

## BWW Interview: Jason Odell Williams Muses on His Various Partnerships: His With His Wife, CHURCH & STATE With NNPN, & His Writings With His Audiences

July 1 7:40 AM  
2016

by Gil Kaan



Playwright **Jason Odell Williams'** latest theatrical project **CHURCH & STATE** opens July 2 at the Skylight Theatre as the first part of its National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere. Later to also open at JCC CenterStage (Rochester, NY) and New Jersey Rep (Long Branch, NJ) in their 2016-17 seasons.

**Hello there, Jason! Thank you for taking the time to interview with**

**BroadwayWorld and myself.**

**What was the genesis for writing CHURCH & STATE?**

*This play began as a germ of an idea shortly after the shooting massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007. I went to University of Virginia (Virginia Tech's "football rival") and the images on TV of candlelight vigils by Cavaliers for their rival Hookies touched me profoundly. Then Tucson happened, and I watched the news, riveted and angry. Then Aurora. And I watched again, riveted and angry. Then Newtown. And I'd had enough. A month later, in January 2013, I had a first draft of what would eventually become **CHURCH & STATE**.*

**How would you describe its plot?**

*Three days before his bid for re-election in North Carolina, a Republican U.S. senator makes an off-the-cuff comment to a blogger that calls into question the senator's belief in God. As his devoutly Christian wife and liberal Jewish campaign manager try to contain the damage, this look at how religion, guns, and social media influence our political system is simultaneously funny, honest, heartbreaking, and uplifting.*

**Would you be one to adhere to the belief that teaching (or conveying a message) is more effectively absorbed if taught with a laugh or relatable, familiar story that resonates with one personally?**

*Yes! Absolutely! I can't write any other way. And while on paper, the topics of this play (religion, guns and politics) seem heavy, I never enjoyed the "theatre as medicine" motif. My first rule is to always, always, always entertain. Then you can layer in some meaningful or serious stuff. But first, make 'em laugh and get the audience to like your characters as fully formed human beings. Because teaching lessons doesn't interest me. What interests me is a*

story that gets to the heart of the people around certain issues. And when you write about people, you can't help but let them be funny and sad and honest, heartbreaking and uplifting all at the same time. Because isn't that what being human is? And because of that, I don't think this play works without the humor. And the humor doesn't mean anything without the heart. To me, comedy and tragedy are not two ends of a single line, but two points right next to each other on the same circle.



**What would you pick as your common theme that runs through the plays (*HANDLE WITH CARE*, *SOMEONE ELSE*) or novels (*Personal Statement*) you write?**

*That's a great question. I certainly don't set out to write with one common theme in mind. I generally start with characters in a situation that interests me. Then I put them in a room and let them start talking*

*and see where it takes me. When I start writing with a theme in mind, it never works out for some reason. But looking back, I guess the common theme is "Follow your heart" or "Love wins." Something like that - if that's not too cheesy. But I think that's a theme for most writing, isn't it? Love beats hate. Good triumphs evil. That's why we read books and go to the movies and theatre. To see good win! And not to get too political, but I think that's why this 2016 election is so riveting and has the highest ratings in election history. Because the RNC unwittingly nominated the perfect villain.*

**If you were to pitch *CHURCH & STATE* for a feature (as you successfully did with your novel *Personal Statement*), what would your three-line pitch be?**

*I'd use the same plot pitch above, only I'd also tease/give away the ending. For movie pitches, sometimes they want to know the whole story including the ending. But I won't do that here. Gary Grossman (the producing artistic director of *Skylight*) would kill me! Haha!*

**Was being an Emmy-nominated writer/producer of Nat Geo. *Brain Games*, an unplanned detour or a planned pitstop to the destination you're at now in your writing career?**

*Not at all planned! Especially not the Emmy nomination. When my friend and executive producer of *Brain Games* Jerry Kolber texted me about the nomination I thought he was joking. But I don't think anything in my career has gone according to any plan. When I moved to NYC after college, the plan was to be an actor in theatre, film and TV. Writing was a detour that soon became my destination. I don't know if there is a plan out there for me, I'm just happy with where I'm at right now and where it all seems to be taking me!*

**How did you initially get involved with the National New Play Network (NNPN)?**

*The very first public reading of the play was mounted by two dear friends of mine who live in D.C., Liz Mamana and Beth Hylton. They run The Actors Salon, and they turn the standard play reading into a fun salon-like party atmosphere. There's a cocktail hour where guests arrive and mingle with the cast and then chairs are magically put in place and the play begins*

with actors on book and moving throughout the space. It's a great event and was the perfect location to present this play to the public for the first time! (D.C. is, after all, a politics town first and foremost.) And **Nan Barnett** who is the Executive Director of NNPB was at that reading. The audience loved it, Nan saw the potential of the play, and she and I had a conversation that night about how to get the play into their rolling world premiere program.



Annika Marks, Stoney Westmoreland,  
Tracie Lockwood & Edward Hong  
Photo by Ed Krieger

### **What was the process in getting CHURCH & STATE selected to be world premiered by NNPB?**

You know the phrase "it takes a village"? Well, that was definitely the case with this play... and maybe *every* play. After I wrote that first draft (right after Sandy Hook), I had some friends read early versions and give feedback and eventually started talking about the play with Ralph

Meranto, the artistic director of JCC Centerstage (who mounted a production of **HANDLE WITH CARE** in 2012). He had been very open to me sending him my new work after **HWC** and when I sent him this play he asked, "What other theatres have you shown this to?" I told him, none really. He saw the potential and offered to mount the world premiere if I would continue to develop the play with him, which we did over the next year and a half. He was really instrumental in shaping the play into what it is. During that time he joined NNPB with an eye toward getting the play in their rolling world premiere (RWP) program. (You need three member theatres to make it an official NNPB RWP). Ralph is also the one who invited Nan to the reading in D.C. Then my wife Charlotte got the play to a producer friend in L.A., **John Rothman**, who gave the play to **Gary Grossman** at Skylight. Then Skylight came on board as the second theatre, but wanted to mount the play quickly, this summer. So we doubled our efforts to get a third theatre involved. We all reached out to several theatres, including NJ Rep (I'd worked there as an actor in 2006) and I asked a friend from that play, actress Phoenix Vaughn, to gently nudge Gabe & **Suzanne Barabas** who run NJ Rep along with their lit manager Joel Stone to take a look at the play, which I think helped move it to the "top of the pile." They read it, liked it, did a reading at their theatre on a Monday in their reading series for their subscribers. It went over very well. Then Gabe called on Wednesday to say they wanted to join and make it an official NNPB rolling world premiere. So I definitely did not do it alone!

### **Had you been familiar with the Skylight Theatre Company?**

I had not, but I've loved working with Gary, director Elina de Santos and the entire cast. They are all so talented and extremely easy to work with! If they'll have me, I'd come back in a heartbeat with my next play.

### **How hands-on do you get when your written words are actually being readied to be performed?**

For a new play, for a premiere, I'm typically involved early in rehearsals, then go away and let the actors and director do what they're good at. Then come back in toward the end and see how it's all working. See if the script needs any tweaking. For this production, since I live in NY, I was maybe involved a bit less than usual, which I think worked out great! Sometimes the writer just gets in the way. So I was in L.A. for a weekend of early rehearsals during table work where we made some significant (and excellent) script changes based on the feedback from Elina, Gary and the cast. And right now, I'm back in L.A. again, where I saw the second preview, made small changes, and I'm on my way to see a run through this afternoon before final preview tomorrow. What I'll do from here is after the show closes, take another look at the play based on my reaction watching it in front of a few different audiences, and what the actors and director tell me about how the play was received throughout the run. And I'll begin

the process all over again with Ralph at JCC CenterStage and his cast, then again with NJ Rep and that cast along with our director *Markus Potter* and my wife *Charlotte Cohn* who is producing the New York Off-Broadway run in 2017.

**Not only are you and Charlotte married, but you're writing partners. Do you have to keep your professional partnership separate from your personal? Or does it all organically meld together?**

*Ha! It's difficult sometimes, but I think we do a good job of keeping it all separate. The idea of us working together came about organically. At first, we tried to keep that separate, but increasingly found ourselves working together and interested in working together more and more. As a writer, it's hard to find a partner that you trust and Charlotte is the best writing partner and producer for me! She can be critical, but constructive, without worrying about hurting my feelings. (Writers can be sensitive!) But when I get feedback from someone I love, respect and trust; I know it's only coming from a good place, trying to make the piece better. I'm often suspicious of feedback that seems motivated by someone else's agenda. But you can't write in a vacuum, you need feedback from outsiders. So it's great to have that first person be my wife. I trust her taste and instincts completely! And it's also really, really fun working together!*

**Would you entertain our *BroadwayWorld* readers with a memorable story on working with *Carol Lawrence* in your Off-Broadway hit *HANDLE WITH CARE*?**

*Carol was great! Since Charlotte was acting in that play and I wrote it, we often brought our daughter Imogen to rehearsals since we both had to be there. And after meeting Imogen once, Carol came to the next rehearsal with gifts and a lovely card that she signed. It still hangs in Imogen's room. She also used to cook homemade meatballs with her own special recipe and bring them in to share with the cast! She's truly a legend.*



**So, back to *CHURCH & STATE*, what do you want your audience to leave with after the final bows?**

*While most writers hope that their work will live forever, my dream for this play actually is that it will become obsolete. And many years from now people will read it and think, "How quaint! Americans used to argue about gun control." But as the news incessantly reminds us, these mass*

*shootings are not going away any time soon. They have become our new normal. Orlando was a stark reminder of that. For now, I hope this play raises questions, sparks debate, makes people laugh and cry, even laugh while crying. Basically, I hope it moves people in some way. Perhaps enough to take action with their voice and their vote and bump the needle ever so slightly in our national conversation about gun violence. But most of all, I hope this play speaks to your heart. Because, for me, that's the only reason to write anything: to speak to each other's hearts.*

**Thank you, Jason! And continued success in all your upcoming projects.**

***CHURCH & STATE*** plays @ The Skylight Theatre thru August 14, 2016.

For schedule and tickets, log onto [skylighttheatrecompany.com](http://skylighttheatrecompany.com)