



No Opposition

*Church and State* isn't a political play, it's a play about politics.

Aug 16, 2016

This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain on LA Theater* for KCRW.

Jason Odell William's play *Church and State* at the Skylight Theatre wants to be political.

We're in North Carolina and it's three days before the election. Senator Whitmore is the incumbent. We're back stage at a big rally 10 minutes before a critical speech when the Senator drops a bombshell on his wife and campaign manager. He may have told a blogger that he didn't believe in God. Well, that's not exactly what he said but this is a red state in the South so the fallout could be the same. His wife, a devout believer, is furious. His campaign manager, who has her eyes on the senator's potential presidential potential, is clutching her cell phone in panic. It's sort of a crisis of faith but . . . not really.

You see, apparently there's been a school shooting in Senator Whitmore's district. In fact, in the very school his kids go to. He knows the victim's family. Outside the funeral service for that child, a blogger asks the senator if he'll turn to prayer in this time of despair. The senator's furious and says basically, "No, what good is prayer? We need action and, by the way, I might have trouble believing in a god who could let something this terrible happen."

In a theater audience in a major city inside a state as blue as California, that's not a terribly radical stance. In the deep South, the play wants us to remember, that might cost the Senator the election, which leads us to the play's problematic politics.

Not because it advocates an all too reasonable reassessment of gun control but because it opportunistically calls on the tragedy of a school shooting and then has us focus on whether a Senator is going to get reelected. That school shooting isn't the moral crisis of the play. It's a plot point. It's background noise. Ditto with the supposed crisis of faith. The play's not really concerned with whether a politician has abandoned God. Once he wins re-election, which -- sorry -- happens, even his bible-study wife seems to forgive his dalliance with the doubting dark side. We're on to new hollow concerns and disturbingly opportunistic and unearned plot points.

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It's telling that the play never makes reference to the Senator's rival candidate. What's missing is a real antagonist or opponent for our concerned Senator. That's a dramatic problem because he seems to be running unopposed both in the election and in the play. Sure, his wife and campaign manager argue with him but these arguments are situational not philosophical. What they're concerned about is that he'll lose the election and they'll both have to find jobs, not whether or not he'll lose his soul.

So how did the audience feel about the play? They loved it. Mostly a standing ovation at the matinee I saw. To be sure, there are some terrific actors but the success of *Church and State* tells us more about the failure of our politics than the promise of our theater. We're all so anxious for someone to take action on mass shootings that we're willing to accept a politically opportunistic play in place of actual legislative action.

In the end, there's nothing wrong with a little theatrical wish fulfillment.

*Church and State* plays at the Skylight Theater in Los Feliz through September 4.

For info on the show and to subscribe to the weekly KCRW theater newsletter, check out [kcrw.com/theater](http://kcrw.com/theater).

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Running time: 80 minutes without an intermission.

Photo: Rob Nagle and Tracie Lockwood in *Church and State* at the Skylight Theatre (Ed Krieger)