

In the new play “Church & State,” onstage at the Skylight Theatre in East Hollywood, a conservative Southern Christian politician running for re-election to the United States Senate has a crisis of faith. After a school shooting in which 39 children are massacred, including two friends of his own children, Sen. Charles Whitmore (Rob Nagle), whose campaign slogan had been “Jesus is my running mate,” suddenly expresses doubts about God’s existence to a blogger, who asks the senator if he prayed after the tragedy. Whitmore’s answer goes viral, to the dismay of his Jewish campaign manager, Alex Klein (Annika Marks), and the outrage of his deeply religious wife, Sara (Tracie Lockwood). Whitmore also begins to question his support for unregulated gun ownership.

Playwright Jason Odell Williams said in a recent interview that the impetus for the story grew out of the recent spate of mass shootings in the United States, beginning with the one at Virginia Tech in 2007, near where the playwright attended college. That incident was followed by the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords in suburban Tucson, Ariz., (2011), and then the 2012 shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in which 20 young children were killed, along with six adults.

“Sandy Hook was the one that really broke me,” Williams said, “and I was just devastated. It’s very close to where we live in New York. I didn’t know it at the time, but I found out later that the close friend of a really good friend of mine lost a son at Sandy Hook.

“I didn’t know it, and the play was already mostly finished, but it just proved to me again that this can happen anywhere, anytime, to anyone.”

Williams went on to describe his play’s three main characters, who could easily have become stereotypes, but whom he has carefully fashioned as fully believable, three-dimensional human beings. Whitmore, the junior senator from North Carolina, comes from a political background. “His father was in politics. His brothers are in politics. And he’s sort of going into the family business. He never really did it because of his passion. He just kind of did it because he could.

“He’s a Republican who isn’t necessarily married to the core values of the GOP,” Williams said. “He’s a man of faith, a family man. He’s very devoted to his wife and kids, and he’s just slapped in the face with this event.”

Meanwhile, Whitmore’s wife, Sara, is drawn as a lovable, deeply God-fearing Southern Christian who can be overbearing but is also very funny. While her husband’s career made it necessary for her to come across as a supportive housewife who stays in the background, there is really more to her than meets the eye. Williams considers this character to be, at her core, a serious woman of depth and complexity. “I think she’s a very smart person, and I think she was a very successful real estate agent in her day, while they were both working,” he said. “And then once they had kids, things changed. I love all my characters, but she’s one that is particularly fun to write, because she just has a vernacular and a cadence and a way of talking that I love.”

Although Sara often clashes with Alex, the liberal Jewish campaign maven from New York, the two women are allied in their insistence that Whitmore remain true to his original belief system and not risk alienating his constituents. The playwright describes Klein, who puts her own progressive views aside in order to manage the senator’s re-election bid, as a political player whose star is on the rise and who sees Whitmore as a horse that she can ride to the White House.

“I think being Jewish is just one of her many layers, [including] the fact that she is more liberal than Charlie and Sara are, the fact that she is from New York, and she is fast-talking, fast-paced, with three BlackBerries in her pocket.”

Although Williams said he grew up as what he called a “Christmas and Easter Christian,” he is very familiar with Judaism. His wife, actress-singer-producer Charlotte Cohn, is Israeli and was raised in an Orthodox home. “Then she came to America,” he explained, “was very secular and embraced American, Western ‘who cares about religion’ kind of culture. And as our relationship progressed and we got married, and we had a daughter, she has kind of found her way back to it, slowly. We’ll go to synagogue once in a while.”

He continued, “I love going to those places with her. I just don’t like it when it gets fanatical and becomes an obsession.”

With respect to his current play, Williams acknowledges that his own views are echoed in the definitive speech Whitmore gives near the end, in which he pleads passionately for responsible, moderate gun control.

“I know that, for the most part, we’re preaching to the choir right now,” Williams said. “We’re doing it in New York, New Jersey and California, but the goal with the play is to get it in as many venues as possible across the country, and that means Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, any red state you can think of. So, hopefully, at some point, he [Whitmore] will be making that speech to audiences whose minds we can actually change.”