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This Beautiful City

(Vineyard Theater; 125 seats; \$60 top) A Vineyard Theater, Center Theater Group presentation of a musical play in two acts created by the Civilians, with book by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis, music and lyrics by Michael Friedman, based on interviews conducted by Emily Ackerman, Marsha Stephanie Blake, Brad Heberlee, Stephen Plunkett, Alison Weller and the authors. Directed by Cosson.

With: Emily Ackerman, Masha Stephanie Blake, Brad Heberlee, Brandon Miller, Stephen Plunkett, Alison Weller.

By [MARILYN STASIO](#)

The inclination is to laugh when the Civilians swing into their first song in "This Beautiful City," a cowboy ditty extolling Colorado as the promised land. But the laughter turns to slack-jawed astonishment once this wicked-smart documentary theater troupe gets to Colorado Springs and allows the residents of this "Christian El Dorado" to demonstrate the evangelical fervor that transformed it into the mecca of the megachurch movement. Performing entirely without attitude, company members inhabit the personae of local residents who sat down for interviews about their churches, their political beliefs and their glassy-eyed commitment to their faith.

There's a nowhere feeling to Neil Patel's abstract set of plasticine cubes, stacked against a distant skyline, that from time to time light up in violently vivid hues. We could be in Oz -- or some disco in hell.

The sense of disorientation pays off symbolically, because Colorado Springs is like nowhere on earth. Model for the lyrics to "America the Beautiful," the city is nestled in the Colorado Rockies, with views from Pike's Peak (14,110 ft.) to the Great Plains. But, according to the editor (played by Brandon Miller) of alternative rag the Toilet Paper, it now feels like Middle Earth because of the overwhelming presence of evangelical Christian megachurches such as former pastor Ted Haggard's New Life Church and militant political institutions like James Dobson's Focus on the Family.

By having the citizens of this biblically designed "city on a hill" speak for themselves, in testimonials that sound exactly like the taped interviews that shaped them, the company allows a rich cross-section of this evangelical enclave to reveal their own characters. No judgments are passed as the town's pastors, civic leaders, religious activists, born-again converts, military personnel and even a dissident or two speak their minds with remarkable honesty.

If there's any sly criticism or condescension in these admirably open portraits, it lurks in the grotesquely awful lyrics of Michael Friedman's amusing pastiche score. (Or maybe some religious zealot actually sat down and wrote about the human body as "a ticking time bomb" of forbidden lusts?)

Even if they don't bring their short-fused lusts to the Vineyard Theater, New Yorkers are only human, too. So it's not surprising that a preview audience applauded the newspaper editor who organized a protest group called the Church Kicker. Or that the same audience squirmed with delighted horror when the estimable Emily Ackerman made her appearance as a Christian transsexual and proselytized for the "Grace and Lace Letter Intl.: An Evangelical Christian Newsletter for Crossdressers, Transgendered and Transsexuals."

When it gets to the other end of the spectrum, the company proves much too stingy with testimony about Dobson's

super-influential Focus on the Family. There's plenty of material, though (enhanced by Jason H. Thompson's crisp projections), about Haggard, the beloved pastor of the New Life megachurch, who was forced to relinquish his ministry after being caught doing meth with a male hooker from Denver.

But it isn't the extreme or outsider elements -- or even the famous names and faces -- that define the Civilians' remarkably fair-minded view of Colorado Springs. It's the Christian mother who accepts her gay father, but just wishes he wouldn't make out with his boyfriend on the family couch. And the former dope addict who found hope in her adopted evangelical faith. And the new pastor who had to clean up Haggard's mess. And the really nice church lady who just wants to convert the whole world to her faith. Not to mention those really, truly scary young cadets at the city's several military academies, who can't abide the church-and-state separation sanctioned by the Constitution.

"We would never proselytize," as one future soldier puts it. "But we reserve the right to evangelize to the unchurched. I mean, that's a part of our religion."

Sets, Neil Patel; costumes, Alix Hester; lighting, David Weiner; sound, Ken Travis; projections, Jason H. Thompson; choreography, John Carrafa; music direction, Erik James; production stage manager, Sarah Bierenbaum. Opened Feb. 22, 2009. Reviewed Feb. 19. Running time: 2 HOURS, 15 MIN.

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