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Interview: Playwright Jason Odell Williams on 'Church & State'



Credit: Russ Rowland

It's only three days to Election Day and Senator Charles Whitmore's (Rob Nagle) who is seeking re-election decides it's time to let his constituents know who he really is when he goes off-script during a speech and talks about his issues with God. Jason Odell Williams' timely *Church & State* addresses the way in which religion comes into play in modern American politics, which perhaps haven't committed to such a thing as laic democracies existing. Read our conversation with the playwright about the themes in *Church & State*.

Can you recall the first time you realized you thought about the possibility of someone sneaking a gun into a theater? How did it change your perception of safe spaces?

I think it was after Aurora. When that kid shot those people at a late screening of the new Batman movie. That was a real wake-up call. It felt like guns could be anywhere after that. It felt like any place where large groups gathered could be the next target. And it really sucks that sometimes sitting in a movie theater or in a theatre Off-Broadway or on Broadway, that thought will sometimes cross my mind. A big piece of our innocence and freedom has been stolen from us so a bunch of people at the NRA can keep their jobs and turn bigger profits for the gun industry. The priorities in this country are completely backwards. Quality of life should outweigh profits.

Do you find that writing plays makes it easier to deal with these thoughts?

Sometimes. I find it really helped me deal with the pain and anger after Sandy Hook, to turn that rage and fear and helplessness into something concrete. And it helps me to hear the argument of the play every night, to hear the Senator's final speech. That gives me comfort. And I think that's what theatre and art is supposed to do: show you how other people deal with tragedy and doubt and with a crisis, so we can be better equipped ourselves and so we can feel less alone, when we see others going through the same stuff we deal with on a daily basis.

Plays set in the world of politics can easily become either comedies or tragedies, how did you achieve the balance between both?

Well I certainly hope I achieved that balance, but it's not something I necessarily set out to do when writing. It just kind of happens. I think no matter what I write it will always have a little of both. All of my plays have elements of comedy and drama in them because I think that's real life. No one's life is all drama all the time, nor is it a sitcom or a farce all the time. I really love seeing that juxtaposition on stage, and when I'm writing something, whenever it gets dark or too serious for too long I always hear one of the characters saying something to relieve the tension because that's what I would do in that situation. So no matter what subject I tackle, I think it will always have elements of both the comedic and dramatic.

Did you discover that writing a politician made you empathize with them?

Absolutely. I watched a Mitt Romney documentary for research (and actually found some great little tidbits that made it into the play) and I was never a fan of the guy when he ran for president, but seeing him behind the scenes, so to speak, in that documentary, it changed my mind completely. I would consider myself lucky to have him in the White House right now! But I don't empathize with all politicians, I still think many of them have very backwards priorities but it did make me understand how difficult their job can be.



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Nothing seems as fantastical, yet lovely, for New Yorkers than to see a sensible Republican willing to fight for gun control, what have been the most fascinating reactions you've heard about the play from people who support either party?

Across the board the comment we get is, "I would vote for him." Meaning the Republican Senator in the play. And these are for the most part liberals saying this. And I think that's because he's coming at the issue not as a politician, but as a human being. He's being reasonable and making a passionate, emotional plea. And people respond to that, they respond to authenticity -- it's what everyone was craving in 2016 -- and what we still want. It's what I want, too. So it's been fun to hear that we created a likable politician that both the red and blue districts can agree on!

***Inherit the Wind* came out almost 70 years ago and we're still having debates about the place religion should have in politics and education. Do you think we'll ever reach a consensus?**

Wow, that's a good one. I love that play. I don't know if religion will ever be truly absent from politics, but as Hemingway said, "isn't it pretty to think so?" Religion is such a personal thing for people that it's hard to separate it from our politicians because we want them to be human and like-minded, so if religion is important to you, I can understand why you'd want it to also be an important value in your representatives. I do think the country is changing though. Just over the last 50 years, fewer and fewer people are identifying as "religious" and that will eventually trickle into being reflected in our politicians. I hope we eventually get back to the place where this country started which is religion is a personal decision and politicians should not take a public side one way or the other.

The first half of the play made me think of Frank Capra films in which characters who are inherently good, are troubled by their morals. Was Capra an influence at all?

Ha! He must be because in my first play, *Handle With Care*, there are tons of his influences and even actual references to *It's A Wonderful Life*. I grew up on that movie (my parents love it and watch it every Christmas), so I'm sure the tone and sentiment seeped into my subconscious as a writer somehow. But I have tons of eclectic influences. From *The Simpsons* to *The West Wing*, from Judd Apatow to Arthur Miller. It's all a jumbled up mess in my head, so in the end I just write the play I would want to either be in as an actor or see as an audience member.

Lines like "your truth sounds crazy" and "apathy is a four letter word" made me think you'd be a great campaign manager, did the thought of working in politics ever cross your mind?

I don't think I could every be a campaign manager or a politician, but the thought that has crossed my mind recently was being a speech writer. The people that say afterwards, I would vote for your Senator invariably also say, "HE should run for office and YOU should be his speech writer." So I joke with our lead actor, the brilliant Rob Nagle, who also played this role at The Skylight Theatre in L.A., I say for our second act in life he'll run for office and I'll be his speech writer. But it was never something I thought about even fleetingly until the last few weeks talking to audience members after the show. I'm not sure I'm cut out for politics. It's pretty brutal. But I do want to make a difference in our political landscape, so maybe I need to bite the bullet one day and give it a whirl, who knows!

I thought we wouldn't get to hear Whitmore's big speech, and I was glad we did because it lived up to its promise. What was the hardest part about writing that speech?

The hardest part was trimming it down so it wasn't 10 pages long and wasn't totally one-sided. The first version of the speech was long and felt like, as Ralph Mernato, the director from the Rochester production at JCC CenterStage, put it, a well-worded Facebook rant. But over time he and I worked on the script, with lots of input from my wife, Charlotte Cohn, and various actors from different casts and readings, and I crafted it and shaped it and made it more palatable and more reasonable. And our actor, Rob Nagle, just hits it out of the park every dang night which also helps!

For tickets and more information on *Church & State* click here (<https://www.churchandstatetheplay.com/>).

Written by: Jose Solis