

A New Political Drama About Gun Control Indulges in Election-Year Wishful Thinking

BY BILL RADEN

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Annika Marks, left, Tracie Lockwood and Rob Nagle star in Jason Odell Williams' engaging election drama, *Church & State*.

Photo by Ed Krieger

What Americans seek in their elected officeholders might be described as a kind of canny pragmatism guided by the dictates of conscience – a figure whose bold political leadership can transcend competing interests and deliver just and equitable public policy.

Or at least that's the Lincoln-like nostalgia that's very much center-stage in director Elina de Santos' pinpoint production of Jason Odell Williams' engaging if unlikely political fantasy, *Church & State*, which is billed as a "National New Play Network rolling world premiere" for Skylight Theatre Company. Rather than the Emancipation Proclamation, Williams' theme is gun control and passage of a seemingly no-brainer federal ban on large-capacity assault weapons of the type used in a Sandy Hook-like elementary school massacre that occurs just before the play's opening curtain.

Rob Nagle gives a stellar turn as Charlie Whitmore, a first-term Republican senator from North Carolina of the pro-gun, tax-cutting and Bible-thumping mold; he's in the final days of a nail-biting re-election campaign in which he trails his Democratic challenger. But as he prepares to deliver his standard stump speech at a university, Whitmore is racked with doubt. He has just returned from the funeral of victims of the latest school shooting – this one not only in his home state but claiming the lives of his own children's playmates.

Act 1 finds the distracted Whitmore in a university green room (on Jeff McLaughlin's spare, institutional-brick set) as he reluctantly reveals to his controlling, fundamentalist wife, Sara (Tracie Lockwood in a nicely calculated comic performance), and exasperated liberal-Jewish campaign manager Alex (an effective Annika Marks) that he may have made some potentially damaging comments to a conservative religious blogger (Edward Hong). Specifically, Charlie has not only committed the cardinal offense for any politician – going off script and speaking from the heart – but has compounded it by openly questioning his belief in a God that could allow such atrocities to repeatedly happen.

As the comment goes viral on Twitter, and as Sara and Alex set aside their visceral mutual dislike to persuade the candidate to deliver his speech as written, Williams backfills his three portraits with enough plausible psychology to make the improbable reversal of Act 2 strangely credible. That's when Charlie's seemingly reckless decision to ignore their advice by again publicly airing his conscience results in his historic landslide re-election.



Tracie Lockwood, left, Rob Nagle, Edward Hong and Annika Marks in Skylight Theatre's election-year drama *Church & State*

Photo by Ed Krieger

Now as Charlie again prepares to deliver a speech – this time his election-night victory address – the challenge becomes convincing him to hold firm in his public conversion to national gun-control prophet, which the ambitious Alex sees as his ticket to a White House bid. That primes the play’s melodramatic bombshell of an irresolution as Williams cleverly suggests that the ultimate political will for reform is in the hands of the voters.

It’s the kind of salutary, election-year message that manages to avoid the sentimental pitfalls of such ripped-from-the-headlines material thanks mostly to a superb ensemble that ably sells Williams’ sometimes outlandish plot contrivances. (*Church & State* will run in repertory with a second election-themed play, Aurin Squire’s *Obama-ology*.) But de Santos’ clear-eyed staging also comes with the shrewd disclaimer of Nicholas Santiago’s sleek projections – namely a preshow montage of C-SPAN Senate video that serves as a chastening reminder of just how much wishful thinking a real-life Charlie Whitmore actually is.

Skylight Theatre, 1816½ N. Vermont Ave., Los Feliz; through Aug. 14. (213) 761-7061, skylighttheatrecompany.com.