

# [A Conversation About Church](#)

[See [“Wilbury’s Church: Drinking the Kool-Aid”](#) for our review.]

*Motif* writer Kevin Broccoli talks with Brien Lang and Phoenix Williams — the director and the lead actor of Young Jean Lee’s *Church* currently playing at the Wilbury Group.

**Kevin Broccoli:** What I find so interesting about *Church* is that it’s a play and an actual church service rolled into one. As a director and an actor, how do you approach an unconventional piece like this?

**Brien Lang:** Unconventional is putting it lightly; there was a lot of discussion early on in the process as to what our approach would be. Fortunately, Wilbury already has a relationship with Young Jean Lee, having produced *Straight White Men* last season. Given this, we were able to reach out to her and ask about taking some different directions than previous productions. Fortunately, she gave us the green light on just about everything I wanted to do, allowing us to add cast members and music and, hopefully, to enhance the whole idea of community.

**Phoenix Williams:** Something I really enjoy about working with Wilbury is the willingness to work with unconventional and non-traditional theater. I feel I produce my best work in these settings. In approaching *Church*, I relied heavily on my upbringing in a Baptist church and the many experiences that taught me. I was able to connect what I believed the playwright’s intentions were with real-life characters and how things could have played out in real life. To be more specific, my father is a reverend and his unique approach and openness allowed me to cultivate much of the charismatic side of Rev Jose. I also grew up around other ministers and reverends that may not have shared Rev Jose’s beliefs but still embraced his unique preaching style and techniques.

**KB:** Brien, last season you directed *Mr. Burns*, which is also unique in its structure and storytelling. What drew you to this particular piece?

**BL:** I am a huge fan of any work that examines why we, as artists, do what we do. The great thing about both *Burns* and *Church* is that both pieces take it one step further and really look at why we need to share experience and stories and how that shapes us as a society. While *Burns* was a sprawling, three-act piece that spanned almost a century, *Church* is an intimate 75-minute service. I feel, however, that both pieces take serious and insightful looks at those things.

**KB:** Brien, music always plays a big part in your work. How did you go about choosing the music for this particular piece? I know you have Matthew Requintina working on it with you as well, and I’m sure he had suggestions. What’s your working relationship like?

**BL:** Young Jean Lee does make several musical ‘suggestions’ in the piece. We ended up sticking with the more traditional gospel numbers she suggested but, with her blessing, were able to add several of our own choices. One of the things I really wanted to do with the music was include several different styles of celebratory music. In addition to the more traditional gospel numbers, we’ve added some great bluegrass, rock and rap numbers that will mix things up without losing any of the sincerity and earnestness that is needed to pull this show off.

Matt [Requintina] and I have worked on a few shows together now and as we both have wide ranging

musical tastes and slightly twisted senses of humor. We often joke about our typical approach, which usually is, “This is such a bad idea, this might be a good idea, so why not try it?” We’re constantly bouncing ideas off of each other — good, bad, ridiculous and, sometimes, all three. For this show we were also fortunate to have Meredith Healy as our assistant director and she did a lot of additional research into contemporary Christian music in a variety of styles. Meredith actually discovered the song that is one of our next to last numbers and, without giving too much away, it’s been a huge hit with audiences.

**KB:** What was your initial reaction upon reading the script? The first time I read it, I immediately went back to the beginning and started over, because I was so eager to figure it out. What were your first thoughts, and what did you take away from it before you began working on it?

**BL:** I also went back to the beginning after my first reading. The play is such a fascinating mix of moral humanism, magical realism, testimony and pretty authentic preacher in left field moments that it seems, at times, to be a bit unbalanced. Fortunately, we had a very adventurous group of actors, musicians and designers onboard so we collectively had a very buckle up for a wild ride mentality, which was both needed and effective.

**PW:** My initial thoughts about the script were, “Hey this is nice. I can get into this.” And then as I got to some of the more “creative” portions of the script I was like, “Whoa, where are we going with this?” I read it through a couple of times and still was unclear of what I had read, but I thought I had a general idea and I couldn’t wait to get with Brien and discuss his plans for the performance.

**KB:** What was the process for this show like? Again, I know that every rehearsal process has certain constants, but did you find yourselves doing things different because of what the text called for in terms of what it was asking you to create?

**BL:** Once we had permission to expand the cast and add music, the process became something of a balancing act between building that ensemble in terms of music, movement and testimony, and working the big chunks of sermon that are solely Reverend Jose. In a way, the early stages were almost two different rehearsal processes; Phoenix and I spent a lot of time one-on-one working the sermons and then the other part of the process was fine-tuning the music and ensemble. We were very fortunate to have Matt running the bulk of the music as well as Ali Kenner Brodsky helping with choreography and Delbert Collins arranging and teaching the more traditional gospel numbers.

**KB:** Lee has said in interviews that *Church* is her grappling with religion. While working on the play, did it cause you to examine your own belief system and your feelings about the sort of issues Lee is addressing?

**PW:** Working on this did not challenge my belief system. It did bring to light issues I have heard many people voice in their own grappling with religion. Over the years I have attempted many times to point to passages in the Bible to help provide answers, but I will say I’m hoping my performance answers those questions where my previous attempts may have failed.

**BL:** We definitely had many, many discussions about religion and how it affected each of the cast and crew members. One thing that kept coming up for me was the idea that, for many of us involved in the production, making collaborative art has become our ‘church’ so, in many ways, putting *Church* together was how our artistic ‘congregation’ celebrates and connects.

**KB:** Brien, what were your visions for the design of the show? I've looked at photos of the set, and it seems like you wanted to keep the audience as close to the actors as possible. Is that accurate? What sort of reaction are you hoping to illicit from the audience?

**BL:** I definitely wanted to create a feel that would blur the performance line for the audience, in a sense, to not let them off the hook as distanced observers at a theater, but rather as invitees to an actual service, making them feel that they were a part of the action. Not in an uncomfortable way, but rather to be inclusive.

We were very lucky to have Keri King on board as our set designer. She got that concept right away and created a set that was intimate, engaging and unique.

**KB:** Phoenix, what has the experience been like for you as an actor now that you're in the middle of the run, and you've gotten to see an audience take in the show. Because your character addresses them directly, have you been more aware of how they're experiencing the show more than you would if you were acting in another play?

**PW:** The experience for me has been great. I love being able to directly engage the audience and play off of their reactions. It gets me really excited to see some of their expressions, particularly at points when I know the next line or two is going to have a unique impact on them. Like a typical church service I see audience members laughing at times, talking to one another during other times, sleeping at points, reflecting at others. I almost wish more performers had an opportunity to feel what it is like to be a shepherd addressing their flock.

**KB:** This time of year seems to be an appropriate time to look at what role religion plays in our lives. Do you think having the play open and run throughout December has affected the experience at all?

**PW:** I hoped it would, in a good way. As I have been inviting friends out to the show, one out of every three needs me to clarify that I am inviting them to a theatrical performance called *Church* and not to a Sunday Church service with me. It is my hope that people will walk away feeling like they experienced the theater's version of church, and knowing that acting is my God given talent and calling, I can say with an absolute certainty that anyone who attends this performance will be blessed.

**BL:** Definitely. The idea of celebration, community and taking care of each other at every level of society is an integral part of *Church* and, ideally, should be an important concept during the holiday season.

But we also don't want things to feel too heavy or preachy, there is a lot of humor, joy and fun in this production as well. Hopefully, that will give our audience a unique holiday gift!