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## The Politician Who Lets His Conscience Get the better of Him (No Silly, It's a Play)

Culture Watch

by Bruce Chadwick



Charles Whitmore is at the end of a re-election campaign for his U.S. Senate seat in North Carolina and the race is very close. It is the last weekend of the campaign and he is about to address a large crowd at a State University. His pushy New York campaign manager tries to get him to deliver his standard stump speech yet again, to avoid discussing his major recent gaffe about religion and a school shooting that lit up Twitter, but he seems hesitant. He marches out to the podium, pauses for a long time, and then tells people what is in his heart about life and guns.

That is the opening of *Church and State: A Serious Comedy*, an interesting new play by Jason Odell Williams that at times takes us back to the North Carolina politics of the 1960s, when Whitmore's dad was a U.S. Senator, too. The younger Whitmore keeps going back to his dad, and his dad's world, in his effort to confront that audience at the State University that wants to hear what is in his heart about guns, too.

*Church and State*, now running at the New World Stages, W. 50th Street, in New York, begins as more of a 1960s political story, much like the *Advise and Consent* novel, with familiar characters and problems. Then, when Whitmore steps out to that podium and starts talking about the slaughter of little children, it becomes very, very contemporary, a story ripped from the headlines, as they say.

Whitmore is torn between the past and the present and he does not want to be stuck in the past, as he claims his father was stuck there. If he moves forward, will he lose the election? If he does not move forward, will he lose himself?

The title comes from the battle within the senator, within all of us, about how much we believe in God and how much effect God has on the world. Whitmore cannot figure out how a just God can permit little kids to get gunned down in their schools and allow other atrocities. How do people understand that?

The campaign in *Church and State*, with its polls, cell phones and Twitter accounts, looks just like any campaign, such as the last presidential election (well, could any campaign look like that one?). The senator's hard working, boozy wife Sara is by his side. His New York liberal campaign manager, Alex Klein, is by his side, too, clenching her fists as he refuses to do what she orders him to do and, at the same time imagining herself working for him at the White House in a few years.

Director Markus Potter does a fine job of moving the story along and he gets fine acting from Rob Nagle as the senator, Crista Scott-Reed as the campaign manager, Jonathan Louis Dent as a campaign aide and, especially, a delightful Nadia Bowers as the senator's wife.

The problem with the play, which runs just an hour and fifteen minutes, is that it is a bit short and there is not enough story in it to sustain a longer tale. Also the characters are not flushed out properly and it drags a bit in the middle.

Those faults are overcome by a story that rattles all of the swords about folks' feelings about gun control and the seemingly never-ending debate about firearms in America.

The play has a jolting end, one that sits you straight up in your seat wide-eyed. It has some problems, but is worth a trip to the theater. If you are a political junkie, you will really enjoy it.

**PRODUCTION:** The play is produced by Charlotte Cohn, SCS Innovations LLC, Forty-Eight Theatrical Group, others. Sets: David Goldstein, Costumes: Dianne K. Graebner, Sound: Erik T. Lawson. The play is directed by Markus Potter. **The play has an open ended run.**

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