

‘Human Interest Story,’ playwright Stephen Sachs’s righteous rage against corporate heartlessness

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From left, Aleisha Force, Rob Nagle, Tanya Alexander / Jenny Graham

LOS ANGELES—“The line between where you are now and sleeping in your car,” says playwright Stephen Sachs, who also directs his new two-act work at the Fountain Theatre, “is much thinner than you

think.”

Human Interest Story, in its world premiere production, focuses with laser intensity on several key issues that are roiling contemporary American consciousness. Sachs talks about the scourge of homelessness—a national scandal but one with outsized relevance in L.A., the “homeless capital of America.” (More than anything else, it’s why, in my opinion, L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti’s tentative bid in the Democratic presidential primary campaign tanked a-borning: He would simply have withered under criticism on that charge alone.)

Sachs also addresses the declining fortunes of journalism, certainly of the morbid print format, with dire reflections on the relentless TV and social media news cycles that in our hyper-capitalized media environment chew people up and spit them out in less time than it takes to read this review.

Part of that phenomenon is our prurient celebrity worship that lifts personalities up either (once in a while) for their legitimate achievements, or more likely just because they have captured enough fame-seeking attention for whatever fetishized reason (beauty, royalty, sports, crime, a TV series or film) to make them profitable as clickbait for curious eyes and ears. It’s all tied into the marketplace: We as consumers don’t guardedly approach the overpriced merch table, rather, without our permission, it surrounds, invades and smothers us.

As many of our past reviews have confirmed, the Fountain Theatre can never do wrong (well, hardly ever). And truthfully, the principal reason for that is Stephen Sachs’s visionary leadership. As co-founder



James Harper / Jenny Graham

and co-artistic director of the company and the author of 15 plays, his antennae are tuned to fresh, insightful ideas. His own recent work presented at Fountain includes his Deaf/Hearing love story [Arrival & Departure](#), his stage adaptation of William Goldman's screenplay for *All the President's Men*, his stage adaptation of Claudia Rankine's [Citizen: An American Lyric](#), and *Bakersfield Mist*.

Some recent highly memorable productions of other authorship include [Runaway Home](#), [Building the Wall](#), [My Mañana Comes](#), Martyna Majok's Pulitzer Prize-winning play [Cost of Living](#), [Daniel's Husband](#), [Hype Man](#) and [Between Riverside and Crazy](#), all featured on multiple "Best of the Year" lists.

Human Interest Story launches the Fountain's 30th season. It depicts the fast-moving universe of new media and its many challenges, including monopolization and concentration. We meet 20-year career newspaper columnist for the *City Chronicle*, Andy Kramer (Rob Nagle), who in the opening scene is unexpectedly laid off in a

corporate takeover. The new owner, Harold Cain (James Harper), is a decidedly über-patriot populist in the mold of a Donald Trump, red tie, political ambitions and all, and, I couldn't help thinking, transporting the spirit of [The Cradle Will Rock](#)'s titan of industry Mr. Mister—it turns out that Mr. Harper performed in the John Houseman-directed Acting Company production of *Cradle* back in the 1980s. Not to mention, the Biblical Cain is the good book's first murderer—among many to follow! (And yes, there is no mistaking the nod in his moniker to the Hearst Syndicate representation in *Citizen Kane*.)

As Andy's last angry gesture—his version of *Network*'s “I'm mad as hell and I won't take it anymore!”—he hatches a “letter” to his final column from “Jane Doe,” a supposedly homeless woman who alarms readers saying she will kill herself on the 4th of July because of the heartless state of the world. The sensationalist column goes viral, which of course pleases the bottom line-loving Mr. Cain. The search is on to find “Jane Doe.”

By chance, Andy encounters a homeless woman (Tanya Alexander) in the park holding a handwritten sign reading, “I am NOT Invisible.” Before long, somewhat improbably—but of such stories myths are made—Andy prods this fictitious “Jane Doe” into becoming an overnight internet sensation and spokesperson, as a Black homeless woman, for a revived national women's movement with TED-like seminars and unheard-of exaltation in the media.

“Jane Doe” is, of course, a real person with a backstory—a public school teacher, named Betty Frazier, fired in a round of layoffs, who



From left, Aleisha Force, Richard Azurdia, Tarina Pouncy and Matt Kirkwood / Jenny Graham

couldn't keep up her payments anymore and soon found herself in the street. For a time she worked for *Street Scene*, the local "homeless" newspaper, but even that got hijacked by big business. Obviously, she is not unintelligent, but new to the persona of sharply dressed media rock star, she relies on Andy to write her speeches and give her talking points for the new Cain-sponsored non-profit organization for which she is the spokesperson. After all, Andy needed a "Jane Doe," and Betty Frazier needed a job, right? Questions arise, naturally: Is she a hoax? Will some of her former students recognize her? But as long as the media hits, the cover stories and the donations flood in, who cares?

If any of this tale sounds familiar, the author acknowledges that it was initially inspired by the 1941 Frank Capra classic film *Meet John Doe*, with Gary Cooper as the "hobo" and Barbara Stanwyck as the newspaperwoman. *Citizen Kane* was coincidentally also released that same year.

In his program note, Stephen Sachs declares: “This city, this state and this nation have the money to feed, clothe and house every citizen. Folks are homeless for many reasons, but one thing is clear: they don’t have to be.”

But his play is not an op-ed column or a leaflet. It has characters with their contradictory motives mixed in with both good intentions and unexamined personal conflicts and agendas. “A newspaper columnist, in the course of writing a human interest story on another individual,” Sachs explains, “is forced to confront truths about himself.”

In his 1958 personal autobiography *cum* manifesto *Here I Stand*, Paul Robeson reflected on the ways in which other interest groups can manipulate a minority’s voice, in words that could apply to almost any constituency: “Effective Negro leadership must rely upon and be responsive to no other control than the will of their people.... Negro action cannot be decisive if the advisers and helpers hold the guiding reins. For no matter how well-meaning other groups may be, the fact is our interests are secondary at best with them.”

In other words, who will write the script for Jane Doe? Andy likes to believe it’s “my words reflecting your truth.” But will he, as a kind of benevolent racist Pigmalion, just serve to turn her homelessness, her womanhood, her Blackness, into merely another commercial marketplace commodity, while keeping a job for himself? As for Harold Cain, “There is no freedom of the press. The truth is whatever we say it is.” (almost literally from *The Cradle Will Rock*). The play takes place in “An American City. Now.” but its implications

are universal.

Human Interest Story features a cast of seven, who are all equally spectacular in multiple auxiliary roles. Richard Azurdia, Aleisha Force (playing, among other parts, Megan Tunney, a reporter at a competing newspaper who is a sometime love interest for Andy), Matt Kirkwood (Andy's editor at the paper), and Tarina Pouncy (playing both the slippery mayor of the city and a self-important Black TV interviewer who pompously, though justifiably, calls out "Jane Doe" on her being used by the establishment).

The creative team for

Human Interest Story

includes scenic and video designer Matthew G. Hill,

whose masterful work

brings you right into the

print and TV newsrooms of our big cities: There in

the monitor is L.A.'s

Mayor Garcetti sounding

off platitudes about

homelessness and what

needs to be done *now*

(right), and there's a shot

of an NYC subway entrance, and other major metropolitan cityscapes

I couldn't identify at a quick glance. Lighting design is by Jennifer

Edwards; the composer and sound designer is Peter Bayne; costume

designer is Shon LeBlanc; video hair and makeup designer is Diahann



McCrary; and prop master is Michael Allen Angel.

It's truly amazing what magic can materialize on such a small, sparsely furnished stage, but the Fountain manages to do it every time. This production is no exception. Watch for it in the "Critic's Choice" columns and the "Best of 2020" lists. For topicality, script, production, and acting, any human theatergoer with a heart and brain would have great interest in this story. It's very human. It's profoundly interesting. And it is a great story.

Advisory to producers outside L.A.: Get ahold of this play and get it up on your stage ASAP!

Human Interest Story runs through April 5, with performances on Fri. at 8 p.m., Sat. at 2 and 8 p.m., Sun. at 2 p.m., and Mon. at 8 p.m. Pay-What-You-Want seating is available every Monday night in addition to regular seating (subject to availability). The Fountain Theatre is located at 5060 Fountain Ave. (at Normandie) in Los Angeles 90029. Secure, on-site parking is available for \$5. For reservations and information, call (323) 663-1525 or go to the theater [website](#).

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Eric A. Gordon is the author of a biography of radical American composer Marc Blitzstein, co-author of composer Earl Robinson's autobiography, and the translator (from Portuguese) of a memoir by Brazilian author Hadasa Cytrynowicz. He holds a doctorate in history from Tulane University. He chaired the Southern California chapter of the National Writers Union, Local 1981 UAW (AFL-CIO) for two terms and is director emeritus of The Workmen's Circle/Arbeter Ring Southern California District. In 2015 he produced "City of the Future," a CD of Soviet Yiddish songs by Samuel Polonski. He received the Better Lemons "Up Late" Critic Award for 2019, awarded to the most prolific critic.