

‘8 Tens @ 8’ short play festival turns 30 and still moves fast

by [Jana Marcus](#), Lookout Santa Cruz, January 20, 2026



James P. Flores’ “Pronouns,” with Avondina Wills and Gino Danna, at the “8 Tens @ 8” short play festival. Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative

Quick Take

Santa Cruz County Actors’ Theatre launches its 30th edition of the “8 Tens @ 8” festival with a lively Night “A” that offers a brisk, entertaining sampler of short plays that range from laugh-out-loud funny to quietly touching. It’s a crowd-pleasing reminder of why this beloved festival has thrived for three decades.

January in Santa Cruz marks a new year — and the unofficial start of the local theater season. For decades, the honor of kicking it off has gone to Actors’ Theatre and its signature “8 Tens @ 8” short play festival. This year, the festival celebrates its 30th anniversary, a milestone especially notable in a town where theater companies evolve, reinvent themselves and sometimes vanish altogether.

The origins of “8 Tens @ 8” date to 1995. Local director, educator, and theater champion Wilma Marcus Chandler brought the idea to Santa Cruz after encountering a similar festival in Louisville. While that Southern counterpart closed long ago, Santa Cruz’s version has endured. Widely cited as the longest-running short play festival in the world, “8 Tens” has become a cornerstone of the local theater calendar and a favorite with audiences.

Part of its longevity lies in its accessibility. Short plays invite experimentation for artists and audiences alike. Playwrights get a chance to test new work. Directors can take risks. Actors can stretch in unexpected directions. Audiences get variety, energy and the reassurance that if a particular piece doesn’t resonate, another one is just minutes away. In an age of short attention spans, this format feels almost prophetic.

The festival has also become a genuine community hub. Over the years, it has drawn artists from nearly every theater company in the area, while also welcoming students, first-time performers and playwrights submitting work from around the globe. It is both a proving ground and a gathering place, and that spirit remains central to its identity three decades in.

What began as an evening of eight 10-minute plays has grown into a two-night format. Eight different plays run on “A” Night and eight more on “B” Night, alternating throughout a five-week run. Each of the 16 plays has its own director and cast. It is an ambitious undertaking that manages to feel festive rather than exhausting.

One of the festival’s quiet heroes has always been its famously choreographed scene changes. This chameleon-like space has, over the years, transformed into living rooms, offices, streets, exotic locations and anywhere else a 10-minute play might require. This year, the design gets an assist from rear-screen projections, an effective tool for quickly establishing a sense of place. Some scenes benefited from this more than others. As the festival continues, it’s easy to imagine the creative team discovering even more nuanced and inventive ways to incorporate the technology in future iterations.

Act 1 of “A” Night leans toward comedy, starting with “Pronouns” by James P. Flores, directed by Helene Simkin Jara. The play offers a cheeky reimagining of Biblical times, playfully suggesting how ancient texts might read if modern questions of language and identity were part of the conversation. It’s a funny, smart opener featuring Avondina Wills, Susy Parker and Gino Danna, that warms up the crowd quickly.

Next up is “Small Cat Negotiable” by Nino Greene, directed by Hannah Eckstein. While the premise of a couple searching for a new home suggests potential, the execution struggles to take shape. The performances lean toward amateurish and the direction never quite reins the story into a clear or compelling arc. As part of the opening stretch of Act 1, the placement of this piece feels particularly challenging, because it lacks the momentum needed to set the tone for the evening. Not every piece finds its full footing, but this one felt the least realized.



Gail Borkowski and Alexis Makayla Williams in “Henry’s Epitaph” by Jalen McKoy, part of the “8 Tens @ 8” short play festival. Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative



“The Moment Before” by Samantha Eppes, with Brady Aiello, Andy Waddell, Susy Parker and Noah Syren at the “8 Tens @ 8” short play festival. Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative

Momentum returns with “This Side of Michigan” by Rachel Whalen, directed by Denise Keplinger. A woman down on her luck is convinced there is an octopus living in her apartment, and from that delightfully odd premise emerges a surprisingly touching story. Stephany Buswell grounds the piece with an emotionally present performance, while Laney Correa’s physical work as the ever-moving octopus adds humor and charm.

“Such Dreams As Stuff Is Made On,” by Dan McGeehan, co-directed by Karen Babbitt and Janet Norton, closes Act 1. A wealthy couple, played by Eva Schewe and Ben Canant, experience a break-in where nothing is stolen. Later, they are manipulated by the same intruders, comically portrayed by Martin Sampad Kachuck and Ash Hartman. The piece is a brisk satire of social status and self-deception. It lands solid laughs as it skewers the anxiety of keeping up appearances.

Act 2 proves to be the strongest portion of the evening, with four well-acted and -directed plays that make the most of the short format.

“Henry’s Epitaph,” by Jalen McKoy and directed by Greg Fritsch, offers a heartfelt look at a family preparing to bury a father. Gail Borkowski, Alexis Makayla Williams and Darren Jackson Wilkins deliver grounded, honest performances. The acting feels lived-in, not rushed.

“Locker Room Talk” by John Holleman, directed by Brad Roades, features a sharp, funny exchange between two teachers. Avondina Wills and Brady Aiello bring easy naturalism to

the dialogue, allowing the humor to emerge organically. Wills gives a strong performance — relaxed, precise, and completely at home in the moment.

“Ad Hominem” by Eric Thomas, directed by Davis Banta, explores the inner life of a picture-perfect mom in TV commercials

grappling with her sense of self. Manirose Bobisuthi handles the central role with control and vulnerability, supported effectively by Laney Correa, Ben Canant and David Leach. The play strikes a thoughtful balance between satire and sincerity.

The evening ends on a high note with “The Moment Before” by Samantha Eppes and directed by Brian Spencer. This gleeful farce centers on kidnappers whose absurd lack of planning unfolds before their victim regains consciousness. Andy Waddell leaned into villainy with enthusiasm. Noah Syren and Susy Parker joined him as equally incompetent henchmen. The timing is sharp, the energy high and the audience’s laughter is sustained. It’s an ideal closer.

Overall, Night “A” delivers what people expect from the “8 Tens” festival: variety, invention and several standout moments. Thirty years on, the festival remains lively, communal and unapologetically fun.

Now, on to Night “B.”



Stephany Buswell and Laney Correa in “This Side of Michigan” by Rachel Whalen, part of the “8 Tens @ 8” short play festival. Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative