Futility & Necessity & Church & State ‹ @ This Stage

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Futility & Necessity & *Church & State*

by HAYLEY HUNTLEY

When the lights came up on *Church & State* at Skylight Theatre, I felt pressure to stand up and clap. This was no ordinary do-I-or-don't-I standing ovation dilemma — per the wishy-washy rules of my Standing Ovation Code — this was a different sort of conundrum. Jason Odell Williams's *Church & State* takes place (fair warning: this article is riddled with spoilers) in a present-day, parallel America. It explores the events leading up to, and resulting from, the landslide re-election of a Republican Senator who, experiencing personal grief from a school shooting in his hometown, defies his party base by publicly promoting gun control and confessing his failing faith in god. The issues at the play's center ring nonfictional bells: the assault weapons ban debate, a polarized two-party system, the power (good or evil) of the social media news cycle, and the real and present danger we face in crowded public places. The issues are so fresh that one line in the Senator's speech references "Orlando," invoking the shooting at a gay nightclub where a lone gunman killed 49 people on June 12th, 2016 — only twelve days before

Church & State's world premiere.

With all this real-world overlap, a standing ovation suddenly felt like more than praise for the actors' performances or the production's successes — those criteria seemed irrelevant. Even my friend who accompanied me said it felt hard to discuss the play on its own. How can you talk about acting when the actors are talking about gun violence?

No, giving a standing ovation after a play about a school shooting, a right-wing politician with a conscience, and the making of a martyr feels like more than praise for a job well done. It feels like cheering for a real Senator who needs our support, or paying tribute to actual victims of identical crimes in the real world, or partaking in a meaningful conversation that will somehow translate to change in the real world. Clapping your heart out feels like it might chip away at the massive, weighty helplessness you feel in your real life, when really bad things happen to really real people. Conversely, the notion of staying seated feels un-compassionate, uninformed, and un-patriotic.

But do those feelings represent any truth? When, how, and how often should we address things like mass shootings, terrorist attacks, institutionalized police brutality, and systemic racism? The summer of 2016 has brought an onslaught of events that, had they happened singly and in separate years, might go down as that year's worst moment: the Orlando massacre, the back-to-back police shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, the assassination of police officers in Dallas, the terrorist attack on a parade in Nice, France.

There's debate about whether the world is worse than ever, or if we're more aware than ever, but regardless, the volume of tragic events makes it feel impossible to learn enough, grieve enough, and act quick enough before the next thing happens. Plus, it's a presidential election year, and Republicans have nominated Donald Trump, a candidate who gives wings to an extremist, racist fervor that the political left and middle didn't know (or didn't admit) already existed. The air everywhere feels charged. If the United States were a public beach, the flags would be waving red: Do. Not. Swim.

In this undeclared state of national emergency, if you have a heart (I do) and an education (I do) and free time (I do), you should do something. But what does that actually mean? Sure, I'll cast my vote for progressives in November, but it's hard not to feel cynical about the effect of a single vote, especially in a decidedly blue state. I could write to my Congressperson, but I've seen too many episodes of *Veep* and *House of Cards* to imagine those letters get read (plus, I can't think of anything innovative to say). I could brainstorm political solutions to social problems with my friends, but we all agree with each other on everything already. I could post something about the 2nd Amendment on Facebook and tag my Republican family members, but I've never been influenced by the reverse. For all the foreseeable impact of these efforts, I might as well pray.

Annika Marks, Tracie Lockwood, and Rob Nagle in “Church & State.” Photo by Ed Krieger.

In the absence of knowing what to do, there arises an unspoken etiquette about what *not* to do — at least, in the liberal, coastal, college-educated community I claim as my own. My friend who hosts a themed show in which comedians impersonate famous murderers throughout history opted last week to host in its place a light-hearted, no-theme variety night; making jokes about murder seemed like the wrong thing to do. The cast of Broadway’s *Hamilton* opted out of using prop guns in their Tony Awards performance the Sunday of the Orlando shooting; using toy guns felt like the wrong to do. Both of those measures feel mature and sensitive to me, but then there are heady examples like this: that same Sunday, I posted a video to Instagram of my short body climbing onto an art installation of an oversized chair — a sight gag, filmed on a family vacation. It wasn’t until after I published it and scrolled through post after post about the shooting that I wondered if being casual was distasteful, and even worse, if being distasteful was somehow the same as siding with the wrong team.

Immediately after processing that self-doubt, I felt indignant: the time spent determining the etiquette surrounding grief, tragedy, and injustice — this is time wasted. Worrying about my acknowledgment of these things on social media or in conversations with friends or in a standing ovation after a play — these methods of self-expression feel like grasping control in the face of chaos. It’s all a distraction from graver matters.

That’s the unscientific position I’ve taken over the last month: that since I wield no power, any public declaration of my interest in social change is self-satisfying. Chiming in might feel like I had accomplished something or done work when I hadn’t, and isn’t complacency the enemy of progress? Retweeting an activist, or promoting a book I just finished about white supremacy and violence, or penning an anecdote about a time I benefited from my white privilege in an interaction with police, or citing an article I read at happy hour with my liberal friends, or attending a protest, or publishing the letter I wrote to a Congressperson (and her staff of intern readers), or writing an essay about a political play I saw instead of a summer blockbuster — all of it feels like a masquerade of engagement: proof I’ve tried, proof I’m good, proof I’m smart, proof I care. I believe in speaking truth to power, but I’m not sure I’ve stumbled across any power yet. It’s all insultingly futile.

The difference between me and *Church & State*'s protagonist, though, is it's his job to make a difference. In Act I, Senator Charlie Whitmore (R-NC) experiences a come-to-Jesus moment that takes shape as a run-from-Jesus moment, a rejection of god and Christianity as viable solutions to real-world violence. Having just attended the funeral of his friends' children, who were slain in a school shooting, he ruminates backstage at a campaign event: prayer, he intuits, is futile, and he vows to stop praying for gun victims and start talking about gun control. Both his wife Sara and campaign manager Alex receive this as a betrayal: of his marital and familial fidelity, to Sara, and of his electorate and donors, to Alex. But to me, and to what I assume is a largely liberal audience in a small theatre in Los Feliz, this change of heart is inarguable and easy to root for. It's a "duh" moment. If I had a dollar for every time I've seen someone post on Facebook that they're "sick and tired of prayers," I'd have a bunch of money and also the conviction that Facebook posts are just prayers in atheists' clothing.

The difference again, though, between this fictional Senator and my friends on Facebook, is that when he says no more prayers, it's converted into power, not "likes." Voters surprise him by electing him by an overwhelming margin to another term in the United States Congress: where words become votes and votes become deeds, where a carefully cultivated progressive ideology that feels so futile in my hands gets spun like hay into bills and laws and precious, golden change. Being elected Senator is to be exempted from the inertia of powerless. It's the opposite of futility, isn't it?

Church & State offers another theory. Without spoiling the outcome, I will say the production delivers this theory in three powerful blows. The first: Senator Whitmore proceeds to struggle with self-doubt, questioning his own moral fortitude to conquer his dissenters. The second two blows, I'll keep vague, but they each leave the audience grappling with the notion of a persistent, wasteful futility. Are people disposable? Are ideas destructible? Here we are again, the plays seems to say: all futile.

So what's left, then? A standing ovation, or not, for a play about important things? A reverent moment of silence, or a rousing political discussion at a bar? Maybe a return home to a laptop and a Google search of #BlackLivesMatter events; an email to an activist friend who knows more than I do; a short-term goal of reading narratives different my own; continue my education, at least. Who knows where that will lead? Because it does seem to me that the power to make a difference lies in individuals, but that the answer to "What can I do?" is different for every single person at every stage of her life, and can only be discovered by turning her head as she passes the looming skyscraper of futility.

And in truth, futility might just be a sensation caused by shortsightedness. The results of our ant-sized efforts probably belong to history. Those of us who feel compelled to contribute to the book of progress do so without promise that we'll ever read the last chapter to see how it all turned out, but most of us are compelled to contribute anyway. And in honor of that little flame that compels us, it's probably better not to critique people's contributions, or to debate our own so incessantly that the flame blows out.

Plus, who's to say your prayers don't make you softer and more receptive to the suffering of others? Or that Facebook doesn't carry your message to someone who's never heard it? Or that a play about an inspiring politician who's fake doesn't raise our standards for politicians who are real?

"Necessary futility" and "futile necessity" were two terms I arrived at while brainstorming — back when I was still avoiding writing this column, the first three pages of which I threw out, the final draft of which I will probably share

on Facebook. It's not much, but it's what I've got for now.

NOW PLAYING: **CHURCH & STATE** at Skylight Theatre, through August 14.

Three days before his bid for reelection in North Carolina, a Republican U.S. Senator makes a heartfelt and off-the-cuff comment after a school shooting to a blogger that calls into question his belief in God. The Senator's devoutly Christian wife and liberal Jewish campaign manager try desperately to contain the damage.