

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## The Christians, A Vivisection

Sylvie Drake · 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.



l-r, Andrew Garman and Larry Powell in “*The Christians* at the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum.

Perhaps the most stinging rebuke comes from a tithing congregant named Jenny (a knockout Emily Donahoe), a single mother living on food stamps and donated clothing, whose boyfriend disagrees with Pastor Paul and makes persuasive points for which Jenny seeks persuasive answers; when she doesn’t get them, she walks out. Finally, and most devastating, the pastor’s wife, Elizabeth (Linda Powell) a beacon of common sense, is utterly flummoxed by her husband’s unforeseen announcement and his unexpected display of what she calls his “own magnificence.”





Emily Donahoe in “*The Christians* at the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum.

These lives are forever altered by Paul’s peroration, and once the formerly unquestioned security of having a Heaven and a Hell is shattered, there is no turning back.

The consequences are surprisingly dire.





Linda Powell and Andrew Garman in “*The Christians* at the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum.

This esoteric play can just as easily be termed a lofty series of staged conversations. They are ecumenical exchanges on the slippery slope of religious belief. Depending on where you stand (literally) on this intensely personal subject, Hnath’s play also can be considered a study of the effect of strict adherence to orthodoxy on people, for good or ill. If you happen to be a secular being, it also may underscore why you are.

Mind you, that conversation is not dull. Hnath’s 90-minute play flies by without an intermission.

You can frame it all — and Hnath does in his program notes — as Significant. And when you're dealing with Major Imponderables, it can make for a fascinating, if oddly self-important event.

What it won't do is drive you to any "aha" moments. There are no answers to these questions, only points of view. Imponderables do not provide answers. The audience is easily captivated (there were audible gasps on opening night) but not captured. No one leaves the room with a changed mind.

The stage setting (by Dane Laffrey) recreates a sleek, clinical, bland modern church. Neutral territory. And the universal use of microphones for all communication in this production is one of the most original: They are used not only in church but in other settings as well, including offices, intimate bedrooms and beds. They are emblematic of the distance that has been forged by words: the denial of the existence of hell.

Unusual evening, all in all, with uniformly strong, sober performances brought to life under Les Waters' firm direction.

The more difficult question: Is it a *good* play?

Answer: No. It pushes all the boundaries of credibility.





Andrew Garman in "The Christians at the Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum.

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*Top image: l-r, Linda Powell, Andrew Garman, Larry Powell and Philip Kerr, sitting in front of the choir of The Christians at the Mark Taper Forum.*

*All photos by Craig Schwartz.*

**WHAT:** *The Christians*

**WHERE:** Mark Taper Forum, 135 No. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012

**WHEN:** Monday, Dec. 28 only, 8pm; Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. No performance Jan. 1. Ends Jan. 10.

**HOW:** Tickets, \$25-\$85 (subject to change), available at 213.628.2772 or [www.CenterTheatreGroup.org](http://www.CenterTheatreGroup.org) or in person at the Center Theatre Group box office at the Music Center. Deaf community TTY: 213.680.7703. Group sales 213.972.7231.

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