

THEATER PIZZAZZ

CHURCH AND STATE

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by JK Clarke

If you're one of those policy wonks who just can't get enough of political discussions that to others can be frustrating and depressing, then you're in luck. The precisely titled ***Church and State*** by Jason Odell Williams, tackles moral dilemmas surrounding the Constitutionally mandated separation of church and state has made its New York debut at the New World Stages. But even if you're not, and you've been feeling hopeless in the current political environment, this is an escapist play that indulges the reveries of left-leaning agnostics holding out hope that one day vigilant gun proponents will come to their senses . . . at least a little bit.

Set in the days leading up to the re-election campaign of Republican, Conservative Christian North Carolina Senator Charles Whitmore (smartly played by Rob Nagle), a school shooting has disrupted the Senator's life and psyche. Not only did the massacre take place at the school attended by Whitmore's young children, he has witnessed the bloody aftermath and it has shaken his conscience and faith. Consequently, he lets slip to a blogger who ambushes him at one of the victim's funerals that he can't believe in a God that would let innocent children be slaughtered.

At first it seems as if the gaffe may harm Whitmore's re-election efforts, and he's already neck-and-neck in the polls. His campaign manager, Alex Klein (a perfectly cast Christa Scott-Reed as a whip-smart, no-nonsense New Yorker) goes into damage-control mode; but his wife, Sara (Nadia Bowers, playing the incisive, twangy trophy wife to the hilt)—who has of late become increasingly fervent in her religious "beliefs"—is aghast, and even begins to question their relationship.



When the bad news breaks, the candidate is on the verge of a big speech to an Evangelical group, an important faction of his base. Both Alex and Sara want Whitmore to go out and give his standard spiel, then deal with the crisis through press releases, confessing to a moment of weakness in a time of great grief. But the Senator is shaken and he goes out and speaks his mind.

This is where the play goes a little off the rails and transitions from plausible to pure fantasy. The speech, in which he decries the absurd leniency of gun laws (particularly the ease with which convicted felons can purchase the highly unnecessary automatic weapon that was used in the massacre), is picked up by news outlets nationwide and rockets Whitmore past his opponent. He's suddenly a national hero whose agenda and reasonable approach both to gun laws and the separation of church and state wins him fans on both sides of the political spectrum. Now there are whispers he just might be presidential material.

The Senator's backers and wife show their true colors when they willingly discard their values. His staffer's T-shirt is immediately changed from "Jesus is My Running Mate" to "Apathy is a Four Letter Word" and Sara is figuratively and literally intoxicated by his sudden popularity. "Power is sexy," she drunkenly proclaims on election night. However, Williams doesn't let us get away with living through this liberal fantasy unscathed. He has one more twist lined up (that shan't be revealed here) and director Markus Potter sets it up expertly.

Church and State is the political equivalent of fan fiction, in which audience members (presumably left leaning) get to indulge a scenario that feels perfectly logical, and which, ideally, would bring a reasonable resolution to an incredibly complex and divisive issue. It certainly would be pretty to see it all wrapped up so tidily. And for just a moment we're allowed to go there. It's kinda nice.

Church and State. Open run, now playing at New World Stages—Stage 5 (340 West 50th Street, between Eighth and Ninth Avenues). www.churchandstatetheplay.com

Photos: Russ Rowland