



FEATURES

# Church & State

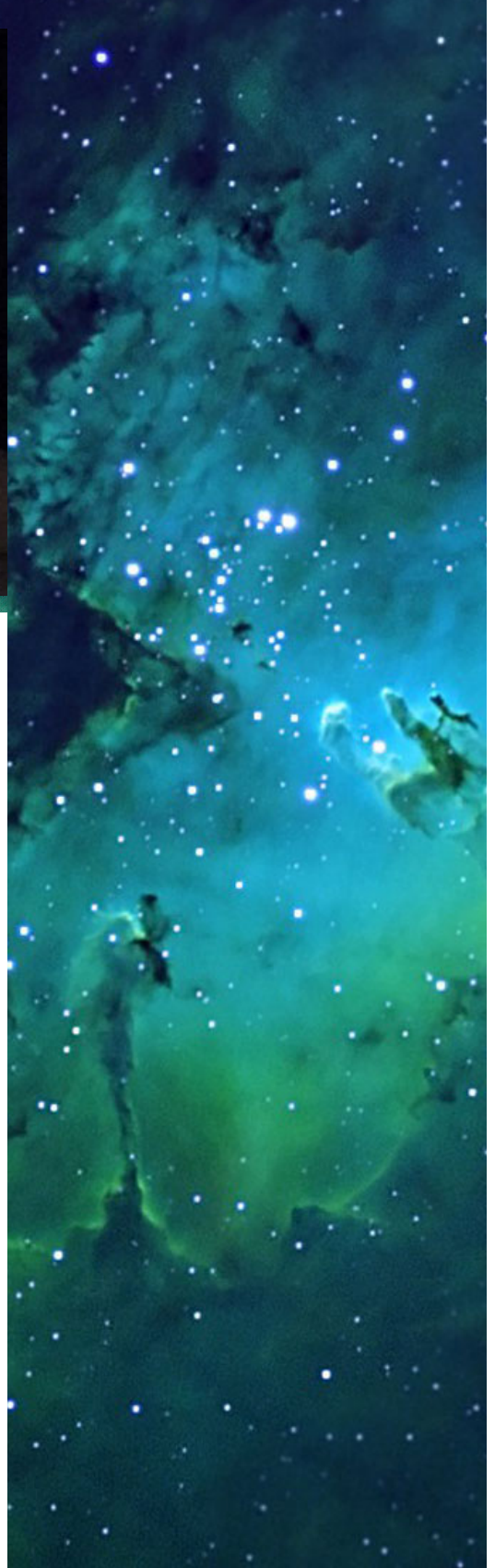
By [starrymag](#) | August 23, 2016

By: Taylor Gates

Tucked away between a quirky bookstore and retro diner sits Skylight Theatre, a literal hole-in-the-wall establishment. On the outside, it's unassuming, the vines crawling up the side of the building giving it a tranquil, traditional theatre vibe. On the inside, however, the place is electric, lit up by the performers of Jason Odell Williams' newest [play](#), *Church & State*.

I chose to see this play for two reasons. One: political dramas are my jam. Binging "House of Cards," "Madam Secretary" or "The Newsroom" sounds like a perfect night. Two: I am a huge fan of "The Fosters" star Annika Marks (who—after seeing her in this play—I can confirm is just as riveting on stage as she is on screen).

Three days before his bid for re-election, a republican North Carolinian Senator makes a spur-of-the-moment comment to an [online](#) blogger after attending a funeral for two young boys murdered in a school shooting. His statement, which calls his religious



beliefs into question, sets off a chain of events that impact his campaign, his future and his relationships with his wife and campaign manager. On the surface, it's a commentary about gun control, but if you dig a little deeper you can see that Williams' script also explores issues like sexism, religion and generational gaps. Oh, and it's also really funny.

While its subject matter is serious, the play is a dramedy with a dash of parody about [social media](#) and politics. (A campaign manager practically has a meltdown over the number of retweets something has; a cheesy political commercial that opens the show is so spot-on it could be mistaken as an ad for a nonfictional candidate.)

With three large roles and one supporting part, Williams keeps the cast lean, which is a huge element going for it. The tight cast and snappy dialogue gives the piece a faintly *God of Carnage* feel. Instead of the comedic element fizzling off with time, the jokes actually land harder as the show goes on and the message unfolds until the last few minutes when a twist ending grinds everything to a halt and shifts tones to deliver a poignant, though-provoking ending.

Rob Nagle, who plays senator Charlie Whitmore, has the southern drawl and confident gait so down pat it feels like he could be Frank Underwood's nicer, non-homicidal twin. His stage presence is captivating; you'll find yourself leaning in closer to catch every word he whispers and cringe back in your seat when his impassioned bellow makes an appearance. Nagle's emotional range is superb and earnest and he makes Whitmore an easy candidate to get behind.

Tracie Lockwood as Sara Whitmore, Charlie's strong-willed wife, is constantly stealing the show. It would be easy to go over-the-top with the role—especially during the second act where the character is drunk for the majority of—but Lockwood never goes big enough to make it caricature. Lockwood makes Sara sympathetic, bringing up the issue of wives having to maintain an image as an obedient, constantly supportive spouse in the world of politics. You'll find yourself rooting for her when she ends up shattering those ceilings and trying to understand her when she speaks about her controversial religious devotion. Although the character occasionally toes the stereotypical “nagging wife” line, these instances are fleeting and obviously played for laughs—jokes that usually land, especially amongst the older, married people in the crowd.

Annika Marks as Alex Klein, Charlie's high-strung campaign manager, is a joy to [watch](#). Equipped with the wit and quick-talking abilities of Lorelai Gilmore, the character is immensely likable. Marks flawlessly plays Alex as both a strong ally and an ample match for the Whitmores. The character's social media savvy is also smartly written, as

it can go two ways: an educational [tool](#) for audience members not familiar with it and a laugh for those who eat, sleep and breathe it.

Edward Hong pulls double duty by playing both campaign intern Tom and online blogger Marshall, two small but crucial roles. Tom ends up unexpectedly offering Charlie a bit of wisdom that impacts him in a big way in a pivotal—albeit slightly cheesy—moment. Although Hong doesn't get too much stage time, he certainly makes every second count. His portrayal of the journalist is rather haunting and his amateur intern is both charismatic and [hilarious](#).

Elina de Santos' direction has managed to get solid performances from the whole cast. Her [interpretation](#) of Williams' script has led to a quirky, relevant piece of must-see theatre that transcends age, gender, race and status.

*Church & State* has done something nearly impossible: tackled hot-button, deeply personal topics without picking sides or downplaying emotions. The Whitmores are Christian Republicans and Alex Klein is a Jewish Democrat yet they are all shown as flawed, but basically good human beings.

Williams commendably subverts stereotypes and dodges easy tropes at every turn. Even when Charlie begins to question the existence for God and his religion, nobody threatens him with the eternal doom of hellfire and the play doesn't make him out to be a villain. Though Sara frequently quotes scripture, she is not a Bible beater. And while she has strong opinions, she doesn't come off as condescending. Although Alex Klein is an ambitious, uptight millennial, she's not seen as bossy, cold or self-centered. Even though there's a clear message about needing stricter gun control, gun owners aren't portrayed as selfish or ignorant.

Don't get me wrong, this play definitely has an agenda, but it's not being shoved down the audience's throat. It doesn't ride on the coattails of its message the whole time either: it's a genuinely riveting, entertaining journey, not a one-note, preachy after school special. The characters are developed, three-dimensional and relatable. Everyone is shown as just doing their best; all of their beliefs and feelings are validated.

The play runs eighty minutes with no intermission and the time goes by quickly. All the action happens in only two places – backstage at two huge events, another smart storytelling [technique](#) much like Aaron Sorkin utilized in his *Steve Jobs* film.

The show runs every Saturday and Sunday through September 4 at Skylight Theatre