

# Meet Jane Doe...

By Don Shirley | February 20, 2020 9:38 PM



*Aleisha Force, Richard Azurdia, Tarina Pouncy and Matt Kirkwood in 'Human Interest Story'. Photo by Jenny Graham.*

The daily Bulletin is changing its motto from "A free press means a free people" to "A streamlined newspaper for a streamlined era."

Is this the latest symptom of the continuing economic collapse of American journalism? Then why does the motto still bother to include that antiquated word "newspaper"?

In fact, this change of a publication's motto appeared in 1941. It was graphically depicted in the first post-titles image of the movie "Meet John Doe," which was released then, back in the days when newspapers still appeared only on newsprint.

Stephen Sachs of the Fountain Theatre had the inspired idea of not only updating this film's script to 2020, but also expanding it to include a representative of Americans who were hardly visible in the original. In his "Human Interest Story" at the Fountain, "John Doe" is now "Jane Doe" -- a black woman who became homeless after she was laid off from her job as a teacher.

As in the original screenplay, this new "Doe" fills a gap in a yarn that was cooked up by a newspaper columnist -- in this version a man named Andy Kramer. As he's about to be laid off by the cost-cutters who now run his newspaper, he writes and runs a protest letter that's supposedly by the

desperate "Doe" -- whose grand finale is a vow to kill herself on the Fourth of July. This letter creates a sensation about the fictitious woman's plight -- and it saves Andy Kramer's job. But he's then asked to find the real "Jane Doe."

Enter the destitute ex-teacher, whose name is Betty Frazier. She agrees to assume the identity of "Jane Doe," initially welcoming the upgrade from homelessness to hotels. Using words mostly written for her by Andy, she soon becomes a celebrity, appearing often on national TV.

The newspaper's new publisher sees Jane Doe primarily as a cash cow -- and then as a potential godsend for his own upcoming political campaign, which begins to draw on funds contributed by Doe disciples. But will Betty Frazier remain as peaceful as, well, a doe? Or will she begin to resent her role as the mouthpiece of two white men -- who can't stand each other?

In other words, Sachs enlarged the scope of the old Robert Riskin script beyond the corruption of journalism and the spectacle of economic inequality to include other red-hot topics: race, gender, homelessness, and a rich media mogul who plans to bulldoze and bully his way into political office via elaborate lies, rallies and stunts. Does any of this sound familiar?

It might sound like too much of a stew, but Sachs has cooked the ingredients into a bubbling boil. He avoided most opportunities to make the play LA-centric. The script is set in "an American city," with a variety of place names that aren't tied to any one metropolis. However, we hear references to the success of the LA Times "Dirty John" podcast and to the fictional city's homeless population of 36,000 -- which also is the number of homeless people identified as living last year within the city limits of Los Angeles.

Under Sachs' direction, Tanya Alexander is equally compelling as Betty and as Jane Doe. Andy is played by Rob Nagle, who delivers solid work in a different new play just about every three months, or so it seems. Aleisha Force plays a sharp-angled, not-so-romantic partner and professional colleague of Andy's. As the media mogul Harold Cain, James Harper channels Trump more than Bloomberg, but the character's name also suggests another newspaper mogul - the Citizen Kane whose own movie was also released in 1941, like the "Meet John Doe" original.

Finding an ending for this saga is a challenge. The filmmakers reportedly found and shot several before picking just one. The play's ending should be open to discussion, but only after you see it; otherwise we're in spoiler-land.

By the way, a stage musical based on the original "Meet John Doe" attained some respectful attention from critics in DC in 2007 and Chicago in 2011. Not having seen it, I don't know how its version of the story ends. LA producers should consider creating the musical's West Coast premiere. It would be fun to see how it might bounce off "Human Interest Story," so start your engines soon. "Meet John Doe" has a lot more contemporary bite than I would have imagined before I saw "Human Interest Story."

Another play that addresses the economic collapse of American journalism -- although without the larger dimensions of Sachs' play -- is Steven Leigh Morris' "Red Ink," about to close in the tiny Playwrights' Arena space in Atwater. Befitting the playwright's experience as a journalist at LA Weekly, "Red Ink" examines the arena of alternative newspapers that are taken over by larger corporations -- but from within the context of Bellevue Hospital, into which the newspaper's former editor has been committed. In other words, it explicitly takes place in New York, not in LA, which was a little disappointing to any of us LA observers who were hoping to witness a more direct connection to the LA Weekly saga.

Speaking of local references in the current crop of new plays, a title couldn't sound much more local than "West Adams," Penelope Lowder's new play. It's set against the backdrop of gentrification in the eponymous LA neighborhood -- although the production itself is at the Skylight, in long-gentrified Los Feliz. Yet as a broad satire that gradually evolves into over-the-top soap opera, "West Adams" seems oddly distant from any actual gentrification area. All the characters are among the neighborhood's new arrivals. No one represents the displaced, who would seem to be an essential component of a play that addresses gentrification.

A much tighter fit between a local subject and a local play occurs in Matthew Leavitt's "The \$5 Shakespeare Company." In fact, let's call it site-specific. Its fictional story is set in a small Hollywood theater, backstage as well as onstage, and the production itself is in the pint-sized Theatre 68 in NoHo. The title of the play doubles as the name of the fictional troupe within the play; the \$5 refers to the price of tickets to the fictional company's cheaply produced Shakespeare.