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Santa Cruz's popular 'Eight 10s @ 8' 10-minute play festival returns with more local writers than ever

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One of Santa Cruz County's most eagerly awaited dates on the local theater calendar comes right at the beginning of it. "Eight Tens & 8," the popular and long-running 10-minute play festival produced by Actors' Theatre, pops up just after the new year, and this year is no different.

The 2014 version of "Eight Tens" opens Friday with four weekends of eight fully staged one-acts — each clocking in at around 10 minutes — selected as the best plays from dozens of submissions, followed by one weekend of "Best of the Rest," which features staged readings of the second-tier runners up.

The festival's long-time artistic director Wilma Marcus Chandler said that this year's festival features an unusually high number of local and regional playwrights. The "Eight 10s" plays are selected by a blind process — the plays are judged without the writers' names attached — so the high number of hometown writers in the play was a coincidence.

"This is a national contest," said Chandler, "so to have 11 winners out of the 16 plays chosen be from the local area is remarkable."

The plays of "Eight 10s" are chosen not on the basis of any theme or criterion. Judges are instructed only to choose the eight finest short plays. That means the festival can feel like a potpourri of drama and comedy, of historical plays and contemporary plays. Chandler said that the eight winners and eight Best-of-the-Rest runners up were drawn from about 150 entries into the play festival from all over the country.

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director Marcus Cato, nevermore revisits Edgar Allan Poe's landmark narrative poem "The Raven," retelling it from the aggrieved point of view of the Raven itself.

"You could call it a one-and-a-half-man play," said Chandler of "Nevermore." "It's a monologue, really, a kind of political protest against the poem by the Raven. You have to see it."

Also part of the festival will be a play called "Strawberry Fields" by Santa Cruz writer and actor Ian McRae. It is the story of a haunted and embittered ex-cop who was the first responder on the scene of the murder of ex-Beatle John Lennon in 1980. Chandler calls it "an incredibly moving piece."

James Chadbourn of Santa Cruz has contributed a true-to-life piece based on his experience in the bizarre world of speed dating, titled, what else, "Speed Dating."

Elyce Melmon, from the Peninsula town of Woodside, returns to the festival with an intriguing character portrait of famed painter James Whistler and his even more famous mother.

Local writers Tim Woods, Carolyn Hyatt and Rita Wadsworth are also all featured in the "Best of the Rest" reading.

Wilma Chandler herself will take a turn on stage as an actor in the play "Waiting for Seven," a piece about two women waiting on what will become the seventh husband of one of them.

Each of the plays are matched with seasoned local theater directors that this year include Robin Aronson, Peter Gelblum, Joan Van Antwerp, Stephanie Golino and others.

For more information on "Eight 10s @ 8" and "The Best of the Rest," go to www.sccat.org (<http://www.sccat.org>).

{ through Jan. 26 Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. \$20 for Friday and Saturday evening performances. Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. Two for \$30 for Thursday and weekend matinees. Details: www.sccat.org (<http://www.sccat.org>). }