



Entertainment :: Theatre

This Beautiful City

by Joseph Pisano
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Marsha Stephanie Blake, Brad Heberlee, and Stephen Plunkett in "This Beautiful City."

After a couple decades as one of the primary faces of America's Christian evangelical movement, Ted Haggard suffered a precipitous descent to persona non grata among those who once regarded him as a shining light in the nation's spiritual reawakening. Haggard's congregation at the Colorado Springs-based New Life Church even required that their meth-addicted, hustler-procuring former pastor move out of Colorado permanently, if he wanted to receive a severance package. In retrospect, perhaps Haggard should have spent a little more time with his congregation unpacking the meaning of one particular Christian dictum: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

By incredible chance, when news of Haggard's secret proclivities broke in 2006, members of The Civilians, a New York theatre company known for its documentary-style productions, was in Colorado Springs interviewing Christian evangelicals as the source material for a future show. Obviously, these artsy New Yorkers could have turned the revelations about Haggard's personal life into a rhetorical bludgeon, hammering away at their subjects' devoutness until nothing but gullibility and hypocrisy remained apparent.

But judging by **This Beautiful City**, the theatrical end product of The Civilians' time in Colorado Springs, the troupe aspired to more than an easy intellectual victory over Christian evangelicalism; their surprisingly even-handed and compassionate play with music offers genuine insights into the movement's origins and the lives of its adherents. Although the show's creators do slip in a few unavoidable jabs at Christian evangelicalism's media-savvy hatemongers - people like James Dobson of Focus on the Family, another Christian right organization headquartered in Colorado Springs - they do not grant a lot of unneeded attention to this ubiquitous vanguard of intolerance.

Instead, building their affecting narrative from the interviews conducted with Colorado Springs locals, writers Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis focus on the people in the pews. While the show's megachurchers often parrot familiar fundamentalist dogma, it does not take long to realize that their religious absolutism largely stems from extraordinary personal suffering; essentially, they are rejecting this world for the next, because this one has knocked them around too much.

Composer Michael Friedman's catchy, strikingly perceptive songs and the show's talented ensemble, many of whom participated in the interviews, evince the same empathy and elicit the same pity. In this regard, Emily Ackerman is particularly effective playing two impressively distinct characters: a young Christian mother recovering from drug addiction brought about by parental abandonment and a transgendered Christian who recounts in painful detail how quickly coming out turned her into a social outcast. Ackerman also nicely registers the latter character's anger and disappointment in learning that the "T" in LGBT community often is treated like an afterthought, if thought of at all by those who should know better.

Near the show's conclusion, Marsha Stephanie Blake appears in preacher drag, portraying the new pastor of an African-American church, which has just ousted its previous pastor for openly acknowledging his homosexuality. Blake gives a hypnotizing sermon (a few audience members actually seemed ready to testify), taking the congregation to task for succumbing to fear and prejudice - the twin evils of the modern Christian evangelical movement.

In its own brilliantly unique way, "This Beautiful City" is a reminder to hate the sin, but love the sinners; of course, in this show the sinners are correctly identified.

This Beautiful City continues its run at The Vineyard Theatre through March 15. For

tickets and show times, call (212) 353-0303 or visit [vineyard theatre website](#).

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[Back to: Theatre » Entertainment » Home](#)

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