

‘The Christians’ avoids preaching, yet gets us thinking

Lucas Hnath’s 2016 drama gets an auspicious Orange County premiere, thanks to a rock-solid staging at Costa Mesa Playhouse.

By Eric Marchese
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Are strip mall or storefront “megachurches” real churches in the true sense of the word? Is the charisma of a religious leader sufficient to bind thousands of congregants whose personal beliefs may be widely disparate? And what if a church’s officers find themselves at odds with its founder or leader?

These questions and more are at the heart of Lucas Hnath’s compelling drama “The Christians,” which gives them a thorough working over.

In the 2016 play’s auspicious Orange County premiere, Costa Mesa Playhouse gives these issues the vigorous workout they deserve, and through his direction and the work of his fine cast, CMP artistic director Michael Serna gives us an insider’s look at events that have rocked a newly successful megachurch.

In the process, Serna and company provide plenty of food for thought while proving that “The Christians” is the kind of play to be relished, cheered for and celebrated by anyone who demands theater of substance, and of relevance to their own lives, versus simplistic fluff devoid of significant content.

The church depicted in “The Christians” is generic enough that the show can work just about anywhere. The program tells us little beyond that we’re inside “a megachurch, in America, in the 21st century.”

That lack of specificity works to the play’s advantage by avoiding regional stereotypes. Another plus is that the church’s head pastor is no high-decibel celebrity whose sermons are televised – or taped and rebroadcast – or who’s got a slate of bestselling books on the market.

Quite the opposite: Paul (Peter Hilton) is gentle, deliberative and soft-spoken – yet one Sunday morning he delivers a sermon that rocks the church and its congregants to the core.

“The Christians” depicts that sermon, then shows us, in flashbacks, Paul’s interactions with those closest to him and their reactions to his decision to take the church in a new direction Paul freely admits is “radical.”

Without preaching, Hnath presents two diametrically opposed visions of Christianity: the traditional tenet where the good reside in heaven in their afterlife, and the evil go to hell; and an existence where all souls co-exist in harmony in heaven regardless of their actions in life – certainly a radical shift of orientation for most Christians and, as seen in the play, a controversial one. That dichotomy is the beating heart of “The Christians,” and it’s sure to disturb, startle and perhaps even rile many an audience member.

Challenging Paul's assertions are associate pastor Joshua (Jeff Rolle, Jr.); church elder Jay (Mark Tillman); Jenny (Cindy Cisneros), a congregant of seven years; and Paul's wife Elizabeth (Silvana Gargione). "The Christians" documents their questioning of and opposition to Paul's redefining of the church's basic system of beliefs – and how their debates effect each of them individually as well as having an impact upon the church itself.

Through Paul, Hnath and his script deal with moral/ ethical, and religious/spiritual issues that have bedevilled mankind for millennia. What makes a good Christian? Should the head pastor of any Christian church be viewed as "the church" – and if so, should a single person hold so much power and have sway over the lives of 1,000s of others?

Through Paul, Hnath documents the church's growth over 20 years from just a small handful of members meeting at a storefront venue to hundreds of congregants, then thousands, and its explosive expansion, with multiple services on Sundays and during the week and the need for building a huge complex whose costs have just recently been paid off, leading to financial solvency.

That fact is later, and cannily, brought into play by Hnath in a way that examines and questions Paul's motives without indicting him – and which is utterly plausible and natural, a testament to Hnath's skill in crafting a drama where the consequences of its characters' actions are impactful, even devastating.

The script gives us plenty to reflect upon regarding the role of the church in today's society, and the existence and proliferation of "churches" that are closer to being a corporation than a religious institution.

The most radical aspect of Paul's new vision lies in what he calls the ultimate definition of "heaven" as a place "where that wrong that one has done is washed away" – a claim that ruffles feathers in its acceptance into heaven of criminals and murderers.

At CMP, Serna's sure-handed direction allows the text to breathe and the actions during Paul's sermon and its aftermath to unfold at a natural, real-time pace. Each encounter Paul has with those closest to him adds a new wrinkle to the play's essential premise.

Particularly fascinating is the Paul-Joshua debate regarding the existence of hell. So is Joshua's leaving to start his own church, which examines the nature and genesis of many of the world's religions – splinter groups that wind up becoming separate new entities.

To Hnath's and CMP's credit, taking the church into uncharted waters is no easy task for Paul, who struggles to communicate his vision to all those around him. That vision includes a conception of a God so much bigger than all of us that it's hard to comprehend the scope and magnitude – which is precisely Paul's point, that the spiritual universe is almost beyond any sort of human comprehension, description or definition.

Another plus of "The Christians": Because he's true to himself and his beliefs, and hasn't necessarily forced them on others, we can't harshly judge Paul, or dislike him. That would be too cut-and-dried for the issues the play boldly tackles. Paul could have been a stereotype, but isn't. Hnath sees to it that he's a real person, sincere even within the scope of his flaws. He's free of any sinister motives or a self-serving agenda, going where his heart leads him.

For much of “The Christians,” Hilton’s Paul holds his cards close to the vest, keeping his cool even when forcefully challenged. But the steady hammering of those who surround him gradually dents his armor, a phenomenon beautifully evinced by Hilton. His Paul is no fiery orator – more like a portly, bespectacled board chairman with a calm manner and whisper-soft voice.

Rolle’s Joshua is young, articulate and impassioned, unafraid to stand up to Paul and voice his beliefs. Jay’s description of him as honest, good and charismatic is certainly apt. Cisneros’s Jenny is quiet and contemplative, and clearly troubled by Paul’s beliefs and the radical new course he charts for the church.

For the bulk of the play, Gargione’s Elizabeth remains in her seat, a silent observer – then Hnath unleashes the couple’s powerhouse confrontation, where the two hash out their opposing points of view. Much like Joshua, she’s an independent thinker and not afraid to stand up to Paul. Their encounter points up the crucial role that women play in the church and in families, the pressures of being the wife of a man of God, and how their union is subject to the same pressures as any marriage.

Late in the play, Joshua and Paul have a true heart-to-heart, away from the eyes of the church’s members and officers, where they level with each other. It’s one of the play’s most honest and moving scenes, depicting two men agreeing to disagree without letting the debate get personal. Mutual respect colors their every utterance.

In yet another beautiful touch by Hnath, Paul sits alone, late in the play, wondering if Christianity can and will survive long after he and his peers are gone. And he asks himself, what if a person’s faith is merely the result of random factors – accidents of time and place?

If Hnath’s name sounds familiar, it’s because his “A Doll’s House, Part 2” had its world premiere last year at South Coast Repertory. That play was intriguing but also problematic; by contrast, “The Christians” is a solid, deftly written piece of stagecraft.

It’s also one of those plays that makes you think, and think, then think some more, about your relationship with the spiritual world and with all those around you. It’s the kind of play we need more of, and we’re fortunate that CMP has made its first appearance in Orange County one that does the playwright and his work justice and realizes its full potential.

‘The Christians’

Venue: Costa Mesa Playhouse, 661 Hamilton St., Costa Mesa

Run dates: 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; closes July 15.

Cost: \$22 (\$20 students/seniors)

Tickets/Information: 949-650-5269, costamesaplayhouse.com

Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes (no intermission)