

Guns, God and Government: 'Church & State'

March 31st, 2017 [Matthew Wexler](#)

by *Samuel L. Leiter*



Rob Nagle in 'Church & State.' (Photo: Russ Rowland via The Broadway Blog.)

Despite its title, [Church & State](#), a thoughtful but patchy political dramedy by Jason Odell Williams, has very little to do with the separation of powers as mentioned in the Constitution's first amendment.

That's the one that says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." More germane here is the second amendment.

Not that religion doesn't play an important part in the play's treatment of Senator Charles Whitmore (Rob Nagle), a North Carolina "compassionate conservative" seeking reelection. The good Republican's dilemma occurs when, after witnessing the results of a mass murder at his children's primary school, he makes a grief-stricken admission to a blogger doubting both God's existence and the efficacy of prayer. Click! It goes viral on Twitter.

Them's fighting words. When the pol's bibulous, Bible-quoting wife, Sara (Nadia Bowers), and dogged campaign manager, Alex Klein (Christa Scott-Reed), learn not only of his potentially damaging gaffe but that he means to defend it by going off script in his last pre-election speech, he seems well on his way to voter perdition.



(l to r) Nadia Bowers and Christa Scott-Reed in 'Church & State.' (Photo: Russ Rowland via The Broadway Blog.)

In dramaturgic terms, however, Charlie's crisis of faith is secondary to the playwright's real target, the need for saner gun control. To NC conservatives, that's as sinful as denying the Lord's existence.

For many of its 75 uninterrupted minutes, snappily directed by Markus Potter, *Church & State* uses this promisingly provocative material for behind-the-politics domestic comedy. The good senator fights to overcome the shock to Sara's religious system (she created his campaign slogan, "Jesus Is My Running Mate!") and to her fondness for her Baby Glock. Meanwhile, Alex does damage control to prevent a debacle at the polls.

Set in a greenroom backstage at a bunting and campaign poster-adorned Raleigh theatre (set by David Goldstein; lighting by Burke Brown) where Whitmore is scheduled to speak, the play teeters uncomfortably between broad comedy and grave issues, seeking every opportunity to garner laughs and argue politics and religion.

Ultimately, after yet another tragic event, it devolves into a gun control admonition, which liberals will relish (the play originated in Los Angeles) but make you curious about its eventual reception down South, where, reportedly, productions are planned.



Jonathan Luis Dent in 'Church & State.' (Photo: Russ Rowland via The Broadway Blog.)

For all the potential interest in *Church & State*'s polemics, everything is abridged for immediate gratification, with too many cheap jokes that create an air of superficiality and implausibility. Williams is an Emmy-nominated writer but he's no Aaron Sorkin.

It's hard to believe that, even if the senator's Chapel Hill-educated wife is written as a stereotypically ditzzy, blonde, y'all-drawing, good ol' gal, she'd be clueless enough to call ticker tape "sticker tape," refer to a blogger as a "blobber," confuse "petard" with "retard," or cite Twitter as "the Twitter." (That last is a running gag even harder to swallow when, in the age of Trump, it comes from the senator's mouth.)

Would she really call Alex, with whom she has a flinty relationship, a lesbian, and then counter the denial with, "You're a Democrat from New York—it's the same thing"? At any rate, the silly belle we see early on is far from the sober one we encounter toward the end, suggesting a character disconnect.

There are too many similar flat notes. It's doubtful, for example, that the liberal, skeptical Alex would manage a Republican's campaign. Or that, as a holidays-only Jew, she could so readily cite an Old Testament reference by chapter and verse, just to set up a joke. And when the play's most perceptive religious commentary suddenly springs from the innocuous campaign assistant, Tom (Jonathan Louis Dent), you can be forgiven for squirming.

Fortunately, Nagle gives the play ballast by making Whitmore believably sincere and emotionally

vulnerable; his big, emotional speech about guns is especially well handled. Bowers's Sara is colorfully brassy but can't avoid cartoonish overkill, while Scott-Reed's Alex is sharply determined, and Jonathan Louis Dent's four small roles are nicely differentiated. Dianne K. Graebner's costumes help make everyone look their parts.

Judging by *Church & State*, when it comes to political issues, North Carolinians have little but God and guns on their minds. Even, one supposes, when they go to the bathroom.

Church & State

New World Stages
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Through July 2

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