

Gun control takes center stage in new L.A. play 'Church & State'



Candidate Charles Whitmore (Rob Nagle), backed by his campaign manager (Annika Marks, left) and his wife (Tracie Lockwood) in Skylight Theatre's "Church & State." (Ed Krieger)

By **F. Kathleen Foley**

JULY 6, 2016, 5:27 PM

Proudly propagandistic, "Church & State," a new play at the Skylight that runs in tandem with "Obama-ology," another premiere, offers a didactic political message in the theatrical tradition of "Waiting for Lefty."

As in "Lefty," an impassioned plea for unionization, "Church" serves a specific political purpose, and playwright Jason Odell Williams is a postmodern Clifford Odets, dexterously balancing on his soapbox as he argues the case for gun control.

Because this production is being mounted in a notably liberal bastion, Williams is arguably preaching to the choir. Yet Williams is no mere sloganeer, and “Church” is no broadside. It’s surprisingly subtle and gripping entertainment that receives an optimum staging from director Elina de Santos and a passionately committed cast.

The action opens backstage at a North Carolina political rally, where incumbent U.S. Senatorial candidate Charles Whitmore (Rob Nagle) is scheduled to appear. Orchestrating the event is Whitmore's campaign manager, Alex Klein (Annika Marks), a New York liberal who comically clashes with Whitmore's steel-magnolia wife, Sara (Tracie Lockwood), yet is united with her in the common cause of advancing Whitmore's political career — all the way to the Oval Office.

That cause seems lost when a tragedy at a local grade school radically alters Whitmore's conservative views on gun control. The moral struggle that follows fuels a sophisticated dialectic that presents both sides of the gun debate before descending, ultimately, into polemics.

Williams occasionally over-writes his Southernisms, such as having Sara contemptuously refer to Alex as a “Yankee,” a reference that seems strikingly archaic in this context. To his credit, though, Williams avoids demonizing his conservative Southerners, who are winning, strikingly intelligent, and above all, sincere in their beliefs.

The performers, particularly the regularly excellent Nagle, are simply superb, while the protean De Santos offers up yet another achievement in her varied body of work. Her direction is the spoonful of sugar that makes Williams' pointedly opinionated play richly palatable.

“Church & State,” Skylight Theatre, 1816 1/2 N. Vermont Ave., Los Angeles. 8:30 p.m. Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays. Ends Aug. 28. \$15-\$39. (213) 761-7061. skylighttheatrecompany.com. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes.