

Entertainment » Theatre**Church and State**

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Contributor
Friday Jul 15, 2016



Every now and again a brilliant play comes your way, strong enough to knock you off your complacent ledge, inspiring social and political change within you, and entertaining us like not much you've ever seen before. Such is the world premiere of "Church and State."

Jason Odell Williams' pulsating drama about government, conservative Protestant churches and the abundance of guns used in human killings is

timely, most definitely not for the faint of heart, nor for those all caught up in the political drama of maintaining citizen's access to weapons of death. It is, indeed, a well-fashioned sermon about how Communities of Faith fall down on the moral and ethical dilemmas surrounding this volatile subject.

Beginning with the extraordinarily burly and intelligent direction of Elina de Santos, and an astonishing cast of four, his drama unfolds for us in 90 minutes, no intermission, with both humor and pathos. Williams certainly knows these characters, and while critical, keeps them from being stereotyped.

U.S. Senator Charles Whitmore, Republican of North Carolina, (eerily close in name to the notorious Charles Whitman who took out 49 people one hot summer's day in 1963 at the bell tower at the University of Texas, killing sixteen of them before police shot and killed him -- coincidence? I bet not), is running for re-election. Not particularly loved or hated, he looks to be an easy win in the primary if only he gives his tried and true speech, his last before the election, sticking to the teleprompter.

But instead of playing it easy, he lets go of his by-the-numbers stump speech and comes out in favor of government control of automatic weapons, scaring the bejesus out of his liberal, Jewish, female chief of staff, Alex Klein (Annika Marks) and his ultra-conservative wife and mother of his children, Sara Whitmore (Tracie Lockwood).

Whitmore's reasons are not exposed until the flashback that closes the play -- lifting the spirits of those of us who really are tired of the mounting human costs from these massacres, domestic and foreign. His huge win, from liberals as well as conservatives, surprises him in addition to his family and his supporters.

De Santos, a veteran at this kind of drama, has cast it impeccably with a career-enhancing performance by Rob Nagle as Whitmore. Looking nebbishy, with that shit-eating grin Southerners get by with, his about-face is remarkable, realistic as can be, and lively. That he is able to take his two women with him on this politically dangerous journey is, in part, due to the strong performances of Marks and Lockwood. Both actors know how to take their parts seriously enough to be able to make the most of their head to head conflicts with each other and gracefully give way to the others' truths.

There is a fourth actor, Edward Hong, who plays three underdeveloped supporting roles, and he does what he can to make them real enough for us to care. May he be given stronger parts in his future.

This is a, authoritative drama, played out in front of large screens on which are projected major American political personalities of the past decade -- some of whom you are welcome to cheer or

hiss as your political leanings take you. It's extremely well presented by producers Gary Grossman and Rachel Berney Needleman, in this adventurous small theatre of theirs in East Hollywood. You must not skip this production of a timely drama reflecting the times we live in and see acted out daily.

"Church & State" runs through August 14 at the Skylight Theatre, 1816½ N. Vermont Avenue, East Hollywood 90027. For tickets or information, call 213-761-7061 or visit <http://skylighttheatrecompany.com>.

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