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Make a date to see 'Church and State'

By [Cynthia Citron](http://smdp.com/author/cynthia-citron) (<http://smdp.com/author/cynthia-citron>) on July 28, 2016 in [Play Time](http://smdp.com/category/life/entertainment/play-time) (<http://smdp.com/category/life/entertainment/play-time>)



Keep your eye on playwright Jason Odell Williams. If he keeps writing plays as extraordinary and impassioned as his latest play, "Church and State," he may in time be hailed as this country's newest Eugene O'Neill.

Ostensibly a play about gun control, "Church and State" broadens to include some of the most crucial issues Americans currently face.

As the audience enters and noisily seats itself, continuing their conversations with companions, most of them are oblivious to the fact that the play is already underway. On-stage on a large screen, snippets are running from C-SPAN's coverage of various Senators

discussing their concerns on the Senate floor. Bernie Sanders speaks about the economy and greed; John McCain talks about the need to defeat ISIL; Elizabeth Warren talks about Wall Street and the role of money in politics.

Senator Cruz inveighs against the slaughter in Orlando; Rand Paul worries that the president will avoid going to war; and Christopher Coons of Delaware condemns Planned Parenthood for performing abortions and selling the baby parts.

On and on it goes, with speeches from Senators Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and Marco Rubio. And then actor Rob Nagle storms onstage. He is portraying Republican Senator Charlie Whitmore, running for reelection in North Carolina.

Whitmore has just returned from the funeral of two little boys, brothers who were two of the 29 victims killed in an attack on their elementary school. Whitmore is distraught and traumatized by the incident, especially because the brothers were friends and playmates of his own two young sons.

Confronted by a sleazy reporter at the funeral, Whitmore is goaded into a diatribe against guns and God. "Do you turn to prayer in your time of need?" the reporter asks. "Prayer doesn't help!" Whitmore responds angrily. "How can God allow this to happen?" He questions God's relevance and repeats John Lennon's comment that "God is a concept by which we measure our pain."

Whitmore, now backstage in a holding room in preparation for making his boilerplate speech three days before the election, gets

embroiled in a heated argument with his campaign manager, a beautiful young woman named Alex Klein (a luminous Annika Marks). He confesses his remarks about God to her and wants to explain himself to the potential voters who have come to hear him speak, but she is adamantly opposed to his doing that.

One of the remarkable things about this play is how real it is. The two combatants do not listen politely to each other; they both shout at the same time, so you can only intermittently distinguish what they're saying. And when Whitmore's overbearing wife Sara (Tracie Lockwood) joins them, she also joins the argument. She is resentful of Alex for many reasons, but mostly because she had been the campaign manager for her husband's first campaign (she chose his campaign theme song: "Jesus Is My Running Mate") and now that responsibility has been turned over to this brusque New York fireball. At one point Sara angrily accuses her of being a lesbian, and when Alex denies it Sara shouts, "Well, you're a Democrat — it's the same thing!"

Sara herself is an ardent religionist steeped in "Christian Values." She is not supportive as Whitmore goes through his crisis of faith. When the women learn that the reporter's interview has been picked up by the press and gone viral, however, they are supportive of Whitmore's determination to explain his position, and he marches out to the stage and gives the speech of his life.

This powerful play might seem aggressively dogmatic were it not for the amazing relevance of its subject matter, its impeccable

language, its unexpected conclusion, and the flawless direction of Elina de Santos. But above all, it is the actors who make this production exquisite. They are the most effective ensemble I've seen in quite a while. Especially Rob Nagle, as Senator Whitmore, whose emotionally charged speeches and angry tirades are the very heart of this production.

"Church and State" can be seen Saturdays at 8:30 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. through August 14th at The Skylight Theatre, 1816 North Vermont Ave. in Los Angeles. Make reservations at (213) 761-7061 or online at SkylightTix.com (<http://SkylightTix.com>).

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