

This Beautiful City

written by Steven Cosson and Jim Lewis

music and lyrics by Michael Friedman

from interviews by The Civilians

Begins March 5

The Civilians are a company with a rich curiosity and a knack for rolling with the punches. Their grassroots investigations of American culture delve into the opinions and experience of everyday people, looking to illuminate a shared Americanness across this wide country. *This Beautiful City* takes them to Colorado Springs, home of the unofficial headquarters of the American Evangelical movement, to explore the city's shared and separate experiences and this country's shifting lines between church, state and society.

Situated where the Rockies meet the Plains, Colorado Springs was a typical small-town Western community when Pastor Ted Haggard arrived in 1984 with a vision to transform the world. He held his first services in his basement, and New Life Church eventually grew to its current congregation of 14,000. Parachurch organizations sprouted in the city, focused on converting college students or providing literature on family values. By 2001, Colorado Springs was well-established as the theological and political nerve center of Evangelical America. Evangelicals were credited with helping George Bush win the White House, and Haggard was meeting with world political leaders, including a weekly conference call with the President. Steven Cosson, Artistic Director of The Civilians and co-writer of *This Beautiful City*, has long been curious about conservative Evangelicals: "The Christian conservative movement doesn't get the attention it deserves in the wider consciousness of the country, and when it does, the media rarely gets it right," he says. "I was interested in the human side. What motivates people who have this worldview? It felt important to go have a face-to-face experience with them, to understand them on a human level."

This curiosity was largely mutual, and in Colorado Springs, The Civilians found communities eager to address a broader audience. In 2006-07, co-writer Jim Lewis took Cosson, composer/lyricist Michael Friedman and actors from The Civilians company to his hometown for a series of residencies. They spoke with Coloradans across the religious spectrum—fervent believers, recent converts, and non-Evangelicals bitter that their town had been colonized by people who believe in the tangible presence of demons and angels. The company was welcomed at kitchen

tables and megachurches, in coffee shops and prayer-cave revivals. "The Evangelicals we met with are very open," Lewis observes. "They're very friendly, and there was a true feeling of generosity from a large part of the population." As the company made connections from individual to individual, a story of the city started to emerge. Concurrently, Friedman composed the songs—thoughtful, quirky and expansive by turns—which refract and expand on the personal narratives and larger themes. "We keep drawing connections until we get the big picture," says Cosson. "A lot of wonderful things happened by chance. Over the course of a day, we might be talking to people who have positions all across the map on the same question. We got a very palpable sense of how those otherwise invisible workings of a place can really shape how people live."

The play itself explores both private and public life in an Evangelized town, from personal experiences of conversion to intersecting opinions about the city's larger stories: competing ballot initiatives over the definition of marriage and evangelizing at the Air Force Academy and throughout the armed services. Just when The Civilians had begun to get their bearings on the interpersonal and political geography of Colorado Springs, a male prostitute alleged that he'd had a three-year relationship with Ted Haggard. Haggard denied the charges, then admitted guilt and was removed from New Life. Colorado Springs was stunned: Pastor Ted was either a father figure or a dangerous charismatic, and his confession confirmed either the fallibility of all humans—even the spiritual head of so many households—or the essential hypocrisy of the church.

Ultimately, *This Beautiful City* asks society-wide questions: How do you know how to live your life? In the American free market of ideas, how can one community negotiate its responsibility to spread the news it hopes will transform society? Haggard's dismissal also laid bare core differences between Evangelical and non-Evangelical models of freedom and authority. The Evangelical political imperative sees freedom as the fruit of killing your sinful side, submitting yourself, your family and your government to the authority of God. The democratic experiment is based on freedom as a chance to express your authentic self and



leave others free to do the same. So how can both ideas exist simultaneously in the same city, the same country? "In the end," Cosson says, "my question for this play is: How is it possible that Evangelical and non-Evangelical America exist in totally different worlds? How are we all even Americans? One of our goals is to find a fundamental root, not where we all agree, but where we at least know the common questions we're seeking answers for."

In looking to untangle these seemingly irreconcilable stances, The Civilians' work reflects the messy business of citizenship: Asking a provocative question, listening to how people respond, building a resonant but none-too-tidy exploration of the answer, and then bringing people together to take it in—an audience the company hopes will run from atheists to Evangelicals. And that's where theater meets democracy. These sections of America live side by side with more impression than knowledge of one another. A performance can provide a forum for an audience that's more immediate than the public "debate" of Sunday morning pundits, and more honest than polite "no religion or politics" conversations with acquaintances or in-laws. Reacting in concert or at odds, audience members can overhear the spontaneous responses of the people around them. In a culture obsessed with the red/blue, rural/urban and religious/secular divides, just sitting in the same room can be a revelation. From a shared experience, we can begin to listen to each other.

—Adrien-Alice Hansel

Produced in association with the Studio Theatre, Washington D.C. and The Civilians

The Civilians

What exactly is a civilian? Merriam-Webster furnishes a definition of "civilian" as "one not on active duty in the armed services or not on a police or firefighting force; and an outsider." A civilian is primarily "not" something—not a professional, someone with nothing at stake. Why would anyone ask a novice anything? What is it about the common man, an outsider, a non-expert that could be interesting?

In 2001, Steven Cosson gathered together a group of artists to form the theatre group The Civilians, with an interest in investigating what a non-expert can bring to a fascinating question that requires more than a carefully constructed and technically correct answer. A graduate of the University of California–San Diego directing program, Cosson studied with Les Waters, who had been a member of the Joint Stock Theatre Company, a British ensemble-based theatre collective. Cosson was inspired by the interview projects Waters assigned and extended this process with his own company. "I had an interest in making this investigative approach to theatre possible and, at the same time, finding a way to allow artists to develop a shared experience and expertise," Cosson explains. With The Civilians, Cosson created just that—a collective with an inside perspective on what it means to be an outsider.

The Civilians' process brings the expert and the non-expert together to yield theatrical answers. First there's the question. In the case of *Gone Missing* (2003), that question was: What have you lost? One stipulation was that the loss must be an object (people didn't count). Then the company, consisting of actors and artistic staff, went out into the streets of New York and polled anyone who cared to speak. No recording devices were used, so when the interviewers returned from their conversations they reconstructed, from memory, the answers to their prompt. The resulting transcripts were collected and edited by Cosson. Meanwhile, composer and long-time collaborator Michael Friedman created musical numbers for the piece, while playwright Peter Morris crafted an interview that threads through the play. *Gone Missing* opened at The Belt Theater in 2003, toured the country including a stint at Actors Theatre in fall 2006 and ran off-Broadway for seven months at the Barrow Street Theatre. In addition, this process yielded *Canard, Canard, Goose* (2002) and *(I am) Nobody's Lunch* (2004).

In creating *This Beautiful City* The Civilians altered their process slightly, both on the level of community involvement and the interview process. A ten-week residency at Colorado College changed the way they interacted with their interviewees. They came indoors, attended church service, and formed relationships with religious and secular voices that weathered the fall of New Life Church Pastor Ted Haggard. "We'd never done anything about a particular place," Cosson observes. "Our previous work explored a subject matter and we spoke to all sorts of people about that. For this play, we're going in as outsiders, interviewing people about issues that were of common concern to them, so the stakes were much higher for each of the interviewees."

As the relationship to the community changed, so did the process that had become a Civilians tradition. Jim Lewis, a first-time collaborator and former Colorado Springs resident, found that as the interview process drew on, their responsibility toward the material shifted. "Because many of the individuals we were talking to were public figures, I thought it was important to have their exact words," he says. "So towards the end everybody was recording and transcribing." When faced with a challenge, The Civilians were able to adapt and still deliver the answers for which they are known. Now they have taken the massive archival files from their ten weeks in Colorado, selecting, editing and juxtaposing the interviews, even setting some to music, to create *This Beautiful City*: a view of the rise of Evangelical Christianity in Colorado Springs, as told by The Civilians who call the place home, and interpreted by Civilians of a different sort.

—Devon LaBelle

STEVEN COSSON

