



## Church and State Review - Are the Boundaries Blurred?

By Elaine L. Mura July 7, 2016

Clearly, 2016 is the perfect year to take a careful look at politics as it rears its head at the Skylight Theatre and everywhere else in the United States. Emmy-nominated playwright Jason Odell Williams penned CHURCH AND STATE, a National New Playwright Network Rolling World Premiere. In association with Providence Entertainment, Ltd., CHURCH AND STATE is a timely and thought-provoking piece of entertainment offered by the Skylight Theatre Company.

CHURCH AND STATE takes place in North Carolina with the senatorial election in just three days. Republican incumbent Charlie Whitmore (Rob Nagle) is up for re-election and counting the possible votes among his constituents. He's just attended a funeral for two young boys – until recently, his own children's close friends and playmates - who were killed during a horrendous school shooting a few days ago. As he exits the church, he is accosted by a blogger who wants to know if he's been praying for the 29 murdered children. At loose ends, he tearfully asks, "How can you believe in a God who would allow something like this to happen?" Within hours, his response has gone viral on social media while the very conservative North Carolina electorate debates whether or not he believes in God. For a man who has remarked, "Jesus is my running mate," disaster is imminent.

Charlie may well feel like a ping-pong ball as he bounces back and forth between his deeply religious wife Sara (Tracie Lockwood) and his cynical New York campaign manager Alex Klein (Annika Marks), who needs another win on her resume. Charlie starts to consider, like John Lennon, that "God is a concept by which we measure our pain;" and Charlie's his pain is escalating by the minute.

The key issue eventually boils down to gun control. Even though Southern belle Sara is in favor of the concept of gun control, she can't help feeling that "I wouldn't want to give up my baby Glock" – which may reflect the feelings of a majority of the electorate. Meanwhile, New Yorker-to-the-bones Alex wants to spin the Internet information into something that it is not. The South meets the North – over a glass of sweet tea - with some very funny and some very serious repercussions. Charlie remains in a quandary. How to handle his fervent and spontaneously damning words and the emotional and ethical dilemmas that they have raised?

Williams has taken some highly controversial issues and framed them in very personal and often amusing ways. The humor and the pain coalesce, just as they often do in real life. However, the play sometimes becomes rather "preachy," especially when the last message seems to override the personalities of characters who have already so cleverly personified the issues. Nonetheless, CHURCH AND STATE remains a fast-paced and entertaining piece. CHURCH AND STATE has an excellent cast who can take potentially intellectual concerns and make them uniquely and emotionally personal. The audience cares about what happens to them and cannot help but remain engrossed throughout the tale.

Playwright Jason Odell Williams, Edward Hong, Jennifer Sorenson, Rob Nagle, Tracia Lockwood, and Annika Marks at the after-party - Photo by Elaine L. Mura

Talented director Elina de Santos has struck just the right mix between the humor and the tragedy of life. Jeff McLaughlin's set is simple yet effective, and Nicholas Santiago's video design expands the range and quality of the play. Lighting (Sohail E. Najafi) and sound design (Christopher Moscatiello) enhance the emotional depth of the story.

CHURCH AND STATE runs through August 14, 2016, with performances at 8:30 p.m. on Saturdays and at 3 p.m. on Sundays. The Skylight Theatre is located at 1816 ½ North Vermont Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90027. Tickets range from \$15 to \$39 (or a two-play package for CHURCH AND STATE and "Obama-ology" for \$63). For information and reservations, call 213-761-7061 or go online at [the Skylight Theatre](http://www.skylighttheatre.com).