

STAGE RAW

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Church & State

Reviewed by Deborah Klugman

Skylight Theatre

Through August 14

RECOMMENDED - TOP TEN

Church & State, Jason Odell Williams' timely and aptly titled political drama, tells the story of a fictional Republican Senator from North Carolina, Charles Whitmore (Rob Nagle, at his splendid best) who suddenly begins to question much that he's always believed in — namely, God and the Second Amendment.

The reason for Whitmore's turnaround is a shoot-up at an elementary school by a crazed killer with an assault weapon. Whitmore's own two sons were in attendance, and the boys who were killed were their friends and classmates.

Following the funeral, a journalist (Eddie Hong) asks Whitmore if he plans to pray over the incident, and instead of delivering the customary automated response, the confused Senator hems and haws until finally he lets drop that this horrific happening has perhaps — just perhaps — shaken his faith in the Almighty.

All this is background to the play's actual fireworks, which take place later in the day, behind the scenes of a campaign rally for the Senator's re-election, among this basically honest and troubled man, his deeply religious and controlling wife (Tracey Lockwood), and his campaign manager (Annika Marks), a Jewish woman (and a Democrat) hired for her sterling record of getting candidates elected.

Though there's a good deal of antipathy between the women, they close ranks fast when the Senator makes known that he plans on discarding his prepared speech and leveling with his constituents about his recent epiphany. Both perceive this as the death knell for a promising career (Whispers of the White House have been bandied about, and neither of them can bear to see those tossed to the wind).

Church and State is a solid workmanlike piece that Williams wrote after he, like so many of us, grew appalled at the recurring number of mass murders of innocents by maniacs with guns, and decided to say something about it. Given the intransigence of these anti-gun control legislators in the real world, the Senator's transformation plays a bit like a Progressive's fantasy. But oh, how satisfying it is to watch. Directed by Elina de Santos, the supporting ensemble does solid work, while Nagle's portrait of a good ol' southern boy, including his nuanced relationship with his wife, truly is flawless, and sweeps us to a stirring catharsis.