



# CHURCH & STATE

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DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.



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*For Virginia Tech, Tucson, and Newtown*

CHURCH & STATE was originally developed at JCC CenterStage (Ralph Meranto, Artistic Director). It was produced as a National New Play Network rolling world premiere on July 2, 2016, at Skylight Theatre Company (Gary Grossman, Artistic Director) in Los Angeles, California, directed by Elina de Santos, and on October 22, 2016, at JCC CenterStage in Rochester, New York, directed by Ralph Meranto. The rolling world premiere casts were as follows:

Skylight Theatre Company:

SENATOR CHARLES WHITMORE ..... Rob Nagle  
SARA WHITMORE ..... Tracie Lockwood  
ALEX KLEIN ..... Annika Marks  
TOM/MARSHALL ..... Edward Hong

JCC CenterStage:

SENATOR CHARLES WHITMORE ..... Peter J. Doyle  
SARA WHITMORE ..... Beth Winslow  
ALEX KLEIN ..... Esther Winter  
TOM/MARSHALL/SECURITY GUY ..... Matthew Austin Combs

CHURCH & STATE had its Off-Broadway premiere at New World Stages (Michael Coco, Managing Director) on March 27, 2017. It was produced by Charlotte Cohn. It was directed by Markus Potter, the set design was by David Goldstein, the costume design was by Dianne K. Graebner, the sound design was by Erik T. Lawson, and the lighting design was by Burke Brown. The cast was as follows:

SENATOR CHARLES WHITMORE ..... Rob Nagle  
SARA WHITMORE ..... Nadia Bowers  
ALEX KLEIN ..... Christa Scott-Reed  
TOM/MARSHALL/OTHERS ..... Jonathan Louis Dent

Later in the run, SARA and TOM were played by Megan Sikora and Andy Talen, respectively.

## AUTHOR'S STATEMENT

This play began as a germ of an idea shortly after the shooting massacre at Virginia Tech in 2007. I went to UVA (Virginia Tech's "football rival") and the images on TV of candlelight vigils by Cavaliers for their rival Hokies touched me profoundly. Then Tucson happened, and I watched the news, riveted and angry. Then Aurora. And I watched again, riveted and angry. Then Newtown. And I'd had enough. A month later, in January 2013, I had a first draft of what would eventually become *Church & State*.

On paper, the topics of this play (religion, guns, and politics) seem heavy. But a heavy drama about heavy topics doesn't interest me. What interests me is a play that gets to the heart of the people around these issues. And when you write about people, you can't help but let them be funny and sad and honest, heartbreaking and uplifting all at the same time. Because isn't that what being human is? And because of that, I don't think this play works without the humor. And the humor doesn't mean anything without the heart. To me, comedy and tragedy are not two ends of a single line, but two points right next to each other on the same circle.

While most writers hope that their work will live forever, my dream for this play is that it will become obsolete. And many years from now people will read it and think, "How quaint! Americans used to argue about gun control." But as the news incessantly reminds us, these mass shootings are not going away any time soon. They have become our new normal. Orlando was a stark reminder of that.

For now, I hope this play raises questions, sparks debate, makes people laugh and cry, and laugh while crying. And of course I hope it moves people in some way. Perhaps enough to take action with their voice and vote and bump the needle ever so slightly in the conversation about gun violence.

But most of all, I hope this play speaks to your heart. Because, for me, that's the only reason to write anything: to speak to each other's hearts.

—Jason Odell Williams,  
June 2016

## CHARACTERS

**SENATOR CHARLES “CHARLIE” WHITMORE (R-NC):** Male. 40s–50s. Born and raised in North Carolina, he is a former state senator, now incumbent Junior U.S. Senator up for reelection. His father was governor of North Carolina for many years before he died. Charlie’s two older brothers are members of the North Carolina House of Representatives. Though not gunning for it himself, the party is grooming Charlie for a presidential run in a few years. Charlie is a man filled with doubt. But he has plenty of charisma and sex appeal. He’s a rare honest politician and gifted public speaker. A real family man who loves his wife, sons, and constituents.

**SARA WHITMORE:** Female. 40s. Charlie’s wife. A big, brassy, former real estate agent, now stay-at-home mom to their boys Matthew (9, athletic and fearless) and Luke (6, artistic and sensitive). She is sweet, charming, and instantly likable. Even when she’s bossing you around, she does it with an irresistible smile. More “street smart” than “book smart,” but can still hold her own with the big boys. Also born and raised in North Carolina. Loves her family, Jesus, and the Bible. She’s a tough Southern woman with a soft underbelly.

**ALEX KLEIN:** Female. 30s–40s. Charlie’s campaign manager. A fast-talking, no-nonsense liberal Jew from New York whose star is on the rise as a go-to campaign manager. Hired by the Whitmore campaign so she wouldn’t defeat him working for the other side. She is great at her job, but knows her career is on the line if this election goes badly. Her self-doubt bubbles to the surface at times, but she’s clearly a professional at the top of her game.

**TOM/MARSHALL/REPORTER/SECURITY GUY:** Male. 20s–30s. Tom is a paid intern with the campaign. Simple with a good heart. Tom is an NC State graduate and North Carolina boy through and through; more “country,” while Marshall is more of a “Southern gentleman.” Marshall is a blogger with Christian values but not much journalistic experience. Reporter is a smart, charming, on-the-scene news reporter. Security Guy is a typical non-speaking bodyguard.

MALE & FEMALE NEWS ANCHOR, RUGGED AMERICAN MALE, and MAYOR voices can be pre-taped by actors in the cast or others. See the note on the next page.

## **SETTING**

Raleigh, North Carolina. A small green room backstage at NC State's Stewart Theatre.

The play opens on a Saturday evening, twenty minutes before the senator is to address a crowd of supporters, three days before election day.

Later, the same green room shortly after Tuesday's election results.

## NOTES

A slash ( / ) denotes a point of overlap between one speaker's line and the next speaker's line.

A “—” at the end of a line means the next character cuts off the previous speaker.

For the campaign commercial at the top of the play and for the montage of news reporters near the end of the play, the production can choose to make actual pre-taped videos to be projected onstage, or can simply use prerecorded voices and let sound design tell the story.

Last but most important: I've seen this play almost 100 times with several different casts, and the key to making it work is to honor the comedy and the pacing. It's not a farce or a sitcom—the comedy must come from a real and honest place—but these characters cannot indulge in the darkness or tragedy. They don't have time for that. So the actors cannot be precious about the words or take lots of unscripted pauses or beats. There is a drive and urgency throughout. And when the highs are high and the comedy is working, then when the bottom drops out and the play becomes serious a few times, it carries so much more weight. But if the actors are slow or heavy, the play drags, the comedy falls flat, and the whole thing misses the mark.



# CHURCH & STATE

*From the dark, we hear...*

CHARLIE. (*Voiceover.*) I'm Charles Whitmore and I approve this message.

*Lights rise on a rundown green room in NC State's Stewart Theatre as the campaign commercial continues.*

RUGGED AMERICAN MALE. (*Voiceover.*) He's been hailed as "a compassionate conservative," and "just the kind of leadership from 'The Right' that Washington needs."

*Tom, wearing a white "JESUS IS MY RUNNING MATE!" T-shirt and a red "WHITMORE FOR SENATE" baseball hat, races by the open door. He looks in the room, slightly panicked. Doesn't see anyone. Races out.*

(*Voiceover.*) As senator, he championed the biggest welfare reform bill in our nation's history, voted to extend benefits for seniors and veterans, and protected our Second Amendment rights by helping to *block* a restrictive ban on firearms.

*After a beat, Charlie enters quietly, wearing a rumpled dark suit, tie loose. He's a little sweaty and unsure of himself.*

(*Voiceover.*) He's a family man who believes in good Christian values. The kind of values on which this country was founded.

*Charlie searches for and finds the remote, but watches the last moments of his commercial, mouthing along with the final catchphrase ("The right leadership for a bold state") then sort of looks pleased and dissatisfied at the same time.*

(*Voiceover.*) This Tuesday, help continue the grand tradition of Whitmores in North Carolina politics, and reelect Senator *Charles* Whitmore. The *right* leadership for a *bold* state.

*The TV comes back from commercial break to a rap video.*

*Charlie presses a button on the remote to change the channel. But the TV stays on the same rap video. He tries again with the remote. Same channel. He looks curiously at the remote. Tries again. Same channel.*

CHARLIE. God bless it.

*He stabs uselessly at the remote.*

*Alex darts by the door, phone to her ear. Spots Charlie. Enters the room.*

ALEX. *(Into phone.)* Never mind, I found him. Tell security to stand down.

*Hangs up, immediately begins texting her staff.*

Senator, what are you doing in here?

CHARLIE. *(Fixed on TV and remote.)* Alex! Just the person I need. You know how to get ESPN on this thing?

ALEX. *(Preoccupied with her phone.)* Do I...what?

CHARLIE. Shoot, it's channel 31 at home, but all I'm gettin' here is B.E.T. That can't be right.

*She finally looks up from her phone and gives him her full attention.*

ALEX. You're due onstage in fifteen minutes, *why* do you need to find ESPN right now?

CHARLIE. Cuz it's Game Day.

*Alex shrugs.*

College Game Day. On ESPN?

*She looks at him blankly.*

Jeez-Louise, State-UNC. The Wolfpack are playing the Tar Heels! It's the flippin' / game of the week!

*She takes the remote and shows him how to find the right channel.*

ALEX. Okay, here, just press "menu," scroll down, ESPN. There. Channel 33.

CHARLIE. Oh, how 'bout that? I was so close.

*He watches for a moment.*

Oh heck, it's still the jibber-jabber—guess kickoff's not till 6:30 or something.

*He shuts off the TV. Paces, nervous.*

ALEX. You have no reason to be nervous, sir.

CHARLIE. Oh, I'm not nervous—I could do this speech without any teleprompters, one arm behind my back.

ALEX. It's the same speech you gave last week in Greensboro. And two weeks ago, in Wilmington.

ALEX. And don't worry about those new numbers that came in—it's actually a statistical dead heat.

CHARLIE. I'm not worried about the numbers, I trust you.

ALEX. Then why are you hiding in this... (*Looks around with disdain.*) what is this place?

CHARLIE. I'm not hiding, I'm getting focused.

ALEX. Senator, we really need you on your A-game today.

CHARLIE. I'm always on m—what're you talking about, / A-game?

ALEX. Security said you were mumbling to yourself...

CHARLIE. I appreciate the concern but I told those guys to tell y'all I was going for a walk—just needed to clear my head.

ALEX. ...acting strange, then just disappeared without a word. We circled the building five times looking for you.

ALEX. Sir, one of the reasons you hired me was because you wanted someone with fresh eyes to tell you when you were drifting off-track...? Well. You're not even in the car anymore.

*Charlie nods, starts to say something, then changes course. Moves to a leftover craft service table in the corner with some sweet tea and other nibbles on it.*

CHARLIE. Hey, you wanna soda or something? Maybe an iced tea? They make the best sweet tea right / here on campus.

ALEX. No. Thank you.

CHARLIE. You sure? It's really good. Not too sweet.

ALEX. I'm fine, really.

CHARLIE. I think they use agave or simple syrup / or something.

ALEX. Goddamnit, Senator, tell me what's wrong!

*Sara swoops in, all charm and smiles, moving immediately to Charlie.*

SARA. (*All in one breath.*) There you are baby we've been looking all over for you what's the matter you need some iced tea should I pour you a glass of sweet tea hey Alex how you doin' you want some iced tea why don't I pour us *all* a few glasses of iced tea.

ALEX. OH MY GOD, CAN WE PLEASE STOP TALKING ABOUT ICED FRICKIN' TEA?!

*Beat. Sara and Charlie stare at Alex.*

SARA. (*Pours a glass of tea.*) She must not have tried it here yet. / It really is delicious. Not too sweet.

CHARLIE. No—I was tryina tell her. I said so. / Exactly.

ALEX. Okay, fine. Here. God!

*Alex hastily takes the tea from Sara. She vaguely raises her cup as a "cheers," then downs it.*

*Beat. Alex stands very still.*

(*Low-key surprise.*) Wow that is really good.

SARA. See! We told you, CHARLIE. There ya go. Aren't  
ain't nothin' else like it. ya glad you tried it?

ALEX. Yes. Wonderful. Life-altering, in fact. Now if we could please address the matter at hand, sir, because you *are* due onstage / in just a few minutes.

CHARLIE. (*To Alex and Sara.*) Oh that, right. Well, it's no big deal really, I was just—after this morning, at the thing there, it got me thinking again—about the events of last week, which got me thinking 'bout the speech for *today*, and it just occurred to me that maybe I shouldn't deliver it *as written*, ya know. Word for word. But rather. Speak from the heart. About everything that's happened. And uh... Yeah. That.

*Beat.*

SARA. (*With a smile.*) That's a terrible idea.

CHARLIE. Well, I respect your opinion, honey, but Alex is my campaign manager, so why don't we—

ALEX. That's a terrible idea.

SARA. See?

CHARLIE. Okay, all right, I get why you'd say that, / but hear me out—

ALEX. You don't *change* the speech that got you this far *three* days before the election.

SARA. Exactly! For once, "I'm with her."

CHARLIE. But y'all don't even—there's a *reason* to change what I'm gonna say.

ALEX. Which is?

CHARLIE. ...Okay now don't freak out.

SARA. Never a good start.

ALEX. Nope.

SARA. It's like with our boys, "Promise you won't get mad, Mommy?" No! What if you're about to tell me you set your brother on fire?

ALEX. Did that actually happen?

SARA. Not yet, but the older one's got the devil in him, you just know he's up to no good.

CHARLIE. Hey, I'm glad y'all are finally getting along but this is serious. Hear me out. Okay...? Okay?!

SARA. Okay, fine, whatever,  
just say it.

ALEX. Yes, what is it? We  
don't have much time.

CHARLIE. All right, now... It's possible a story may come out in the paper tomorrow, or maybe even earlier, on the Twitter or something, / I don't know.

ALEX. It's just called Twitter, sir. No "the."

CHARLIE. ...It's not *The* Twitter?

ALEX. No, sir. We've been over this.

CHARLIE. Okay. Well, a story might come out on Twitter that—  
Now see, that sounds weird to me, there should be a "the" in there.

SARA. (*Smiling.*) I agree. I like it with a "the."

ALEX. It doesn't matter what you *like*, *that* is what it's called. It's Twitter, Facebook, Instagram. No "the." Ever.

# CHURCH & STATE

by Jason Odell Williams

2M, 2W

Three days before his bid for reelection, in the wake of a school shooting in his hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina, a Republican U.S. senator makes an off-the-cuff comment to a blogger that gets leaked on “the Twitter,” calling into question the senator’s stance on guns and God. As his devoutly Christian wife and liberal Jewish campaign manager try to contain the damage, this look at how religion influences politics and how politics has become a religion is simultaneously funny, heartbreaking, and uplifting.

*“[CHURCH & STATE] is surprisingly subtle and gripping entertainment... a sophisticated dialectic that presents both sides of the gun debate... Williams avoids demonizing his conservative Southerners, who are winning, strikingly intelligent, and above all, sincere in their beliefs.”* —Los Angeles Times

*“A crackling script. Feels very of the moment. An enjoyable, thought-provoking and, I promise, humorous piece of theatre. I wish every member of Congress would see it!”* —NPR

*“This is a powerful, often humorous, and highly contemporary piece... The play has several surprises, four fascinating characters, and so many lines that resonate.”* —The Huffington Post

*“[Williams] presents his argument so entertainingly, few would object to going along for the ride. ... Williams is adept at jacking up the tension, and he leavens potentially leaden debates with plenty of humor. ... [Williams’] words... need to be said and heard.”* —Time Out New York

Also by Jason Odell Williams  
HANDLE WITH CARE

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