

At the controversial theological drama, "The Christians," you enter the theatre as if sitting in a church pew, looking directly at the convincing and tasteful sanctuary on stage, complete with a large wooden cross glowing with recessed lighting. The associate pastor, an elder and the pastor's wife work through the audience and shake your hand, making a few theatergoers squirm in their seats a bit at Saturday's opening-night gala performance, but they didn't have long to wait for the drama to begin.

Soon, Pastor Paul, the mildly folksy and pleasantly charismatic Peter Hilton, begins to deliver his sermon. It's a big day for the congregation. This church has "thousands of seats, classrooms for Sunday school, along with a baptismal font as big as a swimming pool." And Paul is here to tell us that as of today, those building costs have finally been paid.

Paul has other news, too. But not the kind that this evangelical congregation is used to hearing. He suddenly announces that he has had a revelation that threatens to upend much of what his congregants believe, and overturn certain sacred tenets of the church. For instance, he now believes that hell, a staple of fire-and-brimstone preaching, is all just a big hoax. And he has citations in scripture to prove it. The play's remaining scenes, which also take place on the church altar, show church officials and congregants struggling to make sense of Paul's hermeneutical detonation.

Hilton plays his part with a compelling mix of unctuousness and integrity, as he wields his microphone cord like a man accustomed to spellbinding giant crowds on a large stage. He shuffles as he sermonizes, his voice the voice of a television preacher - soft spoken, persuasive, and powerful. But there's a troubled sincerity to Paul's demeanor now, a streak of anguish that burns right to the core of his soul.

Conversational tussles ensue between the pastor and some of his closest associates, including his outraged assistant pastor Joshua, who calls for an immediate referendum, Jay, a church elder who cares only about maintaining the status quo, and Paul's wife, Elizabeth, a church pillar who seems to be more furious that he didn't discuss the content of his controversial sermon with her beforehand.

The simple, straightforward quality of the drama actually seems prosaic at moments. All the exchanges take place on the church's altar with hand-held microphones and the tangles of cable that often trail them — suggesting the public implications of even private conversations in such a large church.

When Joshua spars with Paul over the meaning of biblical verses, he is as exasperated as he is injured by his mentor's reasoning. How can hell be rendered null and void when the term recurs throughout the Bible? "Faulty translation," counters Paul, who says the word actually refers to a garbage dump outside of Jerusalem. The perplexed Jeff Rolle, Jr. draws out the many hues of Joshua's pained ambivalence.

Elder Jay (Mark Tillman) also gives a convincing portrayal of representing the corporate side of business in a megachurch environment, but has a few guilt-ridden qualms and questions of his own.

Elizabeth is offended by her husband's claims, but she can't stop loving him. "I wish I didn't think that you're so smart and kind and good," she says while on the verge of leaving him. Silvana Gargione's potent performance makes her character the most menacing in the play.

This is that rare play about religion that both believers and nonbelievers can fully embrace. Author Lucas Hnath is alert to the irony that the golden rule may be hardest to live up to in an institution that divides the world into the saved and the damned, but he dramatizes this conundrum with great compassion and intellectual openness.

Directed by Michael Serna, recipient of the Orange County Theater Man of the Year, 2016, and Assistant Directed by Madison Wacherman, who will herself be directing "Crimes of the Heart" later this season, the running time for "The Christians" is 1 hour, 30 minutes, with no intermission.

With Costumes by Laurie Martinez, Sound by John McQuay, Lighting performed by Ryan Linhardt and Stage Management by Gavin Lattimer, this production marks the first show in Costa Mesa Playhouse's 54th season. Tickets: \$22 Adults, playing June 22nd thru July 15th, Friday and Saturday evenings at 8:00 pm and Sunday matinees at 2:00 pm.

Highly Recommended!

Chris Daniels
Arts & Theatre Reviewer