

Theatre in Review: *Church & State* (New World Stages)

We're starting to see a trend of playwrights who are determined to play serious issues for laughs, papering over painful material with sunny, good-time theatrical devices -- with results that are almost always awkward. *Angry Young Man*, at Urban Stages, sugarcoats its jaundiced view of English



Christa Scott-Reed, Jonathan Louis Dent, Rob Nagle, Nadia Bowers. Photo: Russ Rowland

xenophobia with a barrage of gags right out of the *Noises Off* playbook. The Kneehigh production of *946: The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips* builds a young girl's coming-of-age story around one of the deadliest fiascoes of World War II -- throwing in a bunch of cute animal puppets and some swing tunes in the bargain. The new musical *The View UpStairs* wants to educate us about the deadly effects of homophobia, but only after two hours of raucous, racy musical numbers. Now comes *Church & State*, in which a ghastly Newtown-style school shooting provides the basis for a wisecracking comedy about electoral politics.

We are on the campaign trail with Charles Whitmore, a senator from North Carolina. (The choice of this blood-red state is an early sign that the playwright, **Jason Odell Williams**, has a sharp eye for the realities of contemporary American politics.) Just before he is to give a closing speech -- it's a few days before the election -- the news pops out, via Twitter, that Whitmore, whose path to power has been paved with an overt religiosity of the sort practiced by Cruz, Santorum, et al., has admitted to a minor political blogger that he might have lost his faith. Worse, the senator admits that he hasn't been misquoted; he in fact uttered those blasphemous words. Soon the information is being retweeted from sea to shining sea.

This discovery sends Whitmore's wife, a steel magnolia, into a state of apoplexy and his campaign manager, the almost funereally controlled Alex Klein, into full damage-control mode. The two ladies -- Alex is a woman -- can't stand each other, but they are united in horror at this development and are equally frantic at the candidate's suggestion that he junk his prepared oration in favor of speaking from the heart. Some of the play's most mordant passages feature the ladies trying to reeducate Whitmore in the political facts of life, beginning with rule number one: No spontaneity. Ever.

The source of Whitmore's newfound skepticism is the killing that occurred at a local school a week earlier, which resulted in the deaths of several children. Attending a memorial service and surveying the misery around -- among the bereaved is a lifelong friend -- the senator suddenly begins to question the foundations of his faith: Maybe things don't really unfold according to a divine plan; maybe an event such as this is as inexplicable as it is evil; and maybe trying to comfort the families of the victims with such pieties succeeds only in rubbing salt in their wounds. You try getting elected in North Carolina with those sorts of thoughts running through your head.

Much of *Church & State* is funny in a '90s-era television kind of way; there's an amusing passage in which Alex tries to explain to the Internet-challenged Whitmores that a certain social media platform isn't known as "The Twitter." The senator's campaign song is titled "Jesus is My Running Mate." And there's a tasty moment when Alex, busy handing out orders, stops just long enough to enjoy the delights of sweet tea. Alex, a left-leaning New York Jew, and Sara, a kind of premenopausal Maggie the Cat, are natural frenemies, and their verbal sniping keeps things lively.

Most of the humor focuses on trivial matters -- side issues, really -- and every time the play approaches the matter at hand -- the deaths of children, thanks to lax gun regulation -- the laughter quickly dies; the author switches tone so abruptly you can practically hear the play's gears being stripped. Weirdly, the killing took place at the same school attended by the Whitmores' children, and their callous unconcern about this makes them seem creepier than intended. The disconnect between style and substance becomes even more pronounced when tragedy strikes again, and, without warning, *Church & State* becomes, in its final scene, a different play altogether. It's around this time that we finally hear the

contents of that straight-from-the-heart speech, and, in truth, it's a real barn-burner, but it feels crudely attached to the comedy that has preceded it.

With a running time of only 75 minutes, *Church & State* never really outstays its welcome, thanks to **Markus Potter**'s crisp, faultlessly timed direction, and a highly professional cast. As Whitmore, **Rob Nagle** suggests a more affable, thoughtful Mike Huckabee; he is slyly amusing when cowering, ever so slightly, in front of Sara and Alex, and, later, is genuinely rousing when delivering the great give-'em-hell speech of his career. Given a role that requires her to be, in succession, a gilded Bible Belt matron, a boozed-up floozie, and a pillar of democracy, **Nadia Bowers** delivers on all three counts, no matter that the character makes no sense. (She gets one of her biggest laughs, as well as an insight into her devious ways, by declaring that Whitmore wears the pants in their family, but "I'm the one who told him which pants to wear.") Playing against such a tumultuous scene partner, **Christa Scott-Reed** underplays skillfully as Alex, greeting each new crisis with nonplussed looks that are honest laugh-getters. **Jonathan Louis Dent** delivers a variety of reporters and political aides as needed.

The rest of the production is slickly efficient. **David Goldstein**'s green-room set features a curved upstage wall covered with white curtains that the lighting designer, **Burke Brown**, effectively turns into displays of red, white, and blue; Goldstein covers the auditorium with bunting and "Whitmore for Senator" signs. **Dianne K. Graebner**'s costumes display an accurate eye for what candidates wear on the campaign trail; she also draws a clear distinction between Sara and Alex's personal styles. **Erik T. Lawson**'s sound design provides a series of television broadcasts, most of which are crucial to the plot.

It's always a welcome thing when a playwright wants to tackle some of the key issues of the day, but, caught between sitcom gagging and deadly serious matters, *Church & State* ends up a little bit stranded. Williams hasn't managed to fuse his disparate elements into a single striking whole. Even when his play is funny, it's no laughing matter. -- **David Barbour**

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