

Arts In LA

Church & State

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder July 4, 2016

Although the concept seems rather improbable in this era, playwright Jason Odell Williams speculates about one uncharacteristically unaltered politician still capable of having a honorable thought all his own. Obviously, Williams's *Church & State* is a work of fiction.

Three days before his demanding narrow-minded constituents head to the polls to do their gloriously self-serving civic duty, North Carolinian Sen. Charlie Whitmore (Rob Nagle) is in a quandary. As his campaign's theme song, "Jesus Is My Running Mate," plays over the loudspeakers just before he speaks at a major rally, the hand-slappin' good ol' boy is experiencing a moral watershed moment. It's only been a few days since a mass shooting inside one of his state's grade schools has taken 29 young lives and, as a typically rapacious politician seeking a photo op, he travels to the site where children's blood is splattered all over the classroom's art projects and American flags. Before he can strike a pose looking grim and spout a few hollow promises for the cameras, he experiences a life-altering crisis of conscience.

At the memorial service, Charlie has an epiphany: that living without fear is more important than second amendment rights, religious faith, or "our country's antiquated laws." When approached by a young blogger (Edward Hong) who is shocked when the candidate says he did not pray for the children, he is asked pointblank if he really believes in God. Charlie, in his troubled emotional state, does the most politically incorrect thing he could ever do, wondering aloud if it's possible to believe in a god who would let such things happen. Charlie then vows to not waste time on prayer when there's so much work to be done, a statement that goes viral just as he's about to take the podium.

Charlie's bible-thumping, Kim Davis-haired, Spanks-wearing wife, Sara (Tracie Lockwood), and his abrasive stereotypical Jewish campaign manager Alex (Annika Marks) are horrified when they google Charlie's interview before he hits the stage and realize what is about to go down. The problem is exacerbated when he declares his intent to abandon his carefully prepared speech and talk directly from his heart. Alex, who was hired to keep the senator on track but is now dealing with a boss who wonders if she's even "in the same car anymore," believes the move would be political suicide. Sara, who is the kind of person who assumes Alex is a lesbian because she's a Democrat from New York, for once agrees with her.

Under the brilliant directorial eye of Elina de Santos, this cast could not be better. Despite Alex's formulaic limitations, Marks avoids the inherent traps written into her role as the hardly decorous campaign manager fighting for her own career as well as that of her candidate, something that could have afforded the character a more satisfying conclusion if she didn't oddly all but disappear from the play's concluding scene. Hong does wonders with two small roles, the other as the intern who, when asked his opinion, humbly states he thinks we should all not be so hung up on "what our book says and what their book says."

Still, the true genius here was in the casting of Nagle and Lockwood as the fantastically feudin', tenderly lovin' Charlie and Sara. Their performances are richly nuanced and disarmingly real in roles that could wipe out lesser actors within the play's first beats. Lockwood is endearing as the loud and ridiculously opinionated wife zealously protective of her husband and her faith, and Nagle takes our breath away as Charlie. This is especially true in a flashback scene set in two different periods of time, as Charlie recounts and simultaneously re-creates his interview with the offending blogger.

As his emotional state darkens his demeanor, and later in the delivery of the senator's impassioned speech about his dilemma and plea for assistance from his constituents to help him get the feet under him again, Nagle is dazzling. Together, Lockwood and Nagle make complete sense of their characters' frustrations and verbal skirmishes, able to clearly show how the couple's love for each other will survive no matter what the outcome of the guy's pivotal re-election.

This is a mesmerizing production of a captivating, thought-provoking new play sure to only advance the career of a promising new dramatist. Still, although the outcome of Charlie's re-election is a surprise, it's one of the few surprises in an otherwise brightly intelligent and often hilariously on-target script. It is deserving of high praise and well worth the committed participation of this spectacular cast and production team, but if you don't see the ending coming in the first 10 minutes of its 80-minute running time, you might just be brain dead. Perhaps, sadly, this is because we've become so hardened by the tenor of the times in which we live.