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## Off-Broadway Review: "Church & State" at New World Stages

April 1, 2017 | Off-Broadway | Tags: Christa Scott-Reed, Church & State, Jason Odell Williams, Jonathan Louis Dent, Markus Potter, Nadia Bowers, New World Stages, NewYorkRep, Rob Nagle, The Telling Company



Off-Broadway Review: "Church & State" at New World Stages (Open-Ended Engagement)

By Jason Odell Williams  
Directed by Markus Potter  
Reviewed by David Roberts  
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Following the inauguration of the forty-fifth President of the United States, not a day goes by without listening to Members of Congress – from both sides of the aisle – airing their points of view on all things Trump on national television. Among the chorus of regional dialects is the unmistakable Southern drawl with a twang that seems able to convince listeners to adhere to almost any political agenda. Many of these politicians from the South are members of a privileged class and some of those seem to have lost their way in the maze of unfulfilled promises. At first glance, the fictional Senator Charles Whitmore (Rob Nagle) from North Carolina appears to be one of those “good old boys” who have populated politics for generations.

“Church & State,” currently running at New World Stages, highlights the reelection campaign of Senator Whitmore including his ultimate speech before the election and his post-election acceptance speech. Neither of those speeches pleases his campaign manager Alex Klein (played with charismatic confidence by Christa Scott-Reed) or his wife Sara (played with a disarming honesty by Nadia Bowers) both of whom have abandoned truth for success. The Senator’s first term as a Republican Senator carries favor from the middle-to-far-right constituency that “believes in” the Second Amendment and firmly believes the First Amendment has less to do with the establishment of a national religion and more to do with placing an unsuspecting citizenry in the clutches of the Christian right. Whitmore serves a God-and-Country electorate.

The run for his second term would have been the same had it not been for the shooting at the local elementary school attended by his own children and his attendance at the funeral of the children of his friends who died in that senseless shooting. That event transforms Whitmore and leads him to question not only his faith but his political beliefs and his marriage as well. It is a mid-life crisis on steroids and Rob Nagle portrays the Senator’s dilemma with extraordinary authenticity and strength. Mr. Nagle’s bravura performance is the fulcrum of Jason Odell Williams’s engaging play. Although the themes of Mr. Williams’s play are not unfamiliar, recognizing the sanctity of truth over conventional wisdom is given renewed importance by this actor’s craft.

Truth wins as does the Senator in his reelection bid and when it comes time for his acceptance speech, his campaign manager and wife assume a return to all things conventional would be in order. Why can’t Charles Whitmore simply roll-back his “liberal” promises and not risk any more rocking of the boat? Revealing what happens during the acceptance speech would require a spoiler alert: it is enough to say it is a surprise and deeply disturbing and truly transformative.

David Goldstein’s set is functional but overreaches when it extends the green room of North Carolina State and the university’s auditorium into the audience space. The strength of “Church & State” resides in Mr. Williams’s script not in placing the audience in the auditorium. Burke Brown’s lighting design and Dianne K. Graebner’s costume design are both appropriate and support the action of the play. Jonathan Louis Dent plays his multiple roles with just the right differences in character attributes.

Under Markus Potter’s even direction, “Church & State” is a worthy examination of the values needed to be in the service of the public in America at this pivotal point in its history and the play raises several significant enduring questions deserving answers.