

Theater: Oh Hell! 'The Christians' Tackles Faith

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THE CHRISTIANS *** out of ****
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

A big city play about mega-churches that isn't cynical or filled with hypocritical con men or womanizers or child molesters or womanizing child molesters who pick your pocket at the same time? It's a miracle!

Of course theater has a long history of engaging with faith. (The David Ives play New Jerusalem is a particularly brilliant example from recent years.) And Lucas Hnath is an exciting talent. His piece circling Walt Disney was fascinating and Isaac's Eye turned scientific debates into a riveting night out worthy of Michael Frayn's Copenhagen.

So it's no surprise that The Christians is relatively nuanced, more interested in matters of faith and personal demons than in portraying cardboard heroes and villains. I wish it were better, but a good production and an excellent cast certainly make it worth the pilgrimage to Playwrights Horizon.

The audience is sitting in the pews when a choir of 21 comes on stage and sings modestly swinging gospel tunes of the mega-church variety. Those looking for clues to the strain of Christianity on display at this house of God we're attending will (I think) be left clueless. (I know evangelicals who don't listen to certain Christian bands which to me seem interchangeable with other Christian bands because of the strand of fundamentalism espoused by said band via key words and phrases.)

Technically, the production helmed by Les Waters is spot on. The potted plants and vaguely anonymous atmosphere, the hum of phones ringing and business being conducted even while the pastor is preaching (mega-churches are BIG and something is always going on somewhere else, even during service) -- it all feels right. (Credit to the behind the scenes talent, especially the sound design of Jake Rodriguez.)

Pastor Paul (Andrew Garman) finally begins to speak and between the singing and his sermon, that's the substantial and riveting first 20 minutes or so of this tight, 95 minute work. While Paul talks, he's joined onstage by his wife Elizabeth (Linda Powell), associate pastor Joshua (Larry Powell), and church elder Jay (Philip Kerr). For much of the show, they are on stage with no dialogue to speak of and as a group they do marvelous work staying in character, offering subtle hints to their state of mind without ever breaking character -- they are, after all, facing the congregation and a certain propriety is called for.

That isn't easy because Pastor Paul's sermon is a whopper. Today is the day their little church that could is finally debt free. And today is the day Paul pronounces a seismic change in his personal theology, one he hopes and believes the congregation will embrace.

Paul tells a story he heard about a young man in an African country. A car bomb goes off and while most flee, this young man runs toward the disaster, rushes into a burning grocery store and brings his little sister out. He's shielding her from the flames, literally burning alive but saving her life in the process. The young man collapses on the ground in terrible agony and dies. The person who related this story to Paul said what a shame this hero wasn't born again, what a pity he hadn't been saved and now must be suffering the pangs of hell.

Paul cried that night, suffering a crisis of faith and wrestling with his conscience, he tells us. Did he truly believe

that young man was going to suffer eternal torment, a young man who was not born again or even Christian but by all accounts a decent and good person? No. No he did not. Paul does not believe in hell anymore, not the way he has always preached before. He doesn't believe his way is the only way to eternal salvation. Now he wants to share a message of love and mercy, not condemnation and pain and punishment. That is the Jesus he believes in. Will they believe in this Jesus too?

Wait. He doesn't believe in hell anymore? You don't have to be saved to be saved? Among fundamentalist Christians, a sex scandal or financial shenanigans pale in comparison to such a radical change in theology. Paul's faith has been tested and now he's testing everyone else.

To the credit of Hnath, this is the heart of the play: a debate about ideas. In Isaac's Eye, scientific debates invariably revealed characters and furthered our understanding of the people. Here, however, the play's weakness is that it doesn't, not really. Paul is immediately challenged by Associate Pastor Joshua, who is invited by Paul to share his concerns. Joshua says quite reasonably that the Bible says there's a hell. Paul says "Where?" Joshua cites certain passages like a reference to Gehenna, which Paul immediately dismisses as historically referring to a garbage dump outside ancient Jerusalem, not necessarily or even likely a place of eternal damnation than an idea of a place you dump the unwanted, much like New Yorkers think of the Bronx.

Joshua then says what about.... And here's where the play first stumbled for me. Joshua pauses and has to flip through the Bible he has to find a particular passage. Now Joshua is a magnetic, hugely important figure in this mega-church. He's the second in command. And frankly, in their world, you'd be hard pressed to find someone in a similar position who COULDN'T cite chapter and verse for just about any passage in the Bible. It's their bread and butter. But Joshua stumbles around and finally reads another passage and Paul shoots that one down with a combination of history and linguistic challenges about what this or that word actually means. (The gospels for example were often originally passed down orally in Aramaic and then written down in Greek and then translated again and again into English over the centuries, so as you can imagine nuances are lost and meanings shift.)

It's a masterful moment of spiritual domination, but it's also a wildly uneven battle. Though such debates are commonplace, Joshua is practically helpless in front of Paul's knowledge. And that makes this key early struggle far less satisfying than it might have been. Quite simply, Joshua is not a worthy foil for the doubts many are surely feeling.

Hnath doesn't stop there. Joshua leaves the church and while only a handful follow, those numbers grow in the weeks to come. Then Paul is confronted by choir member Jenny, though "confront" is not the right word for the deliciously timid, submissive but firm questioning of Jenny. (Emily Donahoe is very good in this tricky part).

Here the dramatic problem of the debate between Paul and Joshua is flipped. Jenny raises one tricky question and one easy one. Why did Paul wait until after the church's debt had been paid off to reveal his new thinking? That seems suspicious. And if there's no hell, does that mean Hitler is in heaven? Suddenly, the confident pastor -- previously on fire with the Spirit and ready with a thoughtful, informed answer to every question -- is helpless to respond.

Yet bringing up Hitler or a serial killer or some other notoriously evil person is theology 101, the sort of thing Paul would have heard a thousand times before. This engaging public speaker should have also been able to deal with the personal question of timing more adroitly as well, at least eventually in their talk. First in one scene he's completely prepared to defend his beliefs against the queries of the man presumably the most capable to questioning them. In the next, he's helpless in front of the most banal questioning.

Paul's wife weighs in later and this battle is a doozy. Actress Linda Powell has been especially good at revealing her thoughts onstage without overplaying her hand. When she finally gets to speak, it's fiery and fierce: why didn't he open up to her about his doubts, why did she hear about them for the first time in front of everyone

else, what if God wants her to fight him and challenge him and convince him he's on the wrong path?

Certainly, *The Christians* is strongest when the ideas that animate it are revealing of the characters. That's why this scene between Paul and his wife is so charged; it feels rooted in who these two people are and who they're becoming. And that's why the final scene between Paul and Joshua works better: their back and forth is more personal and specific and Joshua's heart-to-heart is richer and more enlivening than anything that came before. (Both Garman and Powell are excellent throughout.)

The Christians will enjoy a long life in regional theater. And I can't wait to see Hnath's next play. If he's lucky, it too will be brought to life by an excellent cast. He clearly did his homework. As Biblical scholar Karen Armstrong says, [Paul is the apostle "we love to hate,"](#) in other words a complex and confusing one who infuriates as much as he enlightens. And Joshua? He's revered by Jews and Muslims alike. Mormons named the favorite greenery of U2 after him (the Joshua Tree) because it seemed to mimic this humble man praying to heaven. And when Moses died, it was not one of his sons who led his people forward. It was Joshua. Unlike Moses, Paul may not have died. But for the fundamentalist Christians in his church, abandoning a bedrock conviction of their faith was far more tragic.

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