



# STAGE RAW

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## REVIEWS

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Rob Nagle and Tanya Alexander in *Human Interest Story* at The Fountain Theatre. (Photo by Jenny Graham)

### *Human Interest Story*

Reviewed by [Terry Morgan](#)

*The Fountain Theatre*

Through April 5

Poverty and homelessness and what to do about them are hardly new matters of concern. King Lear berates his newly-found conscience thus: "Poor naked wretches...how shall your houseless heads and unfed sides...defend you from seasons such as these? O, I have ta'en too little care of this!" Well-meaning people have struggled to grapple with these problems, and yet homelessness in Los Angeles seems worse than ever, while the divide between the rich and poor widens daily. Add to this the demise of the traditional newspaper and you have the valid concerns driving Stephen Sachs's new play, *Human Interest Story*. The world premiere production at The Fountain Theatre boasts a talented cast, strong technical credits and good intentions, but unfortunately the play is heavy-handed and unengaging.

Veteran newspaper journalist Andy (Rob Nagle) is pitching his new editor Carl (Matt Kirkwood) a story on a woman who brings soup to homeless people when he's dumbfounded to learn that he's being laid off. The paper has been taken over by media mogul Harold Cain (James Harper), and traditional journalism is being given the heave-ho in favor of chasing web hits. In frustration, Andy writes and posts a fake letter from a homeless woman named Jane Doe, who bemoans the current world and threatens to kill herself on the upcoming Fourth of July. This letter becomes a viral sensation, and Andy is besieged by offers to have Doe speak and write more. His dilemma is solved when he meets homeless Betty (Tanya Alexander), who offers to pretend to be Doe so as to pull herself out of her bad situation. But as Andy and Betty are drawn into the national spotlight, what was once a simple fib becomes a complicated and unsustainable deception.

Nagle, one of the most consistently great actors in L.A. theatre, does his best but is stymied by the role as written, which is not a character so much as a viewpoint (that of a hangdog moralist who spends a lot of the time speechifying about newspaper as "sacred text"). Alexander is in the same boat, unfortunately, as she goes from being a person who will gladly do anything to change her situation to a person who spends most of the show angrily denouncing that change. At no time do we see her make a credible transition from one state to the other.

Aleisha Force is quite good as both fellow journalist Megan and the chirpy host of *Good Morning St. Louis*, bringing a tart humor and energy to her performance. Kirkwood is terrific as multiple shady, morally compromised editors and campaign staffers, excelling in both blunt and subtle moments. Finally, Harper is excellent as Cain, a tyrant in a red Trump power tie. He captures the current villain of our times with intelligence and strength, punching out his lines with impressive vigor and bringing powerful energy to all the scenes he's in.

Writer/director Sachs might have benefited from another person at the helm to help trim the text — the second act in particular feels like a long stretch of one earnest speech after another. Matthew Hill's video design is vivid and artfully composed, adding a lot of visual panache to the production. Sachs is clearly a talented writer and has his heart in the right place, but *Human Interest Story* feels more expository than specific. Characters are described as brilliant writers or moving orators but never demonstrate these talents. A romantic subplot seems shoehorned in and extraneous. Finally, setting this story in the current day, and evincing shock at the gutting of newspapers seems about a decade past freshness, while the over-the-top reverential description of classic journalism as holy scripture takes the play even farther from reality, undermining it further.

There is a lot of talent working in *Human Interest Story*, and an overriding anguish in the writing about how the country is going wrong — how we, like Lear, have taken too little care.

Unfortunately the play itself is flawed, and whatever message it intends to deliver gets muddled along the way.

***The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., East Hollywood; Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 p.m. & 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m.; Mon., 8 p.m.; through Apr. 5. [www.FountainTheatre.com](http://www.FountainTheatre.com). Running time: approximately two hours and 30 minutes with one intermission.***