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THEATER REVIEW | 'THIS BEAUTIFUL CITY'

## In a Transformed City, Falling in and Out of Grace

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

The glazed, slightly crazed smile of [Ted Haggard](#), the leader of a megachurch in Colorado who was ousted in a jiffy after a sex and drugs scandal, makes a cameo appearance in “This Beautiful City,” the latest work of cultural anthropology from the Civilians, which opened Sunday night at the Vineyard Theater. But Pastor Ted’s supersize fall from grace is a story no stranger than many others in this engaging, inquisitive and evenhanded work of theater about the transformation of an American city and many American lives.

The burg of the title is Colorado Springs, just at the foot of Pikes Peak, home both to Mr. Haggard’s former empire, the New Life Church, with thousands of members, and Focus on the Family, the conservative organization run by James Dobson that has been a leader of the charge against gay rights initiatives for years. The Civilians, a troupe of theater artists who construct much of their work from interviews, spent 10 weeks in the city before and after the Haggard scandal broke, collecting impressions from citizens ranging across the social and religious spectrum, from church leaders to embattled [atheists](#) in full bunker mode.

You might assume that members of a hip New York theater company would descend on the country’s epicenter of evangelism like a swarm of junior Michael Moores, wielding tape recorders like rapiers, backpacks stuffed full of snark. But the Civilians, known for the long-running revue “Gone Missing” and other documentary shows, have generally used humor to illuminate our follies rather than to sneer at our frailties. And that is certainly the case in “This Beautiful City,” which presents its collage of human experience without commentary, with a loose focus on the clash between religious orthodoxy and freedom of sexual expression.

Written by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis, with songs by Michael Friedman, the show features a talented cast of six playing several roles each. Through the voices of the city’s people the gradual transformation of Colorado Springs into a miniature capital of Christianity is traced.

“The way my mom tells it,” the founder of an alternative paper says, “before all the evangelicals moved in, Colorado Springs was very live and let live. But what happened was, in the ’80s this city brought in evangelical nonprofits to jump-start the economy.”

The population growth and cultural evolution that followed are lamented by secularists who resent the increasing power wielded by the churches, and celebrated by the Christians who believe it is their mission to create a new paradise on earth. “It’s about turning things around in a troubled city using strategic prayer,” an associate pastor at the New Life Church asserts. “Just using the power of prayer you can see measurable outcomes like better jobs, fewer divorces, less crime.” And free Starbucks! (That’s a perk for those who attend the church’s youth-group activities.)

Troubling questions about the blurring of the line between religion and government are raised — one passage touches on the incursion of evangelism into the [Air Force Academy](#), also located in Colorado Springs — but sociology generally takes a back seat to personal history. The show's strongest passages are those in which individual voices are the focus, as the city's residents reveal how they have navigated an increasingly polarized culture.

One of the most moving testimonials comes from Ben Reynolds (Marsha Stephanie Blake), the pastor of a mostly African-American church who is inspired to come out as a gay man before his congregation. His decision is prompted by the heated conflict surrounding two state ballot initiatives, one supporting rights for gay couples and another banning gay marriage. (No prizes for guessing how that shook out, even if you don't happen to be up on your Colorado legislative history.)

Emily Ackerman is terrific in a couple of memorable roles. She plays a Christian woman whose gay father essentially abandoned her when she was in her teens. She married at 17, fell into drugs shortly after and was “doing coke with a bunch of strippers” one Saturday night, only to wake the next morning to hear “God calling to me.” Ms. Ackerman also provides a wry portrait of a transgendered Christian who recalls with a drawl her feeling of being exiled from both the church and the city itself, which she nevertheless insists on loving for its beauty.

Mr. Friedman, the Civilians' house songwriter, is a skilled composer of pop pastiche. Here he channels blandly upbeat Christian rock and country music effectively, but for the most part the songs are transcribed speech set to appealing but uncomplicated melodies. Mr. Friedman may have felt constrained by the show's aspirations to objectivity, and as a result tried to keep from imposing his own personality on the songs; the result is a score without much character.

An exception is a funny ditty called “Whatever,” performed by Ms. Blake in the role of a teenage girl who chatters about the difficulty of not being a true believer, but feels drawn to the New Life youth get-togethers anyway. “It's like going to a concert,” she sings. “Sometimes I'll find myself singing along, and then I think about the words. And it's just so awkward. I mean, whatever.” Also amusing is the e-mail message from Haggard, prescandal, set to a perky little tune, in which he crows about his globe-trotting and hobnobbing with politicians.

As directed by Mr. Cosson “This Beautiful City” is perhaps too inclusive and loosely structured. But the Haggard scandal naturally provides a bit of narrative spine. Among the roles performed by the boyish, apple-cheeked Stephen Plunkett is Marcus Haggard, one of Ted's sons. Although he grew up in the eye of the evangelical storm, Marcus's reaction to the downfall of his father is moving in its maturity and complexity.

“Sure, tragedy happened there,” he reflects. “Flip side is, in my view, my dad's understanding God for the first time. Because, you know, we believe God is unconditional love. He is the only one who can love us completely for who we are, no matter what we've done, and heal us. So I think my dad's being healed. I think he's closer to being human now than ever before.”

## THIS BEAUTIFUL CITY

Created by the Civilians, written by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis, from interviews by Emily Ackerman,

Marsha Stephanie Blake, Brad Heberlee, Stephen Plunkett, Alison Weller, Mr. Cosson and Mr. Lewis; music and lyrics by Michael Friedman; directed by Mr. Cosson; choreography by John Carrafa; sets by Neil Patel; costumes by Alix Hester; lighting by David Weiner; sound by Ken Travis; projection design by Jason H. Thompson; music direction by Erik James; production stage manager, Sarah Bierenbaum; production manager, Ben Morris; general manager, Reed Ridgley; associate artistic director, Sarah Stern. Presented by the Vineyard Theater, Douglas Aibel and Jennifer Garvey-Blackwell, artistic directors; and Center Theater Group. At the Vineyard Theater, 108 East 15th Street, Manhattan; (212) 353-0303. Through March 15. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: Emily Ackerman (Young Woman/"God's Grace"/T-girl Christian), Marsha Stephanie Blake (Emmanuel Choir Member/Ben Reynolds/New Pastor at Emmanuel), Brad Heberlee (New Life Associate Pastor/Fairness and Equality Worker), Brandon Miller (Alt Writer/Military Religious Freedom Activist/RHOP Leader), Stephen Plunkett (TAG Pastor/Priest/Marcus Haggard) and Alison Weller (Fairness and Equality Leader/RHOP Member).

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