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HUMAN INTEREST STORY Theatre Review

From Rags to Riches: Frank Capra Redux
by Ed Rampell

MARCH 4, 2020



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Photo by Jenny Graham

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Human seemingly starts out as a critique of print journalism being displaced and replaced by the Internet and those mobile and other devices that convey what newspapers formerly quaintly sold at newsstands, kiosks, via newsboys at street corners shouting "Extra! Read all about it!" and via home delivery by (mostly) lads on bicycles or on foot, hurling rolled up copies at front doors and onto porches. This theme is worthy of dramatizing in our Orwellian era of clickbait, fake news, bots and so on - and I say this not only as an ink stained wretch "inking" out a living, but as an avid theatergoer.

However, Sachs is not content with sticking to this heady, topical topic. By its second scene *Human* adds a completely different subject, as Andy (who plays the reporter role Barbara Stanwyck originated in Capra's 1941 movie) encounters the homeless Betty Frazier (in another gender bender, Gary Cooper's hobo in *Meet John Doe* is depicted by *Human's* Tanya Alexander) on what is presumably a park bench. Betty is a school teacher who has fallen on hard times who proceeds to embody - or impersonate? - the "Jane Doe" Andy had invoked in what was supposed to be his final column, featuring a letter lamenting the lot of ordinary oppressed people, supposedly written by an everyman/ woman character threatening to kill herself on July 4.

Human Interest Story goes on to weave many other strands into its handicraft concoction - a Trump-like Cain runs for political office, greed, corruption, suicide, Jewish-Black interactions and more. Above all, *Human* ruminates on RACISM - which, as I recall, was not a theme in the all (or mostly) white *Meet John Doe*. Capra rendered his story - which includes many of the same plot points (other than racism) - more convincingly and simply than this all-too-hectic *Human*.

Combined with *Human's* ambitious extravaganza of multi-media special effects, some ticket buyers may find the stagecraft and multi-layered interwoven stories to be more distracting than dazzling. Some may scratch their noggins struggling to understand what unfolds montage-like onstage. For instance, Sachs isn't content to just riff on *Meet John Doe*: He has to toss another famed 1941 screen classic into the movie mix by naming *Human's* capitalist character "Cain" - a la the eponymous media magnate in Orson Welles' masterpiece *Citizen Kane*.

To quote yet another immortal character, the Prince of Denmark, in Act I of *Hamlet*: "There are more things in heaven and earth, *Horatio*, Than are dreamt of *in your philosophy*." There's so much going on onstage that *Human* seems hard to follow for many mere mortals - or maybe Sachs is just a lot smarter than most of us?

Our growing homelessness crisis is so desperate that *Human* is the dramatist's stab at dramatizing the plight of those living - or rather, subsisting - on the streets, by the freeways, in the parks, etc. But Andy's cute meet with Betty is, to the best of my recollection, the play's only scene depicting homelessness, and such cursory treatment of this pervasive plight may strike some as being more trendy than trenchant.

The play and Betty have lots to say about being Black. In particular, about whites' perceptions of African-Americans, especially Black women. But not only is the dialogue presumably written by a Caucasian word slinger, but looking around The Fountain's nearly sold out 80 seats I couldn't help but notice that aside from my guest, there was only one other Black theatergoer present (wrote the white reviewer).

To be sure, Tanya Alexander acts up a storm. I recently saw this excellent actress at the Odyssey Theatre as a domineering partner in a polyamorous relationship in *Mono/Poly*. Besides being drawn to portrayals of strong women, Ms. Alexander seems to also have a penchant for a singular stage specialty: Slippers. In *Mono/Poly* she wore the wackiest footgear I've ever gawked on the boards, although her spa or hotel slippers in *Human* are more sedate. And no, Dear Reader, this critic does *not* have a foot fetish, although he *is* fixated on good acting which, in addition to Ms. Alexander,

Human has galore.

As Cain, James Harper plays his counterpart to *Doe*'s D.B. Norton role with Edward Arnold-like panache as the-capitalist-you-love-to-hate. In multiple roles, Richard Azurdia has an absurdist streak, a Fred Armisen-type vibe that provides comic relief. The beautiful Tarina Pouncy (who was memorable in *Rogue Machine*'s superb revival of Lorraine Hansberry's anti-colonialist, anti-racist *Les Blancs*), Matt Kirkwood and Aleisha Force likewise have multiple parts. As the editor and towards the end as a producer-type character, Kirkwood is appropriately smarmy and opportunistic. As Megan Tunney, Andy's journalistic counterpart, Force has some incisive, insightful lines about love on the run and being what used to be called a "career gal" around the time Stanwyck and Jean Arthur starred in Capra pictures, which Force delivers whip-like, with verve.

However, Megan and Andy have absolutely no chemistry together - which may be because the two journos keep missing the "deadlines" for their trysts sandwiched in between filing stories. Although their repeated missed opportunities may actually be cleverly expressed by their lack of chemistry as lovers? In any case, their relationship raises an interesting question about this remake of *Meet John Doe*. In Capra's original, Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwyck have a romantic connection. But in Sachs' remake the Andy-Betty relationship has no, shall we say, "Sachs" appeal. Why aren't these two lovebirds romantically involved, like Coop and Stanwyck were in Capra's original? Hmm, could it have anything to do with race by any chance? Inquiring minds want to know.

Some may find *Human* to be a mishmash mash-up and hodgepodge, although others may feel this makes the multi-culti, multi-themed play to be all-too-human. To be sure, Sachs' Capra-esque crusade is challenging and probably for more adventurous theatergoers. For your critic, this first play mounted by the Fountain after it won the prestigious Best Season nod plus five other Ovation Awards is "Exhibit A" as to why the venerable Fountain Theatre, now celebrating its 30th anniversary, remains a powerful force to be reckoned with on the L.A. stage scene. Along with dramas such as Pulitzer Prize winner and three-time Emmy Award nominee Robert Schenkkan's 2017 anti-Trump *Building the Wall*, The Fountain still flows with ferment and dissent - even if it isn't always easy to understand. But then again, what human story is?

Review Trivia (from he who has a brain full of completely useless information):

In 1941's *Meet John Doe* the editor is named Henry Connell (James Gleason portrayed the character Matt Kirkwood essays in *Human*). Robert Riskin's screenplay for Capra's movie was based on a 1922 short story published in *Century Magazine* written by none other than Richard **Connell**.

Human Interest Story is being performed through April 5 on Fridays, Saturdays and Mondays at 8:00 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays at 2:00 p.m. at the Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles CA 90029. For more info: (323)663-1525 or www.FountainTheatre.com (<http://www.FountainTheatre.com/>).

Ed Rampell is an L.A.-based reviewer who recently won a theatre critic award: <https://better-lemons.com/the-better-lemons-fomentor-of-revolution-critic-award-for-2019-goes-to/>. The third edition of "*The Hawaii Movie and Television Book*", co-authored by Rampell, is available at: <https://mutualpublishing.com/product/the-hawaii-movie-and-television-book/>. For info about the upcoming 70th anniversary commemoration of the imprisonment of Dalton Trumbo and the Hollywood Ten see: <https://www.gofundme.com/f/hollywood-blacklist-70th-anniversary-cinema-series>.