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CATEGORY ARCHIVES: THEATER REVIEWS

8 TENS @ 8

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By Jocelyn McMahon

PLAYS, especially new ones, are risky and can leave you scratching your head. “What did I just see?” “Did I just waste two-plus hours of my life?” “Am I the only one not getting this?” “I need a drink, where’s the nearest bar?” No one wants to waste their time.

Santa Cruz Actors’ Theater’s 8 Tens @ 8 of 2020 is definitely NOT a waste of your time (or money) and here’s why:

First of all, they are celebrating their 25th Anniversary; the longest running short play festival in America. Producer and president Bonnie Ronzio and artistic director Wilma Marcus Chandler definitely know what they’re doing.

Second, the 16 plays they produce (8 spanning the course of two nights, hence “A” night and “B” night) are chosen from a phenomenal pool of talent, playwrights from around the country who are eager to see their new works brought to life. Hundreds are submitted and only the best are selected. “Each year seems to be more of a creative challenge.” says Chandler, “More demanding, more a mirror of how the world is changing.” The challenge seems to be paying off.

Also, they’re short, the plays I mean. Ten minutes max. If a piece doesn’t speak to you or isn’t one you particularly like, don’t worry, it’s only going to be ten minutes. No longer than a Tinder date, except no swiping. And don’t worry, there will be another piece in the wings waiting to sweep you off your feet.

The gift of a short play is that it’s short, but the challenge is that it needs to catch the audience’s attention instantly. Who are these people, where are we, why should we care? All these questions need to be answered and fulfilled in short order.

Here are the absolute standouts for the 8 Tens @ 8 2020 Season:

“A” Night

Waking Up by Gail Borkowski, directed by Wilma Marcus Chandler, gracefully hits on the points of race, bias, and privilege in the modern world. It stops us in our tracks to ponder what it’s like to walk in another’s shoes, or skin rather, as the characters wake up one morning to realize they’ve swapped races. (Image above.) The ludicrousness of the situation sparks humor, but the poignant message of how we consider race and empathy for others hits a chord as we ponder “Would I want to wake up a different race?” Wonderfully performed, the actors take bold and daring choices, but follow through with depth and endearment that can only be achieved by hard work. Avondina Wills and Karen Blagmon are hilarious as the Cassideys, an upper-class country club couple who’ve changed from white to black overnight, and Karin Babbitt’s daring no-nonsense portrayal of Dina, their maid, who has woken up as a white woman with long blond hair, is exceptional; possibly the best this season. Alfredo Montero Gonzalez’ short time on stage as Bennet, the Cassideys’ son who is enthusiastic to discover he has woken up Latino, is authentic and leaves the piece on a hopeful note. This play takes the cake in all categories; script, direction and performance.

Uncle Nutty’s Final Days by William J. Royce, directed by Daria Troxell, also makes us wonder what it would be like to walk in another’s shoes, except this time the shoes are much larger as they belong to a television clown, Uncle Nutty. While his television show has sparked smiles for the eight and under crowd for the last twenty years, his soul has been eaten away and he wonders if there is anything left for him. Despite the fan adoration, daytime Emmy awards, and great ratings, beneath the makeup he’s just another guy who questions his worth and past choices, the same struggles that many of us face. Uncle Nutty is played by the wonderful Scott Kravitz, who authentically embraces the struggles of the everyday guy. But it’s not all sad. MarNae Taylor and Joyce Michaelson are great as the zany producer and director duo who truly sympathize with Nutty, but are always aware that their show goes on air in a matter of minutes, and aren’t shy to remind him of that. The show writers, played by Tristan Ahn and Donna Johansen, don’t say much, but the wry comments and humorous references to the generational gap are laugh-out-loud-worthy. The closing song adds a fun touch to the dark comedy.

The Winner by Lori Londigan, directed by Nat Robinson, is fueled by the angst of a group of college students who are trying to establish their upcoming theater company. The Debasement Project. They are trying to find the perfect script to produce, out of their parent’s basement, one that will make a mark on society by being the most outrageous and sick play ever. They want to “shock the world” and will stop at nothing to do so. Led by the alpha in the group, Jess, played by Gabrielle Gangitano, these Generation Z-ers will stop at nothing to be the weirdest, wildest and boldest. But when the quieter Evan (Tristan Ahn) becomes entranced with some other scripts that are more on the mild side, and the third member Adam (Dray Bowens-Rubin) starts to side with him, all hell breaks loose. It shows how far some will go to be “original.” The takeaway: It doesn’t have to be bad to be bold. Also, Robinson couldn’t have picked better music, opening with Rage Against the Machine’s “Killing in the Name” and closing with The White Stripes’ “Seven Nation Army,” the music become the fourth character in the piece.

“B” Night

The Next Ivan Sharansky by Jim Geoghan is directed by Hannah Eckstein. This bizarre comedy is side-splitting as it uproariously depicts the alternate reality that is the Hollywood lifestyle. Actor Steve Capasso, whom I’d watch in just about anything, plays the frustrated actor Carl, who once again has been snubbed at an audition, this time for the role of a dead body. “Someone else did it better,” he laments of the audition in which he was instructed to simply lie motionless on the floor. His friend Ida, played by the goofy and entertaining Tiffany Cesarin, tries to console him, for she is also a seasoned actor familiar with the absurdities of the audition process. But the bitter truth is that Ivan Sharansky is just a better dead body.

Press Pray by Seth Freeman is directed by Miguel Reyna. Imagine praying for redemption from God only to be met by an automated attendant. That is what Martin, played boldly by Ward Willats, experiences as he stumbles desperately into a church for some guidance and is put on hold. A



beautiful piece, *Press Pray* comments on how technology shapes our lives, and how hard it is to feel heard in the modern world when even God doesn’t have the time. A one man show, Willats keeps the audience attentive throughout with his precise timing, expressive body language, and comedic air of frustration that anyone who’s tried reasoning with an automated voice can relate to. Ultimately Ward’s sincerity and Reyna’s meticulous awareness to detail come together to create a piece that touches our hearts. The best show of “B” night.

In a pool of witty and exhilarating works, all scripts spark empathy and inspire our minds to think outside the box of daily life. The 2020 Season is off to a great start, with 8 Tens @ 8 selling out almost every show.

Not everything is perfect though. I wouldn’t mind the scene changes picking up the pace a notch. The perfect does the scene changes picking up the pace a notch. The perfect does the scene changes picking up the pace a notch. The perfect does the scene changes picking up the pace a notch. The perfect does the scene changes picking up the pace a notch.

The disparity in acting is notable, but when considering many actors are beginners or students, some for their first time @ 8, it’s impressive to see these professional level shows come to life. 8 Tens @ 8 is a gift to the artistic community; it offers a springboard for those choosing to pursue a career in theater and looks beyond just Equity points while casting. Acting ‘shout outs’ to those who were not already mentioned above: Lillian Bogovich, Frank Widman, Evan Hunt, Mary Ann LoBalbo and Maxwell Bjork.

Photos by Jana Marcus/Actors’ Theatre