

HUMAN INTEREST STORY



Photo by Jenny Graham

Fountain Theatre

Poor Andy Kramer. As so many journalists over the past decade, it isn't easy being a righteous crusader in a world where honest reporting and the desire to tell the truth about our dangerously flawed system's inequities has given way to selling advertising.

Of course, we can blame people getting their information fix from Facebook and *The Daily Show* these days—not to mention Wendy Williams or worse, *Fox and Friends*—but still, the dumbing down of America is basically our own fault because we've put up with it and let it happen. Just read or watch news from other parts of the free world, which deal far more thoroughly and intelligently with the desperation of climate change and the horrendous problems of a civilization eating itself alive rather than concentrating on who's fucking whom or even whether poor Harry and Meghan can still refer to themselves as "Royals."

This societal downward spiral is the subject dissected in the world premiere of Stephen Sachs' *Human Interest Story*, now world premiering as the first production of the venerable Fountain Theatre's 30th anniversary season.

After a long career as a columnist for a newspaper in some undesignated urban American metropolis—although Matthew Hill's smartly modern set and projection designs look a lot like a mix between LA and Manhattan—Andy (Rob Nagle) has been sacked along with 50% of the newsroom.

As Stephen Leigh Morris visited in his new play *Red Ink*, currently premiering from Playwrights' Arena at the Atwater Village complex, Andy's gritty little publication has been scooped up by one of those familiar soulless corporations after suffering debilitating multimillion dollar net losses.

For his final column, Andy, who has been devoting his space to the city's massive homeless problem, impulsively decides to fabricate a letter from a woman he dubs Jane Doe, someone living on the mean streets who threatens to kill herself—but plans to wait until the upcoming Fourth of July as a statement reflecting on our country's once-noble mission of providing a safe home for the tired, the poor, those proverbial huddled masses yearning to be free.

Andy's final column goes viral and soon, as he sits shivah for the paper's demise with his fired coworkers, notably including his on-again-off-again girlfriend Megan (Aleisha Force) at Casey's Saloon, he finds himself summoned back to the office and offered his job back to further exploit the poor fictional Miss Doe and hopefully thrust the publication back into profitability.

A chance meeting in the park with a scruffy vagrant named Betty (Tanya Alexander), to whom he hands a pocketful of spare change in response to her cardboard sign reading: "I AM NOT INVISIBLE," leads to an idea mostly conjured by her. After recognizing him from the photo accompanying his column, she insists she is indeed the real Jane Doe but, when in frustration with her aggressiveness he blurts out he made up the letter, she suggests they conspire to make Jane Doe real and that she play the role for all to behold with Andy pulling the strings in everything she has to say.

Of course, Jane Doe becomes a media darling, mobbed by paparazzi, sitting for national TV talkshow interviews, posing for magazine covers, and in no time spearheading a foundation geared to help homeless women. Dressed in tailored finery (Shon LeBlanc's costumes for every character are spot-on) and living in a lavish hotel suite paid for by the slimy but powerful CEO of Andy's newspaper chain (James Harper), Betty/Jane soon finds a voice of her own and it ain't from some secondhand crusader "living in a white bubble."

This is a slickly mounted, extremely polished production with a cast and design elements that conspire perfectly make it sing. Sachs' striking direction is highly kinetic, his actors on the move between scenes like prowling captive animals trying to escape their cages. His dialogue is smart and insightful throughout but still, Sachs refers to *Human Interest Story* both as a call for compassion and an exploration on how an individual is "forced to confront the truths about himself," neither of which ever quite gels—perhaps because one theme sometimes seems to cancel out the other.

Part of this is probably due to the typical restructuring of a first production of such a heartfelt play, especially problematic at times when the author also directs and loses the perspective of bouncing ideas off another creative entity. Although it is often absorbing, in this first incarnation it is still too long, too repetitious, ultimately predictable and surprisingly anticlimactic. We just are never really offered something to latch onto about which to care, particularly evident in the shaky romance between Andy and Megan that seems to resolve far too conveniently.

The always brilliant Nagle is honest and touching as Andy but, if there's a big catharsis in the confrontation of his character's "truths," it isn't quite there yet—in the writing, that is, not in how thoroughly the actor has mined what he can with what the script offers him. Force is excellent in her LA stage debut, a welcome addition to our theatrical community but again, I was never sure if her needs were emotionally based or just the hankering of a boldly honest single woman looking for a willing fuckbuddy.

Alexander has a tough job here, as her miraculous transformation from a snarky Ebonics-heavy former teacher trapped into homelessness into dignified spokeswoman for the women's movement is too Eliza Doolittle-esque to be believable. Harper is outstanding as Harold Cain, the clearly Trump-like megalomaniacal CEO who's "never met a boundary he couldn't cross," and Matt Kirkwood, Richard Azurdia, and Tarina Pouncy are all major assets as multiple supporting characters.

Despite its minor growing pains, however, Stephen Sach's *Human Interest Story* has the makings of being an extremely important new work. It's said that the third production of any new play is when it comes into its own but, with such a sincere and timely mission taken on by a playwright as gifted and committed to excellence as Sachs, I'd be surprised if the second time out for this one wouldn't already be ready to more sonorously carry the torch of everything he is trying so earnestly to say.

THROUGH APR. 5: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. 323.663.1525 or fountaintheatre.com