

# CHURCH & STATE



–Steven Stanley | July 2, 2016

A North Carolina senator's "Road To Damascus" conversion from staunch 2nd Amendment advocate to gun control champion may sound about as improbable as Barbara Boxer suddenly turning pro-life, but it makes for powerful, thought-provoking comedy (that's right, comedy) in Jason Odell Williams' Church & State, now being given a sensationally acted and directed NNP Rolling World Premiere\* by Skylight Theatre Company.

A slickly-produced reelection campaign video reveals from the get-go exactly what Senator Charlie Whitmore (Rob Nagle) believes in.

He's anti-crime, pro-welfare reform, pro-seniors and veterans, most definitely against any attempt to restrict firearms, and his campaign song is titled "Jesus Is My Running Mate," which tells you where he stands on the Christianity spectrum.

Or at least where he *stood* until cornered by a conservative Christian blogger at funeral services for two of the victims of a recent assault-weapon elementary school shooting, one that took twenty-nine lives and destroyed countless more.

When asked whether he had turned to prayer in this time of need, Charlie's off-the-cuff response was a game-changing "Those families don't need my prayers right now. They need action," words that might not have spelled complete disaster had he not followed them with "How can you believe in a god that would allow something like this to happen?" It took only minutes for the blogger's initial tweet to be retweeted and retweeted and retweeted yet again, and now CNN has picked up the story and Charlie has only ten minutes to decide whether to stick to today's carefully rehearsed campaign speech or, with just three days left before the election, to speak from the heart.

Take a guess as to which one Charlie picks.

Yes, Church & State does at times come across as a Blue State liberal's wish-fulfillment fantasy, but sharp writing and some brilliant performances help us buy into its improbability. Equally significantly, without ever once making light of the mass shooting that inspires Charlie's conversion, Williams' play manages to score laugh after laugh with scarcely a smidgen of sitcom jokiness. Instead, the laughter comes naturally from character quirks like Charlie's ineptitude with the hotel TV remote, the Whitmores' persistence in putting a "the" before Twitter, and the obvious friction between Charlie's big-haired wife Sara (Tracie Lockwood) and Alex Klein (Annika Marks), the Jewish Northerner who's managing his reelection campaign. (No, she's not a lesbian, just a New Yorker, though Sara can't honestly see the difference.)

That's not to say that Church & State doesn't take seriously the rift that develops between Charlie and Sara about their increasingly divergent degrees of faith, and playwright Odell makes sure never to belittle Sara's Christian beliefs. ("My God helps me treat people with love and respect, especially those I have a hard time loving.")

Equally significantly, the transitions between comedy and drama never seem forced or artificial, not with Elina de Santos directing with accustomed finesse, and certainly not with a gifted cast making even more of Williams' script than what is on the printed page.

Nagle gives yet another career-best performance, convincing us every step of the way in Charlie's Southern charm, his politician's charisma, his life-changing crisis of faith, and his absolute sincerity in all of the above. As for Lockwood, to say that she vanishes into Sara's zesty larger-than-life persona is to understate the actress's chameleon-like gifts. Marks gives Alex stereotype-defying depth, once again proving herself one of L.A.'s most watchable leading ladies. Edward Hong completes the cast to delightful effect in a trio of cameos, most notably as harried Whitmore campaign gofer Tom.

Church & State's production design—Jeff McLaughlin's set, Sohail E. Najafi's lighting, Mylette Nora's costumes, Christopher Moscatiello's sound design, and Nicholas Santiago's video sequences—could not be more topnotch.

Christopher Hoffman is stage manager. Stoney Westmoreland and Jennifer Sorenson are understudies. Church & State is produced by Gary Grossman and Rachel Berney Needleman in association with Providence Entertainment, LTD. Emyli Gudmundson is associate producer. "Jesus Is My Running Mate" is composed by John Torres and Tim Kobza and sung by Torres

Contradictory as the words "gun-control comedy" may seem, Church & State manages to make the oxymoronic work. Now if only Williams can get his button-pushing comedy seen deep down in the heart of Dixie where it is most needed. Perhaps a bit of prayer is in order?

\*In a National New Play Network Rolling World Premiere, a playwright develops a new work with multiple creative teams in at least three different communities. The playwright is part of the process, working on the script and making adjustments based on what is learned from each production. JCC CenterStage, Rochester, NY and New Jersey Repertory Company, Long Branch, NJ runs are scheduled for Fall 2016 and Spring 2017.