

ENTERTAINMENT & ARTS

## Review: 'Human Interest Story' at the Fountain Theatre grapples with today's crises



By MARGARET GRAY

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The plot and themes of Frank Capra's film "Meet John Doe," released in 1941, feel startlingly pertinent to America in 2020. A craven plutocrat buys a city's newspaper, lays off its seasoned journalists and repurposes it as propaganda for his political campaign — and the public eats it up.

Writer-director Stephen Sachs has relocated the movie's scenario to contemporary America in "Human Interest Story," having its world premiere at the Fountain Theatre. Sachs, who co-founded [the Fountain](#) and is its co-artistic director, aligns himself here with polemical writers such as Ibsen and Shaw, who used the stage as a platform for social criticism. "Human Interest Story" is a thorough catalog of the [crises of our time](#) and an unstinting indictment of the Trump administration.

The talented cast and inventive design team, however, have a difficult time selling it. It's not that the wonderful actor [Rob Nagle](#) is miscast as protagonist Andy Kramer, a columnist for the City Chronicle, but that he is obliged to convey a variety of competing motives and traits from scene to scene. It's hard to get a handle on the character.

Andy, a savvy master of the media, struggles to draw the only logical inference from a straightforward conversation. Although he is buffoonishly inept at reading social cues when it suits the plot, his long-suffering girlfriend (Aleisha Force, bringing a lot of verve to a thankless role) mocks him for his tender heart, calling him an "empathy addict."

It isn't clear what Andy is trying to accomplish when he kicks off the plot, as Barbara Stanwyck's character does in "Meet John Doe," by creating fake news. After learning

that evil billionaire Harold Cain (James Harper) has bought the paper and laid off half the newsroom, Andy submits one last column: a made-up letter from a homeless woman, who signs herself Jane Doe and threatens to commit suicide on July 4 as a protest against the heartlessness of the city.

Stanwyck's character invents John Doe to get her job back, but Andy's goal in violating journalistic ethics remains a mystery. His Jane Doe letter goes viral, boosting paper sales, but when his editor (Matt Kirkwood) invites him back to track down the mysterious writer, Andy hems and haws, looking so guilty it's hard to believe an editor would fail to probe even a little bit further.

Moments later, in the park, Andy runs into an actual homeless woman (Tanya Alexander), who proves uncannily qualified to assume the role of Jane Doe — down to a background in print journalism. Andy, in his slow-on-the-uptake mode, doesn't put the pieces together, but she eventually persuades him to transform her into a media darling.

Alexander does her best to deliver a forceful, engaging and relatable human woman. But then she storms into Cain's office to confront the new owner about some fund misappropriation, and he makes her wait while he chews his way through a detailed autobiographical soliloquy. Harper's take on the billionaire is entertaining. His bombast really booms. But Alexander has to stand there the whole time with her arms folded, rolling her eyes, as if her character forgot what she came to say.

The production looks and sounds spiffy: Scenic and projection designer Matthew G. Hill's gorgeous, color-drenched photographs of city settings (magically free of identifying details) effectively ground the action, and the original music by sound designer Peter Bayne riffs nicely on the syncopated forced excitement of newscast intros. The supporting actors, who include Richard Azurdia and Tarina Pouncy, have infectious fun with many colorful bit parts. If only the central characters were as believable.

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## 'Human Interest Story'

**Where:** Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave.,  
Los Angeles

**When:** 8 p.m. Fridays, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturdays,  
2 p.m. Sundays, 8 p.m. Mondays, through April  
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**Tickets:** \$25-\$45

**Info:** (323) 663-1525 or  
[www.FountainTheatre.com](http://www.FountainTheatre.com)

**Running time:** 2 hours, 30 minutes

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