

8 Tens @ 8's Short Play Festival Returns

The fest showcases 16 stellar 10-minute plays at the intimate Center Stage

By Christina Waters

January 25, 2023



Manirose Bobisuthi delivers an unforgettable performance in 'The Most Precious Thing,' one of the eight shows featured in Part 1 of the 'longest running short play festival in the world.'

Such a treat watching **8 Tens @ 8** at the intimate Center Stage, especially after a few years of on-again, off-again pandemic-challenged live theater. The two suites of eight short plays, Part 1 and Part 2, are performed on alternating nights, running through Feb. 19. (*Tempus fugit*, so get tickets fast.) Both opening nights showed off the noticeable ramping up of playwriting expertise, and it's a pleasure to point out a few highlights from this never-boring adventure in live theater.

First, Part I: Kudos to the entire cast of *Man's Best Friend*, a bit of comic surrealism with a crisp script, a wild outcome and lots of physical charm. Special praise for Karin Babbitt as the gymnastic canine with strong opinions. Ward Willats and Lee Ann Gray played for broad laughs and a touch of nostalgia in *Wonder People*, a sweet look at two loners with a thing for "Wonder Woman" comics, television shows and nerdy stats. The delightful premise showed off Willats' impeccable timing and vocal polish.

I was unprepared for the stunning performance by **Manirose Bobisuthi** in *The Most Precious Thing*. An accomplished performer, Bobisuthi plays a young woman in a dead-end job who a mysterious guy suddenly approaches with an intriguing existential proposition. Bobisuthi is spellbinding as she agonizes about her character's life, her stupid retail career and the possibility of life in hell. I could have been watching a Broadway actor

walking away with the show. She was astonishing in impeccable timing, gritty and nuanced vocal work. **Tristan Ahn's** confident support matched her every step of the way. Don't miss this little gem.

There were a few false steps in the second half, although the fun of watching Ward Willats and Tristan Ahn as two collaborating priests in *Confessions à Deux*, with one of the cleverest endings of any of these short pieces, was priceless. The final Part I work, *Father Michael's Doing Mass*, paired seasoned actors Karin Babbitt and Karen Schamberg as vintage parishioners reminiscing about how great Father Michael's masses used to be. These funny and occasionally touching performances gave the first evening's audience a final treat.

Note: If I don't mention a performance, it's probably for the best.

Part 2 continued the prevailing tone of strong playwriting with *Everything Happens for a Reason...Right?*, a two-hander featuring Mindy Pedlar and Andrew Yabroff as affectionate mother and son with a sudden issue on their hands. Delightful realization of a very crafty script. The following three pieces offered lots to enjoy, and I found myself reeled in by the performances of Scott Kravitz and David Leach in an ingenious tale of undercover cops and con artists in *Something Holy in Croatia*, neatly directed by Marcus Cato.

Two pieces stood out during the rest of the evening. In *Eddy & Edna*, playwright Donald Loftus boldly imagines the bittersweet realities of a couple no longer sure of each other's mental capacities. Performers Steven Capasso and Mindy Pedlar reached through the realm of make believe and convinced us we were watching a genuine encounter between long-marrieds no longer on top of their memory game. The twist at the end was deliciously neat, an absolute stunner.

And finally, major kudos to director Wilma Marcus Chandler for her no-holds-barred orchestration of *An Adventure in Forms*, an absurdist fiesta of moods, mayhem and adventurous acting styles. This piece showed off the non-sequiturs inherent in every bureaucratic setting. The excellent cast, notably Hannah Eckstein, clearly had a lot of fun dispatching this little surrealist bonbon.

One final note: Yelling is not acting.

8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival (Part 1 and 2) is produced by the Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre and runs through Feb. 19 at Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. santacruzactorstheatre.org