

# The Several Hats of Stephen Sachs



Contributed by Kevin Hopps

Winning six awards at the 2020 L.A. Ovation Awards, including Best Season and Best Production of a Play, is obviously a great way to kick off the **Fountain Theatre's** 30th Anniversary Season. And so is starting the season off with a play written and directed by **Stephen Sachs**.

Born in San Francisco, Sachs moved to the Los Angeles area as a boy, when his father, a newsman, was transferred to the CBS studio on Beverly and Fairfax. And it was here, at Agoura High School, where "this magical theater teacher," Jim Gilchrist, turned Sachs onto theater for the first time.

Sachs went on to study acting at L.A. City College Theatre Academy, after which he began a career in acting, doing movies, TV, and theater. As part of the original Ensemble Studio Theatre, he took his first stab at writing a play by adapting Italian writer Italo Calvino's novel, *The Baron in the Trees*. After he'd written it, Sachs realized he needed a director. And he thought, "Well, I'll just do it." And he did. The play was produced and became a hit.

Next, Sachs took a turn working as a theater manager and then running theatre companies. And then came a fateful call from Deborah Lawlor, who wanted to open her own theatre and needed someone to run it. Together, in 1990, they co-founded the **Fountain Theatre**.

And so, besides his playwright and director hats, Sachs' hat rack also includes an artistic director hat, the occasional producer hat, and, of course, a father hat and husband hat. As Sachs points out, "*My poor wife has read every draft of every play I've ever written, and she still stayed married to me.*"

Now, *Human Interest Story* (February 15 – April 5, 2020), Sachs' latest of fifteen produced plays, is about to start the **Fountain Theatre's** 2020 season.

The plot revolves around a journalist, who makes up a human-interest story about an imaginary homeless woman and then is forced to deal with the consequences. It's a timely play about homelessness, journalism, and according to Sachs about "*the place of an individual in society and about those who feel outside the mainstream and are trying to fight their way in.*"

***So how did the play Human Interest Story come about?***

As a citizen of Los Angeles and this country, I couldn't help but see how homelessness has just become this immense humanitarian crisis. Everywhere you look there are more and more people, families on the streets. They are everywhere. They're at the foot of every freeway off-ramp. They're under every overpass. When I would drive to the Fountain Theatre every morning, I would see these people. I just thought: what can I do as an artist? How can I artistically express what is happening? One day, I was thinking about the 1941 Frank Capra movie, *Meet John Doe*. In the movie, they didn't call him homeless. They called him a hobo. I asked myself how could I transform this into what is happening in our country today, with the homeless crisis now, and under this current administration. I wound up throwing this newsman into this moral existential dilemma, where circumstances sweep him up, and he gets caught up in his own lie. I wanted to dramatize that there are conflicting and often contrary intentions in all of us, showing that sometimes the path we choose is wrong.

***You've directed a lot of plays, won lots of awards, but what's it like to direct your own play?***

Being in the rehearsal room, I am two people: I am a playwright and a director. So, I'm listening with my ears as a playwright and watching as a director. I am listening to the rhythms; hearing what's false or not needed. And then I'm watching with my eyes, blocking, watching the actors. It requires a lot of left and right brain work.

***Do you think about the sets when you start writing a play?***

I think about it a lot. I'm a very visual theater maker. So I often think about the set. In this play, there are only two tables and four chairs. The rest is done with video projection and light and sound. I love the magic that comes out of nothingness. I love an audience to come into a theatre and look at a bare



**Tanya Alexander**  
**Photo by Jenny Graham**

stage. The lights go down, and they come up, and somehow in this empty space, an entire world is created. And people come out; go on a journey. They get swept up in the story. Then it's all over, and there's this empty space once again. And you realize the whole thing has been created out of nothing.

*What do you hope the audience will take away after seeing this play?*

I hope that on the drive home when they see that homeless person at the foot of the freeway off-ramp that they'll see a human being. And, in the storyline of the newsman and his moral and ethical crisis that he's thrown into, I hope people will see themselves. And ask themselves: *'Who am I? What do I really believe? Not what I say I believe, but who am I really?'* Sometimes the answer is a difficult one to accept.