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'This Beautiful City,' a docudrama, examines the evangelical movement

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By MICHAEL KUCHWARA | AP Drama Critic

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NEW YORK (AP) — Praise the Lord and pass the tape recorder.

"This Beautiful City" is a lively docudrama — complete with countrified musical numbers — that examines America's homegrown evangelical movement.

Members of the Civilians, a New York-based theater troupe, traveled to Colorado Springs, the geographic heart of American evangelicalism, to interview members of the movement as well as some of its critics.

Their reporting has been fashioned by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis into a two-act parade of speeches, some more insightful and theatrical than others, which trace the movement's rise in popularity and political power.

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The show, which opened Sunday at off-Broadway's Vineyard Theatre, features a genial, twangy score by Michael Friedman and was directed by Cosson.

Its authors' methodology is similar to what the Tectonic Theater Project did with its "Laramie Project," that company's moving look at the life and death of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming.

Members of the Civilians, best known for its revue "Gone Missing," skip from character to character as they trace the growth since the 1980s of the evangelical movement in this town located near Pikes Peak. Each person speaks directly to the audience as if he or she was answering questions for an unseen interviewer.

The conceit gives the evening a journalistic flavor that is heightened by the show's newsy content. These interviews initially were conducted while a scandal erupted. The trouble involved evangelical leader Ted Haggard, head of New Life Church, and his involvement, not only with a male prostitute but with crystal meth. But it takes awhile to get to this moment in the show, which first traces the history of the movement's flowering in Colorado Springs.

Not surprisingly, the production's most dramatic moments occur during an interview with Haggard's son Marcus — well-played by Stephen Plunkett — as he haltingly talks about New Life and his father's problems.

Among the more exotic interviews is one with a defiant transgendered evangelical (well-played by Emily Ackerman) who refuses to be run out of town. And there's a rousing pastor's speech, delivered with fire-breathing enthusiasm by Marsha Stephanie Blake, that urges folks to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Good advice for these tough economic times.

To its credit, "This Beautiful Life" doesn't sensationalize. There's an evenhandedness to its presentation, even when it tarries too long with some of the more strident evangelicals. That generosity of spirit seems fitting for a show that examines religion in all its conflicted diversity.

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