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Face It: Gun Safety Hits The Stage

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FACE IT: Gun Control Hits The Stage

By Michele Willens

You know how, in your darkest and deepest thoughts, you wish those NRA-hugging members of Congress would be personally affected by gun violence? (Come on, admit it) Well, New York has a play for you.

Church & State, written by Jason Odell Williams, actually premiered at the Skylight Theatre in Los Angeles. Now, it is settling in at New World Stages off-Broadway for what could be a long and buzzy run. (It sold \$15,000 in tickets before a single ad ran)

This four-character dark comedy ("Football is like God. I don't need to see it to know it's there.") deals with a U.S. Senator from North Carolina who is facing certain re-election— until his family comes perilously close to a Sandy Hook type incident. Then he not only questions his stand on gun safety, but the very existence of a religious entity that could allow a lone gunman to take down a classroom of children.

Though only 75 minutes in length, *Church & State* covers a lot of ground, beginning with that politician brave enough to go off script and shock supporters. ("They don't need my prayers, they need my actions.") You might call it a liberal's fantasy play, but have we ever needed one more?

Smartly, the producers are offering seats—and evenings—to progressive non-profits. (Planned Parenthood, Every Town For Gun Safety, Gays Against Gun Violence among others) The organizations will use the performances as fundraisers and information-spreaders, joining the play's principals in post-show talkbacks. Already, famous names and gun control advocates like Julianne Moore and Amy Schumer, have pledged to attend and support the show. It may not be the next *Hamilton*, but this one could bring out the stars.

"People want to do something good right now," says playwright Williams. "So why not come see a comedy drama about faith and politics? We consider it a conversation starter, something to begin the ripple, to help answer the question, 'what can I do?'"

The people behind the production were, at first, concerned that if Donald Trump became president, it might hurt the show: after all, those who think like him had won and would likely not be seeking theatrical inspiration. “We thought who is going to want to see a play about politics,” says producer Charlotte Cohn. “Because of the results, it turned out a lot of people are looking for a way to get involved.—you see it at the Town Halls—and this is sort of a dramatic call to action.”

Church & State is not alone in this unique dilemma. The investors and creatives of an upcoming musical version of the film *A Face In The Crowd* were similarly concerned. Most will admit they wanted Hillary, but privately knew their story—which focuses on a charismatic, mean spirited man who woos a nation with a phony sense of populism—will resonate a lot more now. Likewise, Bryan Cranston is set to star in a stage version of *Network*, which, of course, is about a famous personality who whips a country into “mad as hell” fervor.

Suddenly, every show seems to take on new meaning. *The Liar*, adapted by David Ives, is about a man who literally cannot tell the truth. And it was written in the 17th century! Even when Glenn Close, as *Sunset Boulevard*’s Norma Desmond, walks down that staircase at the end, one can imagine the current president proclaiming, “I’m ready for my next reality show,” at some time in the not-too-distant future.

“Apathy is a four letter word. Every soul makes a difference,” announces a character in *Church & State*. If this smart, short play does nothing but move its audiences to sign a petition, send a check, or campaign against a gutless candidate, it deserves serious recognition. And gratitude.