



Church & State



Rob Nagle photos by Russ Rowland

By Marc Miller

There's not much church, but plenty of state, in *Church & State*, Jason Odell Williams's "serious comedy" now populating New World Stages. "State" as in the state of North Carolina, the current state of American politics, and an attempted statement on what to do about the standstill mess we're now in. Williams's last off-Broadway play, *Handle with Care*, was a facile rom-com centering on a lost corpse (you read that right); *Church & State* has a lot more on its mind, and it spins it out vigorously, proffering some funny lines and jarring surprises in 75 tightly packed minutes. Thoughtful as it is, though, it's also surfacey, and you exit wishing Williams had spent more time in the deep end.

He's intrigued by the ambiguities of contemporary campaigning, and parts of *Church & State* may remind you of Gore Vidal's *The Best Man* or David Mamet's *November*, updated to include Twitter and Facebook. Those are the newfangled bugaboos bedeviling Senator Charles Whitmore (Rob Nagle), running for reelection against an opponent we never hear anything about. Whitmore's a typical Southern senator in many ways: Republican, of course, and given to stump speeches that revel in sports, religion, and empty phraseology—anything to trigger crowd outbursts of "USA! USA!" He's always played by the rules, and if the party faithful have their way, he may be headed for the White House.



Christa Scott Reed and Nadia Bowers

His wife, Sara (Nadia Bowers), couldn't be more of a deep-fried Dixie stereotype: blonde, opinionated, and as convinced of her own irresistibility as Kellyanne Conway. You'd expect this pair to have a Kellyanne of a campaign manager, but, in Williams's first surprise, they've hired Alex Klein (Christa Scott Reed), a Northerner Jew who, we have to assume, took the job on purely opportunistic grounds, seeing Whitmore's popularity as a possible ticket to the West Wing. Predictably, there's bad blood between her and Mrs. Whitmore: "For the hundredth time, I'm not gay." "You're a Democrat from New York, it's the same thing."

So the pillars are in place for a merry backstage campaign comedy, but Williams injects a disconcertingly unfunny plot engine: A week ago there was a random, Newtown-like shooting at the Whitmores' two boys' elementary school, friends of the sons were gunned down, and Whitmore is preparing a speech fresh from the funeral, three days before the election. He's having crises of both conscience and faith, things that might be wished on more candidates these days. How would God permit a tragedy like this to happen, he wonders, and "what if the concept of God was just created by us?"

Such ruminations are decidedly not vote-getters, and as Sara and Alex beg Whitmore to just deliver his damn stump speech as written, he ventures into un-candidate-like uncertainty. He's just told a blogger (Jonathan Louis Dent, who plays several roles, notably Tom, a cheerful, not-too-bright campaign staffer) that he's having doubts about God's existence, and "the Twitter"—Whitmore keeps adding an article to it, a joke Williams overuses—has picked it up. In a political universe where even slight misspeaks are blown up by social media into major disasters, will this emerge as an Obama-wiretapped-my-tower moment?

That won't be revealed here; suffice it to say that Williams is worried about where we're headed on guns, and despairing of the body politic's reluctance to do the heavy lifting needed to effect change. Good points both, but to tell Whitmore's story, the writer has simplified his arguments more than you'd wish. What the senator ends up advocating, in a barn-burner of a closing speech, is the commonsense gun stuff Democrats have proffered for years: background checks, tougher licensing regulations, a ban on sales to the mentally disturbed. That such restrictions would play well in North Carolina is highly in doubt. When he rattles off recent massacres, he includes Orlando—a gay club, something a devout Dixie candidate would be unlikely to go out of his way to lament. And is this Whitmore's only issue? We hear nothing on race, immigration, or even the economy. You'd think his campaign manager, at least, would steer him into those murky waters. And you'd think he'd be surrounded by more than just Alex, Sara, and Tom. Probably that's just to keep the number of actors down, but it also keeps the number of viewpoints down, beyond what a real candidate would have to deal with.

Markus Potter directs with his foot on the gas, encouraging the kind of overlapping conversations that make it impossible to hear what everybody's saying. Too bad, because much of Williams's dialog is diverting, and it's a mostly crackerjack cast. Nagle has Whitmore down to a tee, both the annoying grandstanding of the Mitch McConnells of the world and the deeper introspection of this unique individual. Reed has Alex just right, too, mixing stranger-in-a-stranger-land caution and the brisk

efficiency born of political ambition. Bowers has fewer colors, but let's blame that on the writing—Sara exists mostly to indulge in Martha Mitchell-like mouthing off, and a bottom-of-the-ninth attempt to invest her with gravitas and dignity comes way too late. David Goldstein's attractive set looks much as a green room at N.C. State might, and Burke Brown's lighting and Dianne K. Graebner's costumes feel appropriate without calling undue attention to themselves. Special mention must be made of Erik T. Lawson's sound design, which effectively conjures up crowded campaign halls, blaring TVs, and secluded backstage spaces.

One wishes *Church & State* had chewed on a little more than guns are bad, social media can be disruptive, and, God or no God, man's fate is up to himself. But, a deft mixture of comedy and drama? A look at Southern politics pitched nimbly between affection and satire? A little something to think about on the way home? Check, check, and check.

Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes, with no intermission.

Church & State plays in an open-ended run at New World Stages (340 W. 50th St.). For tickets, call 212-239-6200 or visit Telecharge.com.

