

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Christians, A Vivisection

Sylvie · Tuesday, December 29th, 2015

Question: Is Lucas Hnath's play, *The Christians*, a real play?

Answer: Yes, but only by the broadest definition of the term. Anything can be — or become — theatre. Churches and theatres have always been joined at the hip. Theatre, that ancient offshoot of ritual, plays well in pulpits, in front of shrines, arks and altars.

Second question: Does the subject of religion belong on stage?

Answer: Why in heaven's name not?

With this little matter out of the way, here's what we know about Hnath's *The Christians*, now on stage at The Mark Taper Forum in an Actors Theatre of Louisville production (ATL also commissioned it) and presented here by way of New York's Playwrights Horizons.

It begins with some lively choral singing followed by a sermon wherein Pastor Paul (Andrew Garman) is holding forth with his flock, visibly pleased to be making a couple of big announcements. The first one is that this church — the building, not the congregation — is finally entirely paid for; the congregation now owns it free and clear. The second announcement is more earth-shaking: this pastor has had a revelation — an epiphany of sorts — while sitting on the toilet.

It seems a missionary attending a conference of pastors at the Orlando Marriott at the same time as Pastor Paul, related the tragic passing of an African teenager in some unnamed violent country who died saving his sister from a building that was burning after it was bombed. Since the lad had not been baptized before his death, therefore not "Christianized," as the missionary lamented, "what a shame he went to hell."

That did not sit quite right with Pastor Paul who was thinking about it on that fabled toilet. He allegedly engaged God in a conversation about what seemed like such an unfair fate for a brave young man. At which point, God informed him — allegedly — that there is no hell, that the brave boy *was* saved and was, in fact, standing next to Him at that very moment, because the hell on earth is the only hell there is. Apparently, it suffices.

This news is not exactly well received by Pastor Paul's congregation. He finds himself having to contend with differing points of view. The first is that of his Associate Pastor Joshua (Larry Powell), who came up through the ranks and finds himself "wrestling" with Pastor Paul's surprising conclusions. Secondly, a church elder named Jay (Philip Kerr), congratulates Paul for

being so forward-looking, but later undergoes a change of heart.