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A *CurtainUp* Review *This Beautiful City*

By [Elyse Sommer](#)

This town could have been like Santa Fe, and now it's like I'm living in Middle-earth.— one of the townspeople who's less than thrilled to see his city turned into the country's evangelical capital.



Brandon Miller in The Civilians' *This Beautiful City* (Photo: Carol Rosegg)

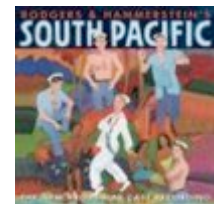
The downtown New York and now nationally touring company known as The Civilians have used their style of theatrical documentary heavily infused with music to take on the rise of the evangelical Christian movement. The beautiful city of the title is Colorado Springs, home to scores of Christian non-profits that produce millions of dollars in revenues, including the 14,000 member mega church made infamous when its leader Ted Haggard was exposed for his use of a male prostitute and methamphetamines.

As luck would have it, the Haggard scandal erupted just as the Civilians were in town doing the usual interviews that are the first stage for all their shows. And, with Haggard once again in the news giving interviews on television, *This Beautiful City* makes a timely landing at the Vineyard Theater after previous runs at the Humana Festival and in Los Angeles.

The Civilians' method of scripts forged by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis from interviews conducted by company members echoes the technique pioneered by Moises Kaufman's Tectonic group for their much produced *The Laramie Project* ([review of premiere production](#)). What's unique to the Civilians, however, is that their documentaries are heavily infused with Michael Friedman's music and lyrics. They're not quite musicals though they always feature a small band and tend to burst into song at any moment. Actually they're not quite documentaries either, since the interviews are a way of examining a topic and ruminating about it but not to come up with any pro or con

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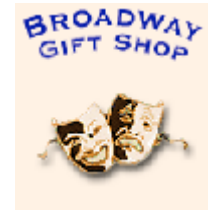
Playbill 2007-08 Yearbook

conclusions. New York audiences who are most likely to be mostly the choir responding to Bill Maher and Michael Moore may therefore find *This Beautiful City's* take on the Evangelical Christian movement too even-handed. That even-handedness is reflected in the inclusion of proselytizing Evangelicals, the men and women they've evangelized, as well as those who see them as a threat to freedom of expression who are brought to life by the multi-tasking sextet of performers. Having an actor likely to play people of widely differing persuasions and backgrounds adds to this neutrality.



Leonard Maltin's 2008 Movie Guide

There's no plot per se, just a patchwork of Evangelical types and Colorado Springs residents who are none too happy with being caught up in this seemingly unstoppable wave of Christian right dominance. Among the Evangelicals we meet there's the ex-Detroit economic development specialist, who used her Christian connections to bring religion (along with prosperity), to Colorado Springs; a Fairness and Equality leader who sums up the Christian Right's ambition of making their social programs pervasive enough to lead to the dismantling the non-Christian organizations, thus making the Evangelical services an imperative for everyone); a trio of singers with a cowboy twang to their musical proselytizing. There are also appearances by the sinful Pastor Haggard as well as his son Marcus who reflects on his father's downfall.



Speaking for the un-evangelized population there's a writer who hates the Christian Right's bullying ways and defiantly started an alternative rag called *Toilet Paper*. There's also a Jewish man whose immediate family has "a hundred and fifteen years, combined Air Force service" whose disgust with the Air Force's official policy "to evangelize anyone who comes into the service who is unchurched" has made him a freedom activist. Another and quite moving minority figure is a T-Girl (a man by birth, woman by choice) whose trans-gender-ism has left her without money or a church but who defiantly refuses to move to a less hostile environment. ("You know what this is AMERICA. I like it here. I LIKE seeing Pikes Peak out of my front door. And I'll be doggoned if some guy is gonna to tell me where I can or can't live")

Covering all these points of view gives the show a personality landscape that feels as big as Colorado's majestic Pikes Peak — a natural treasure that is uplifting and beloved by everyone we meet, whether devoutly Christian or Atheist. Though one would expect a group like the Civilians to tilt towards satirizing the more disturbing elements of excessive religiosity, especially its influence on the body politic, the right wingers are not presented as monsters and the power of faith is given as fair a hearing as the right to be different and independent. The rather touching monologue by Ted Haggard's son Marcus is a case in point. Still, a theater piece like this tends to be rather bland and emotionally uninvolved without the fire generated by a more opinionated script, and it's only the awesomely versatile performances and the liveliness added by Friedman's songs and the dynamic staging, that keeps this from happening.

Each of the six actors who make up the cast is a star, with perhaps Stephen Plunkett and Marsha Stephanie Blake the

standouts, but the superstars of this show are scenic designer Neil Patel and lighting wizard David Weiner. Patel's cube-like cityscape is just stunning, and made even more so when Weiner lets it explode with light or display Jason H. Thompson's projected images. There's enough room at the top of these buildings for views of Pikes Peak.

This Beautiful City would benefit from being trimmed to the same 90 minutes as the long-running and more generally entertaining *Gone Missing*. Though it is tempting to label a political show that refuses to express a definite point of view as "too bland and tame" the Civilians do manage to put interesting questions on the table, and in a uniquely entertaining manner.

LINKS

[Gone Missing](#)

[\[I am} Nobody's Lunch](#)

[This Beautiful City-LA](#)

This Beautiful City
 Directed by Steven Cosson
 Writers: Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis
 Music and Lyrics: Michael Friedman
 Choreography by John Carrafa
 Music director: Erik James

Cast: Emily Ackerman, Marsha Stephanie Blake, Brad Herberlee, Brandon Miller, Stephen Plunkett, and Alison Weller
 Sets: Neil Patel
 Costumes: Alix Hester
 Lighting: David Weiner
 Sound Ken Travis
 Projections: Jason Thompson
 Stage Manager: Sarah Bierenbaum
 Music Director: Erik James
 Musicians: Chris Biesterfeldt, Benjamin Campbell and Richard Huntley
 Running Time: 2 hours, including one intermission
 The Civilians at the Vineyard Theatre, 108 East 15th Street, (212) 353-0303
 From 2/03/09; opening 2/22/09; closing 3/15/09.
 Tickets (\$60). Student rush tickets (\$20)
 Reviewed by Elyse Sommer Feb. 19th press performance

Musical Numbers

Act One

- Colorado/Brandon Miller, Stephen Plunkett, Brad Heberlee, Company
- This Beautiful City/Company
- Whatever/Marsha Stephanie Blake
- An Email From Ted Haggard/Brad Heberlee
- End Times/ Allison Weller
- Demons/Brandon Miller, Allison Weller, Company

Act Two

- Doubting Thomas/ Stephen Plunkett
- Take MeThere/Company
- The Order of Things/Emily Ackerson
- Another Email From Ted/Brad Heberlee
- Urban Planning/Allison Weller
- Pikes Pea; (A Model of Christian Charity/Stephen Plunkett andCompany)

REVIEW FEEDBACK

Highlight one of the responses below and click "copy" or"CTRL+C"

- I agree with the review of This Beautiful City
- I disagree with the review of This Beautiful City
- The review made me eager to see This Beautiful City

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