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“Human Interest Story” at The Fountain Theatre



Tanya Alexander as Jane Doe in Stephen Sachs' *Human Interest Story*, now playing through April 5 at The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue in Los Angeles. Photo by Jenny Graham.

It is impossible to get away from the grim state of the world, its politics, its ever-simmering wars, its ever-widening gap between the haves and the have-nots, and the ecological disaster that is hurtling us into extinction. As a person of emotion, I feel it physically every day, not to the point of contemplating suicide, never that, but still it's there. With an apology to Dickens—"It is the best of times, it is the worst of times, it is the age of wisdom, it is the age of foolishness, it is the epoch of belief, it is the epoch of incredulity, it is the season of light, it is the season of darkness, it is the spring of hope, it is the winter of despair."



(l. to r.) Tarina Pouncy, Rob Nagle, Aleisha Force in Stephen Sachs' *Human Interest Story*, now playing through April 5 at The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue in Los Angeles. Photo by Jenny Graham.

With all that in mind, **Stephen Sachs'** new play, *Human Interest Story*, just opened at **The Fountain Theatre**, is a play for our times that is set "In an American City. Now." The playwright and the scenic designer have given the play a feeling of New York and Los Angeles, weighed a bit more towards LA than NYC. He has also given his characters names and actions that will resonate in the minds of people of certain ages and experiences. The play is inspired by Frank Capra's 1941 film, *Meet John Doe*, which starred Gary Cooper and Barbara Stanwick.



(l. to r.) Matt Kirkwood and James Harper in Stephen Sachs' *Human Interest Story*, now playing through April 5 at The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue in Los Angeles.
Photo by Jenny Graham.

A major metropolitan newspaper has just been the victim of a hostile take over by the vile, nasty greedhead, Harold Cain (**James Harper** in a fierce, powerful performance), who has fired half of the staff in an effort to make the paper profitable. The popular veteran journalist, Andy Kramer (excellent **Rob Nagle**), a columnist who covers the human interest stories, is given his exit ticket after more than twenty years on the beat. In an effort to retaliate, Andy fabricates a letter to his column, purportedly from a homeless person named "Jane Doe," who promises to kill herself on the Fourth of July.



Aleisha Force in Stephen Sachs' *Human Interest Story*, now playing through April 5 at The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue in Los Angeles. Photo by Jenny Graham.

After leaving the newspaper building, Andy comes across a black woman named Betty Frazier (**Tanya Alexander** in a titanic performance) who holds a sign reading "I am Not Invisible." She lost her position as an elementary school teacher due to staff cutbacks, and, lacking resources, gradually fell into poverty and a life of homelessness. Andy essentially hires her to play the role Jane Doe, which leads to multiple complications that rocket the action into unexpected heights when Jane becomes a media darling with an enormous following. Her honest intentions get co-opted and then taken over by media mogul Herman Cain, who uses her to advance a political career. If you detect a whiff of current events, it is not a whiff, but a stinking pile of ordure.



Richard Azurdia in Stephen Sachs' *Human Interest Story*, now playing through April 5 at The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue in Los Angeles. Photo by Jenny Graham.

An ensemble cast of protean actors flesh out the action in multiple roles. Most significant, perhaps, is **Aleisha Force** as reporter Megan Tunney, the frustrated hyper-sexual, on-again, off-again girl friend of Andy Kramer. **Matt Kirkwood** plays the role of Carl Miller, Herman Cain's hatchet-man. **Tarina Pouncy** plays Mayor Woods and others and **Richard Azurdia** scores as Hernandez, Rick Moran, and live-on-the-scene media types. And I loved his brief turn as a pushy Jane Doe fan seeking a selfie.



Tanya Alexander as Jane Doe in Stephen Sachs' *Human Interest Story*, now playing through April 5 at The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue in Los Angeles. Photo by Jenny Graham.

Playwright/director Stephen Sachs keeps the action brisk, while allowing for moments of emotional confusion. The Fountain Theatre has pulled out all the stops in putting up a production with astonishing video effects by scenic designer **Matthew Hill**, and lighting design by **Jennifer Edwards**. Music is composed by sound designer **Peter Bayne**; costume design is by **Shon LeBlanc**; hair and make-up design is by **Diahann McCrary**; and **Michael Allen Angel** is prop master. **Emily Lehrer** keeps things going as they should as production stage manager, aided by the assistant stage manager, **Nura Ferdowski**.

Simon Levy, **James Bennett** and **Deborah Culver** produce for the Fountain Theatre. Producing underwriters include **David and Mary Jo Volk**; **Laurel and Robert Sifton**; **Toby and Daniel Bernstein**; and **Lois Tandy**. The executive producer is **Karen Kondazian**.

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Published by Paul Myrvold