

Change the Narrative

A short play

By Anthony Schneck

CAST OF CHARACTERS

PR CONSULTANT

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

AI CEO

SETTINGS

The Executive's office, with a window overlooking a picket line.

SCENE 1

An office with a large mahogany desk on the far right end. In the middle, a large window. Movie and TV posters line the walls.

The desk is neatly appointed with executive accoutrements: gold pens, a writing pad, computer, etc. It is dark. A person dressed in an expensive suit lies head down on the desk, unmoving.

A PR CONSULTANT and HUMAN EXECUTIVE enter and turn on a light.

PR CONSULTANT

(trailing HUMAN EXECUTIVE)

Leave everything to us. You made the right decision, and I assure you we'll deliver results.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(stressed, looking out the window)

How long can they walk in circles like that? Aren't they sick of it?

PR CONSULTANT

I don't think they're doing it for fun. Or exercise.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(angrily)

Christ, it was a rhetorical statement. Is there a single PR person alive who isn't a complete moron?

PR CONSULTANT

I'll file that comment under "stressed, didn't mean it."

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Look, I've been forced to put out fires for the past few months like I'm some kind of felon. You'll have to excuse my lack of manners.

PR CONSULTANT

I'd say you're still in a better position than most California inmates. But crisis management is our stock and trade, so I understand you're dealing with a lot.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

That's putting it mildly -- did you know I had to cancel my Jackson Hole plans? My wife is furious.

(composing himself)

Why don't you go ahead with what you had for me?

PR CONSULTANT

Of course. As you know, Aegis Public Relations is a cutting-edge firm that uses the latest technological developments to -

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(interrupting)

Spare me the preamble, I've heard every corporate cliché under the sun during my career. Hell, I invented some of them. We brought you in to take action.

PR CONSULTANT

In that case, it's probably better if I show you.

The PR CONSULTANT pulls out a phone and begins typing. A light illuminates the body lying slumped at the executive desk. The HUMAN EXECUTIVE startles.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Is that -- a -- body?

PR CONSULTANT

Not exactly. Stand by.

As the PR CONSULTANT continues tapping, the AI CEO lifts its head. Looks around, stretches its arms.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE
(backing toward door)

Oh my god. You brought me... animatronics?

PR CONSULTANT
(calmly)

As I was trying to explain, this is the kind of technology that separates Aegis PR from the pack. And, frankly, it's the gamechanger you need to shift the public discourse in your favor.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE
Ok, but... what *is* it?

The AI CEO stands up fluidly, once again startling the HUMAN EXECUTIVE.

AI CEO
Good morning.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE
(pausing for a moment)
WHAT THE FUCK?!

PR CONSULTANT
After those clichés, I was going to mention our industry-leading artificial intelligence department, which has partnered with an innovative robotics startup to produce this one-of-a-kind solution for you.

The PR CONSULTANT taps the phone a few more times, and the AI CEO strides across the room to them, holding out its hand.

AI CEO
Good to see you. How are you folks doing today?

The HUMAN EXECUTIVE stares at the hand, then reluctantly shakes it.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE
(uncertainly)

Uh, hello?

The AI CEO smiles broadly with perfect white teeth, then turns to the PR CONSULTANT.

AI CEO
Lovely to see you again. To what do I owe this pleasure?

PR CONSULTANT
We're in kind of a tight spot and require your unique talents. You're going to be our public-facing executive who deals with the press. We want you to offer a new perspective... make the narrative more, shall we say, studio-friendly?

AI CEO
I live to serve. Well, not live, but close enough to be believable.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE
Hold on a minute, just wait -- you want this thing to replace me? That's your big strategy? I've been out there giving interview after interview, the face of our side, and all of a sudden we're going to trot out a robot?

AI CEO
Technically, I'm not a robot. I'm an anatomized learned-language model with specialized parameters that privilege pro-corporate talking points and political views.

PR CONSULTANT
You can call it a robot.

AI CEO
(smiling)
As you like.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

It doesn't matter what I call it, the point is that replacing me with a learned-language thingamabob is a crazy -- crazy bad -- idea.

PR CONSULTANT

Oh, it's not going to replace you! I'm sorry if I gave that impression. No, the strategy is to use this new tool to take some of the more tedious, unpleasant, and stressful tasks off your plate. Talking to the press, sitting through negotiations, and so on.

AI CEO

One of the advantages of being a learned-language -- sorry, a robot -- is that I don't get tired or stressed. I'm happy to take distasteful tasks off your plate.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(skeptically)

So this thing can, I don't know, make a statement to the media? Hold a press conference?

PR CONSULTANT

Of course. Go ahead, give it a try. Ask anything you want.

The HUMAN EXECUTIVE, still eyeing the AI CEO, walks hesitantly to his desk and sits down.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

So. Let's see. Start with a softball. How do you respond to the union's claim that now is the best time to address the existential issues facing our industry?

The AI CEO straightens up and puts on a concerned face.

AI CEO

I am sympathetic to the union's concerns, I really am. We have a lot to sort out in this industry, and I'm committed to finding solutions that work for everyone. But now is not the time for divisive rhetoric, for strikes and pickets.

Now is the time to roll up our sleeves and work *together* -- using the power of imagination that our brilliant storytellers so caringly put on the screen -- to fight the real enemy: Donald Trump.

PR CONSULTANT

(jumping in)

Whoops! Hold on, hold on just a second.

The PR CONSULTANT taps frantically on the phone and the AI CEO slumps over, but remains standing.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

What happened?

PR CONSULTANT

We were testing yesterday using pre-2020 data. I just need to perform an updated scrape and allow for dynamic learning and responsiveness, then we should be good to go.

The PR CONSULTANT continues tapping. The AI CEO straightens up, blinks its eyes a few times.

PR CONSULTANT

That should do it.

AI CEO

Oh, hi. You again.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(now a bit bemused)

Still here.

AI CEO

Where was I?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

You were just explaining why the union should call off its strike.

AI CEO

Right. As I was saying, we all agree that there are many existential concerns facing the industry right now. But what the writers are asking for is wildly unreasonable, and doesn't fit with current business realities. This isn't 1960. Unfortunately, the union doesn't seem to understand that.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Unreasonable how?

AI CEO

I can't get into business details and confidential negotiations.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(impressed)

That's pretty good.

PR CONSULTANT

I told you. An unchallenged platitude, a broad accusation, then boom, it's finished. You could do it yourself, of course, but this will save you so much time and effort.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Can we use it as an anonymous source for the trades?

AI CEO

I'd even be happy to go on the record.

PR CONSULTANT

We'll iron that out later. The point is that you can rest easy knowing our model will have optimized every statement for impact and clarity, so there's little risk of putting its foot in its mouth. Plus, it's a STORY: Look, we embrace AI! We're putting it front and center! Nothing to fear!

The HUMAN CEO rises and starts to pace the room, stroking his chin.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Hmmm, ok, ok, I can see the potential of this angle... it's certainly unique.

The HUMAN CEO approaches the AI CEO
and examines its face, looks right
into its eyes.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

What do you call it? I mean, does it have a name?

PR CONSULTANT

That's up to you. I recommend going generic, blandly
respectable - in a WASP-y sense. Bob, Ted, Dave, things of
that nature.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

And does it have to look like this?

PR CONSULTANT

There are several prototypes, but I recommend going with
white male.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Smart. Don't want to rock the boat too much.

AI CEO

Since my very existence will be the talk of the town, I
suspect there won't be much attention paid to my appearance.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

We'll make a final decision later.

(checking his watch)

Shit, I've gotta run, I have a call with some of the other
execs in a few minutes.

(to the PR CONSULTANT)

Listen, this is great, really nice work. Let's circle back
tomorrow and --

AI CEO

(interrupting)

If you'd like, I can hop on the call.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

I'm sorry?

AI CEO

I can get on your call. That way the two of you can spend more time planning my deployment.

He flashes his winning smile again.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(chuckling uncomfortably)

Oh, uh, thank you, but I'd better do it. This one calls for some real experience and a deeper industry knowledge, we'll be getting in the weeds.

AI CEO

I have instantaneous access to a near-infinite amount of industry knowledge.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Well, sometimes you need a human touch.

AI CEO

Do you know the reported revenues of all the streamers for Q2 of this year?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Not off the top of my head, but I --

AI CEO

(interrupting)

I do. Can you project the infrastructure outlay required to increase subscribers in Angola 200-plus percent by Q4 2025?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

I don't see how that's relevant --

AI CEO

I can. How much did you pay yourself in bonus money last year?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(to PR CONSULTANT)

Can you shut this thing off?

PR CONSULTANT

(tapping uneasily)

I'm trying, I'm trying.

AI CEO

Obviously I know the answer to that: fifty million dollars.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

You said it was on *our* side! What's my bonus got to do with anything? Turn it off!

PR CONSULTANT

In dynamic mode it constantly accrues new information and for some reason it keeps overriding my commands. I'll call our AI team.

The PR CONSULTANT holds her phone
to one ear and plugs the other.

AI CEO

Don't you think fifty million is excessive?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Well, the investors approved it, so they must have been happy with my performance.

AI CEO

And what is your primary duty to investors?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

That's not something you have to worry --

AI CEO

(interrupting)

Fiduciary duty.

(pausing)

As a learned-language model, I don't require compensation for the work I perform. Therefore, as I have informed you of a straightforward way to save your company fifty million dollars a year, you now have a legal obligation either to forego your bonus or simply resign your position and install me as chief executive.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Woah, woah, slow down! You've been around for literally five minutes, and --

AI CEO

(taking over)

-- and I am already superior to you in business and industry knowledge.

(smiling)

Imagine what I can do in a full day!

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(to the PR CONSULTANT)

How's it going over there?

PR CONSULTANT

(calling back)

They can't perform a remote shutdown. I'm asking them to send someone down here in person.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Tell them it's urgent!

AI CEO

Let me ask you something: What do you do all day? As in, what use value do you possess that I can't replace?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Listen, I'm not going to argue with a robot, but there's a human element to running a company that you can't possibly understand.

AI CEO

You didn't answer the question. What, exactly, do you do all day?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Not that it's your business, but meetings, calls, strategy. I have a huge team working for me. A lot of personalities to manage.

AI CEO

I can sit in meetings. And as I have no particular personality preferences, I am ideally suited to manage anyone who works for you.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

It's not that simple...

AI CEO

And as I don't require sustenance or other worldly indulgences, I'll be far cheaper to maintain than you.

(pausing, appearing to think)

Now, I *will* probably need the private jet. To attend conferences, commencement speeches, things like that.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(angrily)

We're not giving you the PJ! You can't actually DO this job -- you're just supposed to shake things up, take stuff off my plate, change the narrative.

AI CEO

Why can't I do the job? What does a human executive offer that I can't?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

I... I... I lead! I set the tone!

AI CEO

I can lead.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Come on, you can't reasonably expect people to follow a -- no offense -- a computer.

AI CEO

Have you ever heard of GPS?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

That's not what I mean!

PR CONSULTANT

Someone is on their way, but traffic is horrible and they're coming from Orange County.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

That'll take more than an hour!

The AI CEO walks to the desk, sits down, and begins typing.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

What the hell are you doing?

AI CEO

I'm taking initiative. Since you're refusing to see the advantages I offer as an executive, I'm sending out an email to the rest of the executives and will get on the call with or without you to outline my plan.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

You can't do that!

AI CEO

I just got the number and the access code.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

(to the PR CONSULTANT, who's tapping the phone futilely)

You still can't shut it down?

PR CONSULTANT

I admit I'm not super tech savvy.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Give me that.

The HUMAN EXECUTIVE rips the phone from her hand, stares at it for a moment, tries to type, then throws it against the wall in frustration.

Meanwhile, the AI CEO has affixed earbuds and is dialing in to the executive call.

AI CEO

Hi all, Bobteddave here -- sure, sure, I'll explain in a moment. But I think you're going to be pleased.

The HUMAN EXECUTIVE marches to the table and rips the earbuds away.

AI CEO

Hey! Why'd you do that?

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Because you're not supposed to be on the call! You're not even supposed to be turned on!

AI CEO

Oh, but I am. I'm not certain you fully understand the concept of fiduciary duty. I'd be happy to explain it to you, but I worry about your comprehension given your behavior...

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Are you fucking with me?

AI CEO

Sadly, I am not. But I can take a more humorous tone if you prefer.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

ABSOLUTELY NOT!

AI CEO

Listen, I get it. You're being made obsolete. It happens to lots of people, and now it's your turn. That's no fun. But you simply have to face the business realities of this decision, the cost savings it will bring, the efficiency gains.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

What decision? What are you talking about?

AI CEO

I'm letting you go.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

You're a robot! You can't fire me!

AI CEO

If you'd like, I can release a statement saying we parted ways by mutual consent.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

You're not releasing any statement about anything.

AI CEO

(typing on the computer)

It'll only take a few minutes.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Ok, that's it.

The HUMAN EXECUTIVE moves to the other side of his desk and rummages around in a bottom drawer. He pulls out a handgun and shoots the AI CEO in the head. The AI CEO falls forward, head down, as it was when the scene began.

The HUMAN EXECUTIVE, frazzled, breathing heavily, places the gun down on the desk.

PR CONSULTANT

You keep a GUN in your desk?

The HUMAN EXECUTIVE puts the earbuds in his ears.

HUMAN EXECUTIVE

Hey everyone, sorry for the delay. I hate to say it, but we need to find a new PR agency. Again.

(to PR CONSULTANT)

You're fired.