

WORDS ON MUSIC

Taking a ride with Eddie Money's 'Two Tickets to Paradise'

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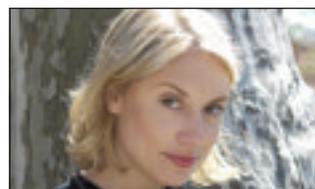
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The Guide

1.8.2015 – 1.14.2015

TWENTY EIGHT TENS

'8 Tens @ Eight' Santa Cruz's landmark 10-minute play festival marks 20 years on stage





PHOTO BY STEVE DIBARTOLOMEO

Frank Widman (left) and J.J. Porter star in E. Borg's 'Surprises' at '8 Tens.'



SHMUEL THALER — SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

Danielle Crook and MarNae Taylor rehearse 'Office Hours' one of this year's offerings at '8 10s @ 8' directed by Robin Aronson and written by Bryan Harnetiaux.

THEATER

Give me 10 minutes

In its 20 years in Santa Cruz, '8 Tens @ Eight' has established a new kind of theater

By Wallace Baine

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If you performed them one after another, around the clock without intermissions or breaks, the plays that have been staged over the course of the 20-year history of "8 Tens @ Eight" would go on roughly for a day and a half.

'8 TENS @ EIGHT' FESTIVAL

When: Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. through Feb. 8.

Where: Center Street Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz.

Tickets: \$25 general; \$22 seniors and students; \$40 package for two nights (www.brownpapertickets.com).

Details: www.sccat.org.

That doesn't seem that much when you consider 20 years of work — some Eugene O'Neill productions seem like they go on for a day and a half on their own.

But in that 36-hour period, you would likely be gobsmacked by the variety, the diversity, the sheer weight of playwrights, directors, actors and designers who have contributed to the whole.

Brevity — specifically, 10 minutes — is after all the name of the game at "8 Tens @ Eight," perhaps the most prominent short-play festival on the West Coast. The beloved Santa Cruz tradition again gets cranking this weekend for a five-week run that is presenting more theater in one go-round than it ever has before.

Despite its title, this year's festival is featuring, gulp, 16 separate, fully staged 10-minute plays, each from a different playwright, each helmed by a different director, to be presented in two programs.

In past years, the festival would augment its eight selected plays with eight more staged readings in a "Best of the Rest" event. This year, there are two slates of eight plays.

The founder and the current artistic director of the festival is long-time Cabrillo College theater faculty member Wilma Marcus Chandler of Santa Cruz County Actors' Theatre. The 20th year, she said, marks a noticeable up-

tick in the festival's prominence in the drama world.

"We received more than 200 entries this year," she said, "which is almost twice as many as we've received in years past, from all over the country and many parts of the world. In the past, we'd receive entries from 10 to 15 states. This time, it was from everywhere."

Despite the increased flow of material, almost half of the selected plays come by way of local, Monterey Bay writers. This is only remarkable in that the plays are blind-judged, selected by a festival committee without the author's name attached.

Maybe that's evidence of a thriving Santa Cruz theater community and a widespread comfort level with the idea of a 10-minute play, a format with an obvious limitation that could give Shakespeare fits.

Chandler first flashed on the idea of a Santa Cruz 10-minute play festival back in the mid 1990s when she became intrigued by a 10-minute play taking place in Louisville, Kentucky. She decided that Santa Cruz could work as a kind of West Coast sister to the Louisville festival.

Since then, Chandler and her able partner in theater, Actors' Theatre president Bonnie Ronzio, have been tweaking the formula until it felt right. They also surfed a lot of ups and downs in

the theater community, almost shutting down the festival in 2011 when Actors' Theatre gave up the Art Center theater that is now known as Center Stage Theater.

The spirit of "8 Tens @ Eight" has remained intact, and a big part of that is to honor whatever the playwright has conjured, as long as that vision comes in under 10 minutes.

"One of the things that has differentiated our festival," said Chandler, "is that we don't limit what you can submit." Some festivals, she said, will remind playwrights to avoid scene changes, keep the cast lean and the set spartan.

"We don't do any of that," said Chandler. "We just tell playwrights, send us whatever you got. If you can write it, we can produce it." She then refers to one 10-minute play a few years ago that featured 33 actors.

The Festival also welcomes the contributions of award-winning set designer Skip Epperson of Cabrillo Stage, who was along for the first ever "8 Tens" and returns for their 20th. Epperson has designed a series of modules that can easily be transformed from one play to the next.

To accommodate 16 plays, the festival season is divided up into an "A section" and a "B section." The "A Night" opens Friday; the "B Night" on Saturday.

In past years, "8 Tens" has leaned heavily on comedy, but over the years, said Chandler, playwrights have learned to bring more weighty emotions to bear, even in the tight format.

Highlights this year include a play about the swindles of some genealogy companies to appeal to people's historical narcissism (Spike Wong's "Countess Befits Her"), another about a family who visits the person who received their deceased child's heart ("Change of Heart" by Vincent Durham), and a fantasy that many creative types often have, about murdering the critics of their work (Brian Spencer's "Murder Most Foul").

THE 16 OF '8 TENS'

"A" NIGHT

- "Office Hours" by Bryan Harnetiaux, directed by Robin Aronson
- "Oscar's Wallpaper" by Wallace Baine, directed by Tandy Beal
- "The Men's Room Monologues" by Wilma Marcus Chandler, directed by Karin Babbitt
- "Kanreki Blues" by Lisa Hadley, directed by Bill Peters
- "Am I Good" by Jean Blasier, directed by Sarah Albertson
- "Champagne and Chopped Liver" by J.M. Eisenman, directed by Peter Gelblum
- "Louie Louie" by Charlotte Ortiz Colavin, directed by Kathryn Adkins
- "Murder Most Foul" by Brian Spencer, directed by Marcus Cato

"B" NIGHT

- "Like a Lullaby" by Greg Rowe, directed by Mike Ryan
- "Winning" by Mercilee Jenkins, directed by Ian McRae
- "Poison Control" by Rebecca Gorman O'Neill, directed by Erik Gandolfi
- "Pound for Pound" by John Boni, directed by Brian Spencer
- "Port City Blues" by Jody McColman, directed by Al Muller
- "Surprises" by E. Borg, directed by MarNae Taylor
- "Countess Befits Her" by Steve "Spike" Wong, directed by Gail Borkowski
- "Change of Heart" by Vincent Durham, directed by Gerry Gerringer

"I look at these plays as picture windows of life," said Chandler. "And we're not just able to see the funny ones, but the tender ones as well."

For a full schedule, go to www.sccat.org.



Oscar Wilde

My 'Wilde' ride

By Wallace Baine
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As a reporter, I've been covering the "8 Tens @ Eight" play festival from its beginnings 20 years ago. I never figured I'd be part of the show.

But last spring, on a lark, I submitted a short play I had written about the final days of Irish-born playwright and bon vivant Oscar Wilde. It was akin to throwing a chocolate bar into the shopping basket while standing at check-in. The play was adapted from a story in my new collection of stories titled "The Last Temptation of Lincoln" and that book was what I was mainly interested in.

Then, to my shock and delight, the play was accepted (the plays are judged blind, without the author's name, so I knew my name

didn't help or hinder me).

It's been a crazy and unbelievably fulfilling experience since then, working with director Tandy Beal and actors Jackson Wolfe and Frank Widman. It's given me some insight, as a long-time outsider, the stakes of collaboration in theater.

Not that it hasn't been awkward covering something that I'm now a part of. Just as in past years, I'd be telling people about this festival even if I weren't in the show. The good thing is that there are 15 other playwrights this year who don't have the forum I have to promote this show. So go see the festival to experience their plays.

Better yet, write one yourself. It's a wonderful exercise in creativity, and this festival gives you an outlet to see actual actors speak your script. If I can do it, so can you.