

Nell Minow, Contributor

shareholder advocate, movie critic

Church & State: Jason Odell Williams on His New “Serious Comedy” About Guns, God, and Politics

03/15/2017 11:01 am ET

[Church & State](#) is a timely new play about a political candidate who impulsively tells the truth about his views on God and guns and has to deal with the consequences. It is now showing at the New World Stages in New York.

In an interview, playwright Jason Odell Williams talked about the value of “thoughts and prayers” responses to tragedy from politicians and how theater can change the political conversation.

What can a play contribute to the conversations about these issues that an op-ed or political statement cannot?

I think theatre is best place for real conversations to start. It's very easy to dismiss an op-ed or a statement released by a politician as being too one-sided. But theatre is built on arguments from opposing sides. Characters with opposing ideas or wants or desires are in a room and they argue and debate until they get what they want or are convinced to change their mind. And the other unique thing about there is it's live. It's not you watching alone on a tiny screen or reading alone in the paper. It's in a big room with lots of other people who may or may not share your worldview. And the actors are live in the room with you. It's so immediate and real it's harder to dismiss the ideas presented in front of you when it's a real live human saying these things. Then you are also (I hope) entertained with this specific story about a reasonable man having a crisis of faith after a tragic event. And I think most people will willingly go on that journey with him and once you go on that journey you understand his change of heart and perhaps see some room for changing your own worldview. I think people leave this show energized and thinking and ready to take action! That's the power of theatre.

Should politicians tweet about their thoughts and prayers after a tragedy?

It's fine to do that as long as they *also* then go to work the next day trying to pass legislation that will actually address the issue and prevent other families from having to suffer another gun tragedy. Words are good. Action is better. As the Senator in the play says, quoting the Bible, “A person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

Why do you think that the percentage of politicians who say they believe in God is so much higher than the percentage of Americans or the percentage of voters?

I don't know, that's a great question, but I can only guess at the answer. First, I think our politicians are always a few steps behind public opinion. If the country shifts its views it takes a few election cycles before that's reflected in Congress. And second, I think we have about 40-50% of an eligible voting population that do not vote. The ones who do vote I think skew toward the religious end of the spectrum. But if we had 100% voter turnout, you'd get a more accurate reflection of the country as a whole. More progressive socially, more moderate in general. Less of the extremes we see now in Congress.

Why was it important for your main character to have a campaign manager who was an outsider?

To have that other point of view represented in the play was important. But I also liked the idea that he actively hired someone from the "other side" because he's been craving a shift in his own politics for a while now, or at least questioning it.

How should a politician decide when to say what the voters want to hear and when to say what the voters need to hear?

I don't think a politician (or *anyone*) should say what people want or need to hear. They should only say what they believe. They should always speak from the heart. People respond to authenticity.

Why do you think Americans are so different from the rest of the world when it comes to guns?

I've been trying to figure that out for a while, especially as we worked on this play, and I think it comes down to America being driven and run by capitalists. Money wins. It wins elections, it wins votes in Congress, it informs policy and laws and that sucks. The NRA is very wealthy and they will do anything to stay in business and keep profits soaring. And our country respects profits over quality of life. We see it in our gun laws but also in this recent healthcare debate. Why should insurance companies be valued more than average Americans? It makes no sense. Why should the profits of gun manufacturers be more important than the lives of first graders in Newtown or a group of young people at a nightclub in Orlando or a dozen churchgoers in Charleston or a bunch of patrons at a movie theater in Aurora, or concerned citizens in Tucson or students at Virginia Tech? It's mind-boggling how these people sleep at night valuing death over life under the guise of "freedom" when it's really about profit and getting elected.

How is the political conversation about guns affected by political contributions from the industry and special interest groups?

It's *completely* affected by money and political contributions. It's what I said earlier, money wins in America. If you could magically take money out of politics, this country's priorities would shift instantly.

What do you think are some of the best plays and movies about politics? Are there any that you believe changed the conversations or outcomes?

The West Wing and *The Newsroom* did a great job of including lots of humor mixed with the drama or politics. I love Aaron Sorkin in general and those shows in particular. *All the President's Men* is a classic. I also really like the ones that lean toward satire like *Bob Roberts*, *Bulworth* and *Wag the Dog*. I love humor in politics. I don't have a lot of experience seeing "political" plays... I know they are out there, but they tend to be super serious and I'm not a fan of anything super serious or that feels like a lecture or a history lesson. And to your second question, I don't know if any one single play or movie can change the conversation, but *collectively* they can change the conversation as we as a nation move more and more toward inclusiveness and democracy.

I heard a guy come out of the show a few days ago (he didn't know who I was or that I was eavesdropping!) but I heard him say he really related to the main character's struggle with his faith. And that was cool to hear him talking about that with his friends as he left the theatre. I'd like people to be moved by the story, by the characters. I'd like them to talk about faith and politics and maybe be energized to support some of the great [anti-gun violence organizations that we've partnered with](#) on this play like [Moms Demand Action](#), [Sandy Hook Promise](#), the [Virginia Tech Victims Family Outreach Foundation](#), [Everytown for Gun Safety](#), [New Yorkers Against Gun Violence](#). And I'd like people to talk to their friends who maybe have differing views on this issue and see if there's common ground. Then in my wildest dreams I'd like people to stay passionate through 2018 and 2020 and speak out with their vote!
