

Review: Mixing Religion, Politics, and Guns, 'Church & State' Is Sinful Fun



Christa Scott-Reed, Nadia Bowers, and Rob Nagle in 'Church and State,' photo: Russ Rowland.

By Miles Harter, Contributing Writer, April 3, 2017

At a time when threats to secular government and individual liberties by doctrinaire lawmakers in the new administration are very real, many of us yearn for thoughtful and humorous responses in the arts. Jason Odell Williams's play *Church & State*, fittingly billed as a serious comedy, hits the mark.

Church & State deals with weighty matters of faith, values, and guns. The drama centers on the reelection campaign of Charles Whitmore, a conservative Christian U.S. senator from North Carolina. His slogan: "Jesus is My Running Mate." The play begins three days before the election, as Charles is preparing to deliver his typical stump speech. His wife, Sara, an earnest and devout Christian, and his ambitious campaign manager, Alex Klein, a liberal Jewish woman from New York, try to inspire him in the moments before his oration. But Whitmore is profoundly distressed by a local mass school shooting, and has just attended

Jason Odell Williams, the playwright, adeptly uses his play and characters to tackle weighty issues. The 75-minute drama moves through several twists, and packs in a great deal of debate and emotion in a short period of time. Mr. Williams also frequently provides unforgettable laugh out loud lines. One effective running gag that surprisingly does not get old concerns use of "the Twitter." As to his Christian faith, Charles remarks that we do not come out of the womb believing in Jesus. Mr. Williams also hints at idiosyncrasies of Jewish people – pointing out that even in light of good news, a Jew is always ready for the next shoe to drop. Showing the still strong dichotomy between the old South and the North, Sara wonders whether, in a worst-case scenario, having to move up north would be worse than having to move overseas. In one outstanding dialogue, Sara announces that Charles is obviously hiding something from her. As she quizzes him, she wonders whether he is having an affair, and he tells her of his crisis of faith. As the ardent believer, she complains that his having doubts is even worse than having an affair.

The four cast members are stellar. Rob Nagle is ideal as the somewhat bewildered and virtuous politician, as he questions his faith and tries to do the right thing. Christa-Scott Reed shines, especially in her masterly facial expressions that show her ambition and bewilderment. Nadia Bowers faultlessly plays Sara, and even her strong Southern accent works. Jonathan Louis Dent also deserves credit for his turns in four different roles, including one character who makes a wondrous and authentic observation that God is like bottled water, existing in many divergent forms.

Church & State at New World Stages, 340 West 50th Street. Running time: 75 minutes, no intermission. Opened on March 27, 2017 for an open-end run. Written by Jason Odell Williams. Directed by Markus Potter; scenic design by David Goldstein; lighting design by Burke Brown; costume design by Dianne K. Graebner; sound design by Erik T. Lawson. Cast: Rob Nagle, Nadia Bowers, Christa-Scott Reed, and Jonathan Louis Dent.

Cover: (l. to r.) Christa Scott-Reed, Nadia Bowers, and Rob Nagle in 'Church and State;' photo: Russ Rowland.