

BWW Interview: HUMAN INTEREST STORY's Chameleon Actor Rob Nagle On Choosing Roles, Classics & L.A. Theatre

by Gil Kaan Jan. 28, 2020



A stalwart member of the Los Angeles Theatre community, the multi-award-winning **Rob Nagle** will next be appearing on **The Fountain Theatre** stage in the world premiere of **Stephen Sachs'** **HUMAN INTEREST STORY**, opening February 15, 2020. Rob essays Andy Kramer, who just having been laid off, fabricates a letter to the editor; then, has to mastermind an elaborate charade to justify it. Rob's **HUMAN INTEREST STORY** onstage accomplices include: **Tanya Alexander, Richard Azurdia, Aleisha Force, James Harper**, Matt Kirkwood and Tarina Pouncy.

The ever-busy Rob managed to find some time to answer a few of my queries.

Thank you for taking the time for this interview, Rob.

I have seen you onstage in such a variety of performances (*CHURCH & STATE, JUDAS KISS, LITTLE FOXES, SUCKER PUNCH, FOREVER BOUND*; to name a few). Now you're rehearsing for your role as Andy Kramer in *HUMAN INTEREST STORY*. What criteria do you look for in taking on a new role/character?

I try to keep a very open mind when I am first looking at a new role. I read the script, trying to keep my mind a tabula rasa, a blank slate, so that I do not have any preconceptions about what I am reading, and I can simply respond to the material. I want to see if it is a story that I would like to tell, and then I more closely examine if the character says things that I would like to say. It does not matter whether or not I agree with the character's point of view; the story and the words just need to resonate for me. Once the part and the script have passed muster for me, I then consider the people involved in the project and the place where it will be performed. After that, I take a look at the pay. But it's never really about the pay for me, it's about the story.

What cosmic forces of creativity first brought you together with this new world premiere by **Stephen Sachs?**

The cosmic forces of creativity seem to work when you stay involved in the Los Angeles theatre community. I have admired Stephen's work for many years now, and apparently he mine, as well. In January of 2018, he invited me to take part in a one-night-only reading of **ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN** in the Council Chambers at Los Angeles City Hall. I believe that was our first creative foray together. In July of 2019, he asked me take part in an early read of **HUMAN INTEREST STORY**, then titled **JANE DOE**. I was reading a different role, but I loved what he was doing with this script.

What's carries more weight for you - a great script, a proven director or open-to-learning/collaborating castmates?

That's a tough question. I suppose it really depends on the project. Sometimes a great script is what lures you in. Sometimes the script really needs a proven director to polish it up and make it shine. Sometimes an open-to-learning, collaborative cast is the only thing that will save a project from remaining a bump on a log. But more often than not, the script's the thing that will catch the conscience of this king... I'm such a theatre geek.

If you were writing a letter of recommendation for Andy, what qualities of his would you emphasize?

His tenacity and strength of purpose. His empathy and his heart. His curiosity and searching nature. And his passion for telling stories.

What character flaws would you sugarcoat?

His pride. His ego. And the little boy who is still seeking his father's approval.

You joined the Antaeus Theatre Company in 2010 as a company member. Then took on the roles of co-artistic director, as well as, director of the Antaeus Academy. Last year you were given Titan status. Tell us what the impressive, fun title of Titan endows or entitles you.

I think I get at least a cool cape or something, don't I? It is a title given to Antaeans who have gone above and beyond for the company. It's a lovely honorary title, and I get a break on dues. And that means I get to rub shoulders with some pretty impressive Antaeus company members - some who have even shuffled off this mortal coil. To be listed with [Dakin Matthews](#) and [Angela Paton](#) and [Gregory Itzin](#) and [John Apicella](#), among others... well, it definitely makes me feel like I'm in very good company.

When approached for advice from a newbie actor just moved to L.A. to be in the movies or on television, what importance do you place on participating on the Los Angeles theatrical stage?

Participating in the Los Angeles theatre community is a personal choice. I find it frequently to also be a privilege. We have the greatest concentration of artists in the country in this fine city, and that gives us a unique opportunity to not only take part in, but also change the cultural landscape of a big swath of Southern California. Taking part in the theatre here in L.A. is very important to me. I might even say that it's a vital part of my life here on the West Coast.



Do you, as one with a deep resumé of Shakespeare roles, advise the novice, who strives to be the next police captain in the next procedural hit, to study the classics in their training?

I believe that if you don't study the classics, you are leaving a big, fat hole in your preparation for everything else you do. You certainly don't *have* to study them, and you don't have to even be good at them, and plenty of people will hire you without them on your resumé. But knowing and being aware of the great writers that came before the ones living and working now gives you a unique lens through which to prepare and interpret your text. I may have a Disney Channel show in front of me, but if I can find a way into the material through [Tennessee Williams](#), it's only going to make the writing

and my acting even better. There's a reason why Shakespeare-trained actors have been so good at science fiction, from [Star Trek](#) to [Buffy](#) to [Doctor Who](#) to [X-Men](#)... [Patrick Stewart](#) talked about it. The experience that we get making 400+-year-old texts believable transfers directly into the credibility that we bring to science fiction and fantasy.

What improvements in the Los Angeles theatre community have you seen in the last decade?

Well, the last several years have been rough. Don't get me started on our battles with [Actors' Equity](#) and the New York-centric nature of my parent union... But I do believe that the Los Angeles theatre community is meeting the challenges presented to it, and the strongest theatres are thriving in the midst of those challenges. We are bending towards progress, and there is some wonderful work being produced on our stages, but I feel like we're still in some ways the red-headed stepchild in Los Angeles. We need and deserve more local and state government, as well as corporate and private support, the same kind of support New York theatres receive in relative spades.

When you were in the rolling world premiere of *CHURCH & STATE* at Skylight, did you know at the onset that you would reprise your role of Charlie Whitmore in the subsequent Off-Broadway production?

Not at all. It was certainly an aspiration to be involved in a future production of that play - I thought maybe **Block Party** at the **Kirk Douglas Theatre** - but I never imagined that

New York would be my next stop with Senator Whitmore. That was a very pleasant thrill that came directly as a result of working with the writer **Jason Odell Williams** on that Skylight production. We might have run longer Off-Broadway if the **New York Times** hadn't declined to review the show.

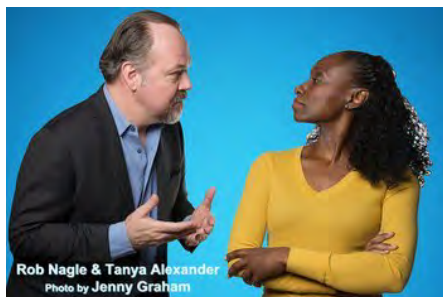
Were there a lot of tweaks between the Skylight production and the one at the New World Stages?

I don't recall a *lot* of tweaks, but we were certainly changing lines and scenes well into previews. Jason was hoping to have the play ready for publication, and so he was constantly looking to improve it - and, of course, sadly, there is always another shooting to add the list mentioned near the end of the play. That list grows. We added Orlando when we were at the Skylight, as the Pulse shooting happened while we were in rehearsals. I'm sure Jason has continued to add locations to the script, even after publishing.

What theatrical role that you haven't inhabited would you still love to tackle?

In no particular order: **Orson Welles**, Lenny Small, and Blanche DuBois.

In all the many theatre productions you've been in, what has been the most unexpected audience reaction you've ever been a part of or caused?



I remember when I was playing the role of the Roman Captain in a production of **CYMBELINE** at the Virginia Shakespeare Festival... I was fifteen years old. And at the end of the play, after the battle sequence with short-swords and lots of running around screaming to show the audience the chaos of war... I had been captured and manacled as a prisoner, while the final scene revealed all of the misadventures of Imogen while she was away from the English court. And I was

standing on a six-foot platform, and the stage lights were feeling particularly hot, and I started to feel a little queasy, and the next thing I knew... I was on my hands and knees on the stage floor below and **Will Casey**, who played the title role, was as wide-eyed as I'd ever seen him, and other actors were helping me to my feet. I had blacked out and fallen off the platform onto all fours. Could've shattered my knees or cracked my head open. I think the audience must've thought it was the best onstage stunt they'd ever seen, watching this poor, beleaguered by battle, Roman soldier collapse and be helped to his feet mercifully by the English court... They got quite a last scene that day. I've always known how to milk the old drama cow, you know?

What for you, Rob Nagle, would be the most satisfying thoughts/emotions audience leave The Fountain Theatre with after your HUMAN INTEREST STORY curtain call?

I hope all of our hearts grow a little bit while we're all together experiencing this play. Maybe we'll think a little differently about all those ideas we were so certain of when we walked in and sat down together, all the things we think we know about the world. I hope audiences feel an enlarged sense of compassion, greater understanding and deeper concern for their fellow human beings, no matter the color or gender or creed. We all tend to take care of our own circles of family and friends - but there are people out there who have been kicked out of their circles, or who have wandered out of them, or who have lost their connections to them. They are worthy of our care, of our attention, and even of our love. There are eight million stories in this naked city, and every homeless person you encounter can tell you one of them. I hope we start talking less, and listening a little more.

Thank you again, Rob! I look forward to experiencing your Andy Kramer, I'm sure, another one of your incredible characterizations.

For ticket availability and show schedule through April 5, 2020; log onto www.FountainTheatre.com