

BY KIRK
MARKEY

CHURCH AND STATE

Is your gun worth more than my life?

[editor's note: The Jewish Theater of Bloomington will stage five performances of the critically acclaimed play Church and State between May 10th and 20th. The play was written by Jason Odell Williams and will be directed by IU graduate student Liam Castellan. For ticket information, please visit www.jewishtheatrebloomington.com.]

Persuasive, entertaining, and deadly serious, *Church and State* is a message play wrapped up in a character study. The plot is fast-paced and surprising, with enough twists and emotional crossings to engage even the least politically minded viewer. Its characters are flawed, realistic, and likable. They act like human beings, not as messengers for the playwright's view on social issues. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of *Church and State* is the light, comedic hand that Williams uses to convey its action. The humor we encounter in *Church and State* first surprises us because it just doesn't seem to belong in a play about gun violence. It surprises us again when we realize that it's not dark comedy that Williams is after in his play. The most surprising part of all occurs to us only in retrospect, when it becomes clear that the relevance of the play is inextricable from its comedic elements. But although the humor in *Church and State* is certainly not of the pitch black variety, it is still intimately linked to the horror playing out in the background. This connection should not surprise us, however, for it is impossible to disagree with Samuel Beckett's assertion that death lingers somewhere behind every piece of

laughter. Jason Odell Williams might have a slightly less morose take on this inevitable connection, but that doesn't mean it isn't there.

It's a reboot of "Gods and Guns," but we've seen this horrible movie before. It's the aftermath of another mass shooting and a Twitter feed fills up with tweet after tweet about "thoughts and prayers" until this banal sentiment inevitably encounters resistance. It's at this point that the feed changes, from a trough of platitudes into a stream of threats, recriminations, and vicious assaults on the victims and the grief of their families. It's an opposite and unequal reaction to those shrill Gestapo voices who dare speak of heresies like background checks, age restrictions, closing gun show loopholes, and maybe we have us a talk about assault rifles and hunting.

As citizens and family members, most of us have witnessed this backlash in one way or another-- either in person, on the news, or on social media. Someone you thought you knew, some previously mild, unassuming person is transformed from the reasonable soul they once were into a ravenous warrior for the gun lobby and all bets are off. Their ferocity is ultimately justified of course, what with sacred cows being attacked and the libtards coming after their guns, but the transfiguration is baffling nevertheless.

The view from the other side of the aisle ain't exactly pretty either. The battle is almost always drawn along strict party lines and the liberals are just as likely to sink into ugliness as their so-called ideological opposites. It's never quite clear where things begin to go wonky and the dialogue goes scrambling down the cliff, but it's a rare occasion indeed when anyone from either side dares deviate from what has become their prescribed position. Absurd binaries have

become axiomatic and your fuzzier logics need not apply. It plays out like some weird form of cultural entropy, with fevered human molecules collecting on one side or the other and Maxwell's demon growing more sinister by the day.

This is the backdrop for Jason Odell Williams's tragicomic *Church and State*. As the play opens, another mass shooting has occurred, this time at the elementary school that Republican Senator Charles Whitmore's children attend every day. This brings the senator to a crisis moment. He has been a gun rights advocate since the beginning of his political career, a position that seems inextricably linked to Christian faith. Soon after, Whitmore's moral vortex sweeps up the other two main characters as well. The dynamic between the Senator, his wife Sara, and his liberal campaign manager Alex Klein is the emotional impetus of the play, as well as the vehicle that drives a public nightmare into the private sphere.

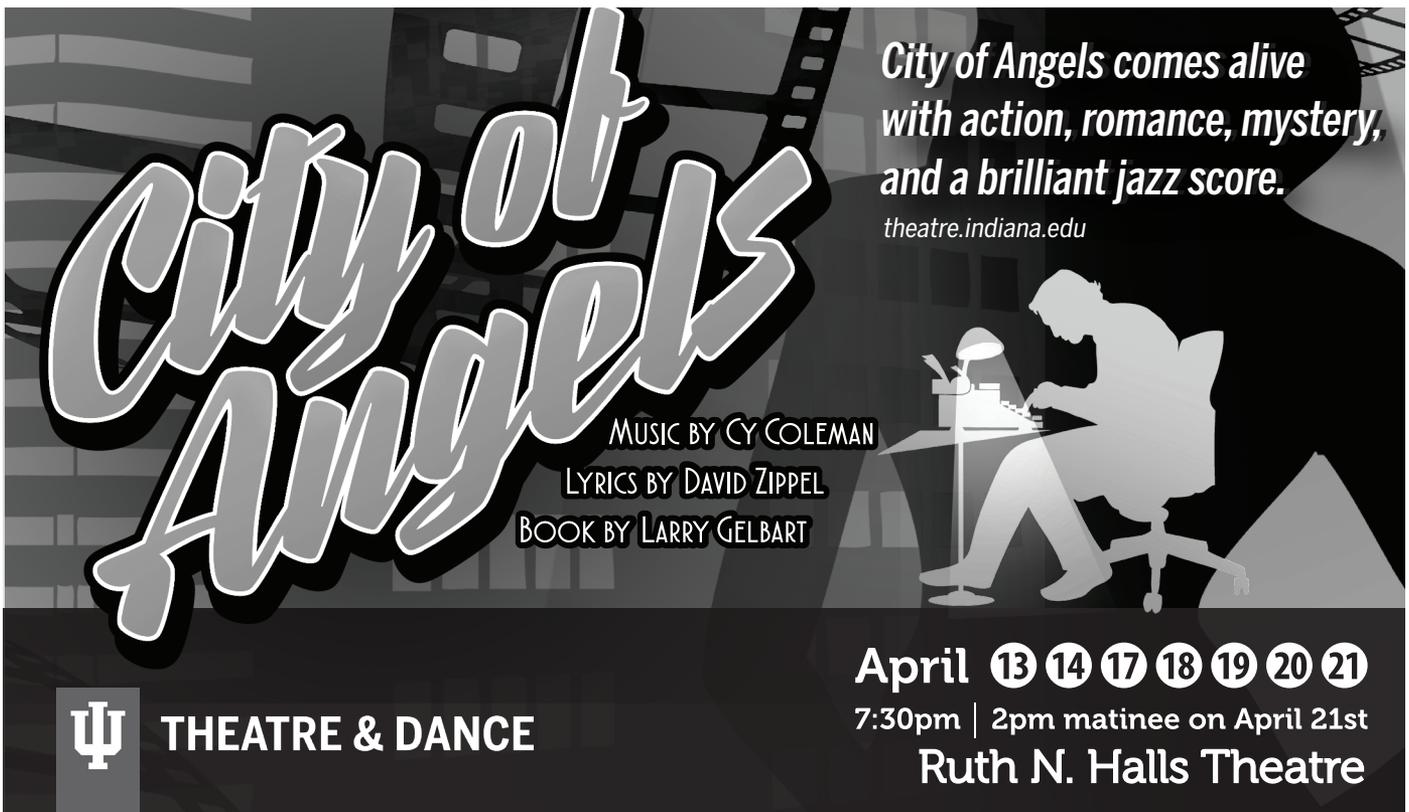
We enter the action *in medias res*, uncertain what's transpired before, but caught up now right in the middle of things. A political ad issues from some invisible spot backstage, the voice of Senator Charles Whitmore and how much it approves of this message. Then come the lockstep phrases, these in a voice that's absolutely sure of itself: "compassionate conservative," "welfare reform," "Second Amendment." These phrases follow one another in a fluid sequence, as though they exist in some necessary connection with one another, as though they might collapse under the strain of separation. The ad continues as the Senator himself appears onstage. He looks tired and uncertain. We realize he's watching his own ad playing on television. The contrast between the man and his PAC representation achieves its highest pitch at the mention of family, good Christian values, and how this great country was founded. Unsure of himself and clearly ambivalent, Senator Whitmore tries to change the channel, only to find that he cannot. The remote will not work and the programming continues uninterrupted.

This is how Jason Odell Williams's play *Church and State* begins,

in a green room on the campus of North Carolina State during the aftermath of yet another school shooting. It's three days before the general election and the Senator's on the cusp of giving the same type of partisan speech that won him his seat the first time. The action proper doesn't begin until a few moments later, but one taut narrative strain has already been woven. It's the narrative of a conscience in crisis, one that eventually poses its questions to the soul of a nation. Senator Charles Whitmore materializes onstage accompanied by the thud of a comfy but windowless dogma. The tension, this particular tension, is evident from the start of the play. Charles Whitmore should be right at home here, but instead he comes off like a man divided.

Williams is quick to establish this division as the moral fulcrum of the play, beginning when Charles decides to give a very different speech than the one both Alex and Sara insist he deliver. It turns out that he made an offhand remark to a blogger after the funeral for one of the young victims of the recent shooting. Put simply, Charles questions the value of prayer after a school shooting. Then, when questioned further, he asks "how can you believe in a God that would allow something like this to happen?" Not surprisingly, the story quickly goes viral through Twitter and our three main characters are left to navigate the damage.

Charles ends up delivering a speech that responds to the story directly. The audience does not hear the speech until the end of the play, but the effects of it course through the characters' lives and determine everything that happens afterward. To give away anything more would be to say too much, but it's fair to admit that the play is stark, real, and oddly comedic. The pacing is brisk and insistent, the dialogue snappy. It's a message play whose content is delivered through the lives of its characters, making for an energetic and



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sometimes volatile mix.

The mass shooting on the Virginia Tech Campus in 2007 sparked the idea for *Church and State*, hitting Williams close to home: Virginia Tech is the rival of his alma mater, the University of Virginia. As Williams developed the play over the next few years, until it debuted onstage in 2016, people kept dying, just as they continue to die today. The year is still young, this vexing midterm year 2018, but a horrible tragedy is again fresh in our minds already, hard on the heels of the bloodshed that loomed over 2017.

On February 14th, 2018, Valentine's Day, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, a 19-year-old man entered the school with an AR-15 and opened fire, killing 17 and wounding 17 more before being apprehended. The parallels between the horrors of Parkland and Williams's fictional shooting become all the more jolting when the survivors of Parkland speak.

Ryan Dietch is a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas and one of the survivors of the shooting. Along with other survivors of the massacre, on February 21st, he went to the State Legislature in Tallahassee, hoping to reach Florida politicians in a state with loose restrictions on firearms like the AR-15. This is the military-inspired semi-automatic rifle at the center of other mass shootings



Liam Castellan

(Photo by: Amy Osajima)

like Sandy Hook and Las Vegas. On that date, one week after the Parkland massacre, the third deadliest school shooting in United States history, the students were stonewalled and largely ignored. In the end, they were only able to speak to three Florida politicians.

Five days later, on February 26th, Dietch told an assembly in New Jersey "I do not know in what God I can trust that allows this to happen over and over."

That statement could have come straight from the script of *Church and State*. And as these words are being written, students all over the country have walked out of schools in protest over the utter and absolute lack of action on the part of legislators across the country: "...is your gun worth more than my life?"

As Twitter and social media in general are a big part of the storyline of *Church and State*, it only seems fair to check out (Jason) Odell Williams's Twitter page. Not surprisingly, he is outspoken and passionate in his support of these students. Williams's passion is manifesting in his actions as well. As of

this writing, he plans to attend the March For Our Lives protest in Washington, D.C. The following day, actor Jack Coleman (*Days of Our Lives*, *Dynasty*, *Heroes*, *Scandal*, etc.) will do a reading of the script of *Church and State* at the Arena Stage in D.C.

Polls certainly suggest most Americans want *something* to happen in regard to these shootings, and Liam Castellan is no exception. Audrey Heller, co-founder of the Jewish Theater of Bloomington, and artistic director, chose *Church and State* specifically for Castellan to direct. During a recent interview on the IU campus, Castellan spoke at the length about the play and how he plans to direct it.

Castellan said that the aftermath of this shooting felt different and that maybe we'll see action this time. This a hope that many of us share, but haven't we felt this way before? Castellan had not heard the quote from Dietch, but he agreed that the young man's statement is very close to the central theme of the play. But theater about big issues, said Castellan, still has to be about *people*.

"I think that's why I'm drawn to this piece," he continued. "It's still about people, and they are allowed to be funny, and they're

A "public play" surges along troubling and very private lines; a public nightmare swirls into the private sphere.

allowed to be vulnerable. And they are allowed to have moments of doubt as they move forward, and that's what's compelling to us as fellow human creatures ...and hopefully it's entertaining, right? Because if we don't do that, we can't reach them with anything else."

"Instead of *political theater*, I call a play like *Church and State* a *public play*," said Castellan. "It's about something larger than just these people. But, at the same time, the larger issues that the piece touches on are all processed through a story of human relationships...because that's what theater is best at. Because otherwise you could just write a letter to the editor."

Castellan's directorial approach promises to reveal much that is veiled in the text, but it is a testament to the quality of the script that the characters in *Church and State* will force his "public play" to surge along troubling and very private lines. Despite his "emphasis" on the public aspects of the play, Mr. Castellan also took great pains to express his desire to let the characters do the heavy lifting. Much of this crucial task will fall to the actors. Admirably, Mr. Castellan made this very explicit; his vision of the play depends heavily on a flexible collaboration between himself, the script, and the actors. The thinking here is that he will strike the necessary balance masterfully.

Fortunately, the actors have a rich vein of material to work in Williams's deft characterizations. Senator Whitmore is neither a caricature nor a surrogate mouthpiece. He is a fully fleshed out human being. Yes, he does possess the earmarks necessary to his functioning in the play, but his development both before and during the action make him all-too-real and wholly sympathetic. He is a Republican up and comer from North Carolina, something of a poster

boy for the “God, guns, and guts” sentiment that has become the oversimplified tag of some portions of the political right. Charles is the heir apparent to a conservative dynasty and might just have a chance at the presidency if he toes the party line, but it’s when he breaks rank that the shared souls of both parties come up for inspection.

At first, Sara Whitmore comes off as little more than an outline of a human being, a construct dully performing the gestures of an ossified role. She is a devout, fundamentalist beauty, but much more of her is revealed as the play continues. Although she blusters through some face plant moments, Sara is smart, savvy, and determined. She was Whitmore’s campaign manager during the early part of his career, but the party pushed her aside when they saw the candidate’s national potential. Subsequently, she has the role of “Senator’s wife” foisted upon her, but she seems to play it with tongue planted firmly in cheek and with the perfect amount of bitter irony.

Alex Klein is the young campaign manager and Sara’s apparent foil. A democrat from New York, Alex shares with Charles and Sara certain stereotypical personality hints, though hers are of the oft maligned liberal elite variety. But there is much of her that is submerged at the beginning of the play, leading the viewer to ask just who she is and to interrogate her motives. Alex is brilliant, driven, and ambitious. She also has an impressive track record of winning elections. She seems to believe in the Senator’s character, but does this suggest a moral commitment or merely a desire for more political victories?

These questions are but partially resolved as the relationship between her and Sara develops. Revealing too much might spoil the fun, but the evolution of the female characters is the most emotionally rewarding aspect of *Church and State*. Like Charles, they are fully formed human characters, but while much of the Senator’s development happens offstage, Alex and Sara are transformed in real time. While it is doubtful that Williams wished to turn *Church and State* into a feminist play, it is quite certain that his suggestive

depiction of these women confers dignity upon both their relationship with one another and their individual autonomy.

Church and State inhabits a strange aesthetic and moral area. After all, it’s a *comedy* of all things, and what’s funny about another episode of mass murder? And what, pray tell, could possibly be funny about a school shooting? Nothing, of course, nothing at all. These events shake our souls and challenge our beliefs. Or at least they should. And this is what *Church and State* is all about. It’s about people first and foremost, about people believing, thinking, and doing as per *what they conceive to be their abiding nature*. The italics are significant here. They draw attention to what Mr. Williams has cited as one of the keys to *Church and State*-- that we needn’t accept our particular set of “givens” wholesale and that constant introspection is a moral imperative.

No, there’s nothing funny about mass murders or school shootings, and Jason Odell Williams would not have us think otherwise. Human beings, on the other hand-- at least when they’re not killing each other or ridiculing their beliefs on social media-- are often hysterically funny. And they might be funniest in the exact sorts of situations that Williams presents in *Church and State*, when they’re challenged, vulnerable, and afraid. *Church and State* brings gun violence, partisan politics, religious faith, family life, and the stark divide between left and right onto the stage.

The Jewish Theater’s production of *Church and State* promises to leave a mark on the skin of its audience. Happening as it is during the aftermath of the Parkland shooting, the timing could not possibly be any worse. Nor could it be any better. There is no appropriate time to stage *Church and State*, but right now is absolutely perfect. The play ends in a state of suspension, with a cliffhanger that perfectly reflects where our country stands right now-- circumspect perhaps, but not yet sufficiently ashamed.