

ON & OFF BROADWAY

‘Church and State’ and ‘Joan of Arc: Into The Fire’

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Two Off-Broadway plays, set nearly 300 years apart, examine the strong impact that religion has had on world events. In 75 minutes, “Church and State” tackles the thorny issues of religion and gun control in politics in the U.S. today. Charles Whitmore is an incumbent U.S. senator running for reelection in a tight race. His campaign is interrupted by a horrific act of violence at an elementary school in his hometown in North Carolina (similar to Newtown.) Ironically, it is the same school his children attend. At the funeral, when a blogger asks Whitmore if he has sought strength from prayer, the senator, overwhelmed by grief, wonders aloud how there can be a God who would allow this to occur. His views are tweeted and re-tweeted and are considered to be political suicide. Rather than retract his comments, he goes off-script, tossing out his canned speech, and urges gun control and action to change things.

The election results are pleasantly surprising, but the ending of the play is disturbing and shocking. Rob Nagle is excellent as the conflicted senator. He’s sincere and convincing (I was ready to give him my vote). Nadia Bowers plays the wife who turns out to be more than she appears on the surface, and Christa Scott-Reed is the serious N.Y. Jewish campaign manager. (Her role provides a chance for a few jabs at Northerners.) Playwright Jason Odell Williams sends a powerful message, one that resonates long after the play ends.

Religion is also the motivation for “Joan of Arc: Into the Fire,” at The Public Theater. With book, music and lyrics by David Byrne and directed by Alex Timbers, the show traces the story of the teenager who claimed to be a messenger sent by God to unite the French in their fight for freedom from British oppression.

Despite a story filled with dramatic possibilities, Joan of Arc often lacks theatricality. When Joan encounters the angels, she merely gazes up. Except for a few scenes, one in which Joan receives training to be a soldier and another in which the men fight, much of the musical feels the same. Even the music and lyrics seem repetitive (“fight,” “victory”). The musicians move around on stage and often that was more interesting to watch than the performers themselves.

As Joan, Jo Lampert works hard and gives an impassioned performance, but I often felt as if I was merely listening to a concert, one that lagged at times.

Joan is burned at the stake in a disturbing scene, but later, as history tells us, she was eventually canonized.

Joan of Arc: Into The Fire, should be inspirational and moving. It was her faith that led her to the French king and enabled her to lead the soldiers to victory. However, by the end, religion led to her death.