



He Hopes His Play Becomes Obsolete

By *HALEY CHOUINARD*

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Inside a nuanced comedy about gun control

Jason Odell Williams first had the idea for a play that tackled gun control in 2007, in the wake of the shooting at Virginia Tech. It was

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an idea he revisited in 2011, when Representative Gabrielle Giffords was shot in the head while meeting with constituents at a supermarket in Arizona. The shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012 was the final straw.

neighbor or their representatives."

"It was such a shattering of innocence," Williams says. "I got really upset, and I channeled my rage and frustration into a play, which became *Church & State*. I thought, 'What if there was a shooting that personally affected a Republican congressperson? Would that change things?' I think it would cause this politician to have an emotional, spiritual, intellectual reaction, and what if it caused him to change his mind about gun laws and speak out?"

So begins Williams's show, which is [currently at New World Stages](#). Billed as a "serious comedy" that injects moments of levity into its dark subject matter, *Church & State* follows Senator Charles Whitmore, an incumbent republican from North Carolina, in the wake of a shooting at his children's school. Though his kids survive, others are not so lucky. The tragic event shakes the senator's faith in God and changes his stance on gun control.

Williams wanted the story to take place in a swing state, where a middle-of-the-road politician would stand a chance of being elected.

"I think in a state like North Carolina, you have to be able to get votes from both Republicans and Democrats — you have to be a centrist," he says. "I think what this country really needs and is longing for is more centrists in office. In writing Charlie, I was writing the kind of politician that I'd like to see."

While most of Charlie's arc happens before the play begins, his wife, Sara, and campaign manager, Alex, have to grapple with the senator's new views and decide how to move forward. While it's clear these two women aren't usually on the same side of an argument, they're equally baffled by Charlie's declarations about God and guns. Sara is fiercely devoted to her Christian faith and is stunned by her husband's religious doubts. Alex must try to dissuade her candidate from committing what will surely be career suicide days before an election. Much of the show's humor comes from the dichotomy between these two women and their starkly different relationships with Charlie.



L to R: Christa Scott-Reed, Nadia Bowers, and Rob Nagle

"My vision was for these three characters to form a triangle," Williams says. "If Sara is on one side of the line, Alex is definitely on the other and Charlie is in the middle, trying to figure out which way to go."

The play ends on an ambiguous note, which Williams and the show's director, Markus Potter, hope will spur debate.

"I want people to leave the theatre and feel motivated to talk to their neighbor or even their representatives about gun control," Williams says. "Everyone can effect change if they make a choice to do something."

While many artists may strive to make work that is timeless and universal, Williams hopes this play becomes obsolete.

"My hope is that gun control becomes a non-issue in this country," he says. "If Congress decided tomorrow to pass a ton of gun control legislation, or the National Rifle Association falls from power, that would be great. If all that happened and no one ever saw this play again, I'd be okay with that trade-off. I would like nothing more than for this play to eventually read like a history lesson."

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Photos by Russ Rowland. Top photo (L to R): Christa Scott-Reid, Nadia Bowers, and Rob Nagle.