

# HOLLYWOOD PROGRESSIVE

## How “Human Interest Story” Intersects Us All

BY DICK PRICE AND SHARON KYLE



Tanya Alexander

**W**ith his stunning world premiere presentation of “Human Interest Story” at the Fountain Theatre, playwright and director Stephen Sachs stitches together issues deeply affecting American society, delivering them with a witty edge and kinetic punch that thrilled the audience the night we attended.

Our colleague and friend, Eric A. Gordon, just published a delightfully detailed review with us: “‘**Human Interest Story**,’ Playwright Stephen Sachs’s Righteous Rage Against Corporate Heartlessness.” Rather than replicate his work—or, rather foolishly, try somehow to top it—we’ll share the ironic way Sachs’ themes struck the two of us. Ironies abound, as you’ll see.

At curtain rise, long-time opinion columnist Andy Kramer (played by Rob Nagle) is about to lose his job in a cost-cutting move by his newspaper’s new owners, who are decimating the staff and moving quickly online to save the paper from folding, a fate so many print publications have suffered in recent years.

On his way out the door, as a way to give the new editors the finger, Andy concocts a letter purportedly written by an anonymous homeless woman, Jane Doe, who’s so bereft by her plight that she promises to kill herself on the approaching Fourth of July.

And, of course, in this digital age, the letter immediately goes viral, generating lots of hits on the paper’s website and saving Andy’s job. Problem is, the editors want to know more—lots more—about Jane Doe.

And, of course, in this coincidental world, Andy soon stumbles across a homeless black woman (Tanya Alexander) living in the park, who, after some negotiation, agrees to play Jane Doe. Together they use their ruse to shed a harsh light on the plight of the homeless while saving their own bacon.

But, as Jane Doe will later say, “there’s no good way to do a bad thing,” so problems ensue: rising media stardom, intruding corrupt politicians, distracting sexual escapades, and soulless publishing magnates all colliding in an engrossing stew—“ripped from the

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headlines,” you might say. You’ll need to see the play—and you absolutely should—to see how all this works out.

Our first irony: Hours before we saw the play, the two of us were at LA CAN (Los Angeles Community Action Network) on West 6th Street, in the heart of L.A.’s sprawling Skid Row, helping to plan the “**Radical King**” event planned for April 4th.

Moreover, to avoid the crush of L.A.’s highway traffic, we frequently take surface streets to activist meetings we attend downtown, a route that takes us through Skid Row. At one point, we had to stop taking this shortcut because Sharon would break down in tears at the sight of so many of her people—black people—pushing shopping carts down the street, huddling in the endless rows of tents, shaking their fists at an unforgiving sky. At one time, her former brother-in-law had been among them, a Vietnam vet devastated by his wartime experiences and brief capture by the Viet Cong.

And long ago, Dick had been executive director (some would call him “house daddy”) of a halfway house in Torrance where many homeless were among the residents, an experience that showed him that beneath the grime and tattoos and missing teeth, they were every bit as human as he—and not some kind of alien beings you might only see in news reports or passing by quickly in your car.



A second irony, of course, is that for the past 12 years we've published two online magazines, LA Progressive and Hollywood Progressive, which are in the mix of the shift away from print publication to digital, which has caused the loss of so many editorial jobs like Andy's.

And again moreover, in Dick's last job working for other people (other than Sharon), he worked on venerable print magazines at the very start of the move to the digital world, his job to figure out how to preserve revenue—and his staff's jobs—while moving online.

While readership levels rose dramatically with the much wider reach the Internet afforded, his readers were much less willing to pay for the privilege as they had with print magazines—and the money they did pay had to first go through the Web

publishing shop, which took most of the gravy, shrinking the editorial staff bit by bit. His version of Andy, walking out the front door with his belongings in a cardboard box, became an all-too-common sight.

But the third irony is perhaps the most telling. Sachs's play has the middle-aged white "word slinging" columnist ghostwriting speeches and articles for the somewhat younger black homeless woman—who, by the way, was an award-winning fourth grade teacher before bad luck put her on the street. Point being that the white man assumed he needed to do the thinking and writing for a black woman, who, by the way she spoke and acted and carried herself, could surely have used her own words and thoughts quite nicely, thank you very much, given the chance.

Now, at the Dick & Sharon collective, Dick would never dream of putting words in Sharon's mouth. But our parallels to the play are strong—older white man (she'll remind you), younger black



woman, joined not just with an ampersand but at the hip for years on end. Many days we spend the entire 24 hours within 30 feet of each other, talking to the same people, watching the same programs, reading many of the same things, chewing through the day's events as one.

We're together most of the time when the world comes at us, but how we interpret that world, especially around issues of race, can be quite different (one of us says "quite," the other "somewhat"). If we hear news of yet another unarmed black man gunned down by police or a black mother sent to prison for enrolling her child in the wrong school or reports of a friend suspiciously denied a job or promotion, Dick hears it, hurts for it, perhaps discusses it, and moves on. But then hours later he'll find Sharon still sunk down in despond for the endless targeting of her people, thinking of her son's safety, her brothers' safety, black people's safety and well-being in general.



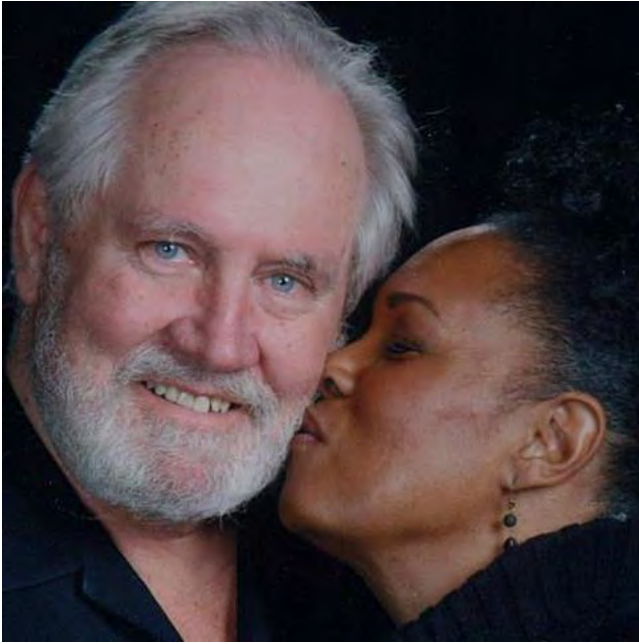
**Rob Nagle, center, Tarina Pouncy, left, and Aleisha Force, right.**

See, if Dick walks out our front door, pretty quick he's just another white dude walking down the street in a mostly white neighborhood, the consequences of racism becoming increasingly intellectual. Sharon doesn't have that luxury.

So, the heart of "Human Interest Story"—for us, at least—is the interplay of racism in our lives,

white and black, that rot at the heart of America's soul.

Go see for yourself.



**H**uman Interest Story runs through April 5, with performances on Friday at 8 p.m., Saturday at 2 and 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 p.m., and Monday 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](#).

**Dick & Sharon**

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### **About Dick Price and Sharon Kyle**

As a husband and wife team, Sharon Kyle and Dick Price publish several print and online newsletters on political and social justice issues. Sharon serves as Publisher for Dick & Sharon's Hollywood Progressive and LA Progressive and Dick serves as Editor