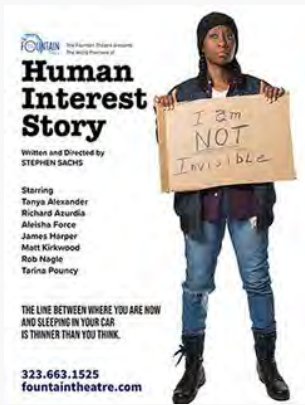




Los Angeles

BWW Review: Timely New Play HUMAN INTEREST STORY Focuses on Homelessness, Celebrity Worship and Truth in American Journalism

by Shari Barrett Feb. 24, 2020



The multi-award-winning Fountain Theatre in Hollywood creates, develops and produces new plays and re-imagined classics expressing the diverse social issues and cultures of Los Angeles and the nation, giving artistic voice to the voiceless. Now presenting the world premiere of **HUMAN INTEREST STORY**, a timely new play written and directed by Stephen Sachs (*Arrival & Departure*, *Citizen: An American Lyric*, *Bakersfield Mist*), centering on homelessness, celebrity worship and truth in American journalism which reminds us that the line between where you are now and sleeping in your car is much thinner than you think. And like city traffic congestion, the homeless population in Los Angeles has grown to epic proportions and will only get worse, with even more tents and campers lining streets in every neighborhood to house those with nowhere else to live and no financial means to change their circumstances. But for those who want out, shouldn't there always be a way to do so by just taking a chance when the opportunity arises?

According to Sachs, the play is about how contrary and opposing impulses can hide in the same human being, and was initially inspired by the 1941 Frank Capra classic film *Meet John Doe*, in which Gary Cooper plays a homeless man (then called a "hobo"), who is hired by newspaper writer Barbara Stanwick and transformed into a national celebrity she names John Doe. "What if the story were told today in the fast-moving world of social media with homelessness, fake news, and political corruption in our daily news feeds, when "a newspaper columnist, in the course of writing a human interest story on another individual, is forced to confront truths about himself?" he explains.

HUMAN INTEREST STORY is about more than homelessness, taking us beyond the circumstances of those on the streets and allowing us to remember how truth - in our press, in ourselves and the world -sets us free. Set in the fast-moving world of news media, with locations brought to life through video projections brilliantly created by and incorporated into Matthew G. Hill's scenic design, the play chronicles the journey of newspaper columnist Andy Kramer (Rob Nagle), who, after being suddenly laid off when a corporate takeover downsizes *The City Chronicle*, which is suffering the fate of most print publications, struggling for readers and ad revenue to stay afloat in our changing times.

Realizing he is one step away from losing his livelihood as well as his home, Andy fabricates a letter to run as his last column in retaliation for the layoff, hoping to garner the recognition he has longed to achieve while exposing the lies and corruption which forced his hand. The letter he creates from an imaginary homeless woman he names "Jane Doe" announces she will kill herself on the 4th of July because of the heartless state of the world, and soon goes viral. Andy then finds himself forced to hire a homeless woman in the park (Tanya Alexander) to stand-in as the fictitious Jane.

But this Jane Doe is a former teacher and writer, wise beyond her current living circumstances which were forced upon her due to teacher layoffs and her own poor financial planning. When "her" letter is published, Jane becomes an overnight internet sensation and a national women's movement is ignited when she speaks up for homeless women on the streets everywhere.





But what happens when she begins to speak her real truth rather than spout the words forced upon her by the new newspaper publisher Harold Cain (James Harper), who sees in Jane a way to raise funds to support his run for mayor? It's an examination of social media power in an era of ever-present fake news and the overwhelming need of the public to create celebrities to follow.



Richard Azurdia, Aleisha Force, Matt Kirkwood, and Tarina Pouney authentically portray many supporting characters including TV new reporters and event interviewers who twist Jane's story to gain more viewers or to support their own causes. And when media investigators discover Jane Doe's real identity, her popularity drops and the media attacks begin, forcing Jane back into the woods as she awaits the upcoming and fateful 4th of July. Will she take her own life for an identity she assumed to protect Andy Kramer's lie, or is it possible to turn your life around simply by telling the truth?



This thought-provoking testament to the universal struggle of living day-to-day in a society whose apathy seems to know no bounds for the down-and-out will grab your attention and keep you at the edge of your seat as Jane Doe's story unfolds. Tanya Alexander's magnificent ability to morph herself from a homeless woman in dirty clothing, sitting on a park bench holding a sign stating "I am NOT Invisible" allows us to see where she has been and how much she really desires to pick herself up by her bootstraps and do whatever is necessary to survive. As she achieves celebrity status, Alexander opens to heart and soul and lets us see into Jane Doe's guilt of having survived when others have not. And as Jane Doe's fortunes rise, Alexander is costumed to perfection in lovely, form-fitting dresses designed by Shon LeBlanc that would allow Jane Doe to shine anywhere.



But it is Rob Nagle as the intrepid, if rather morally corrupt reporter Andy Kramer who fabricates a story and then lies about its authenticity, who commands the stage from start to finish, assisted by his height and distinctive voice as well as his remarkable ability to completely infuse his being into the heart and soul of his character. Scenes between Alexander and Nagle will ring true on a variety of levels, especially when they debate the value of telling the truth over doing what you need to do to survive. Other compelling scenes take place between Nagle and Aleisha Force as Megan Tunney, a forceful fellow reporter whose honesty about what she wants from him challenges his will to struggle through life alone.

Along with the cast, the incredibly insight playwright/director Stephen Sachs, scenic and video designer Matthew G. Hill, and costume designer Shon LeBlanc, kudos go to the rest of the impressive creative team including lighting designer Jennifer Edwards; composer and sound designer Peter Bayne; video hair and makeup designer Diahann McCrary; prop master Michael Allen Angel; production stage manager is Emily Lehrer, and the assistant stage manager is Nura Ferdowski. Simon Levy, James Bennett and Deborah Culver produce for The Fountain Theatre, with executive producer Karen Kondazian.



HUMAN INTEREST STORY runs through April 5, 2020 with performances on Fridays at 8 p.m.; Saturdays at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m.; and Mondays at 8 p.m. Tickets range from \$25-\$45; 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 Avenue (at Normandie) in Los Angeles. Secure, on-site parking is available for \$5. For reservations and information, call (323) 663-1525 or go to www.FountainTheatre.com

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