

8 Tens @ 8 Festival

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By Philip Pearce

The annual “8 Tens @ 8” Play Festival is traditionally a sold-out crowd-pleaser at the Actors’ Theatre Center Street performance space in Santa Cruz. Like those old-time Whitman’s chocolate sampler boxes, you always know that if what you’re having now doesn’t quite suit your taste, there’ll be something different and better before long.

This year’s first night offered eight plays, all acceptably entertaining, six of them comic, one bittersweet but witty, and one, which opens the evening, an intense drama. In *Office Hours* by Bryan Harnetaux, journalism student Danielle Crook confronts prize-winning author/professor MarNae Taylor with an awkward discovery about Taylor’s recent prizewinning book, raising a series of significant shock discoveries, both literary and personal, about both of them. The performances are effective and the plot strong, but it’s difficult to believe that the kind of tally of crucial and complicated conflicts that might occupy a fully developed short story or even a novel could arise and be resolved in the space of ten minutes.

Jean Blaziar’s *Am I Good* seemed to falter under the same timing challenge. It starts when Caber Russell, excellent as a delightfully awkward teenager named Brody, gets dumped on his hapless next-door neighbor Nora, played by Ann McCormick, as she prepares for a crucial dinner date. That the nerdy Brody will end up more fun than Nora’s prospective date is an appealing comic idea. But by the time Blaziar has laid the groundwork, the ten-minute time limit keeps her from developing it fully or convincingly.

It’s a formula that works better with one simple central idea treated as a theme and variations. Actors’ Theatre board president Wilma Marcus Chandler’s play is about nothing more than the desperate Claire’s varying reactions to a long, long wait for her boyfriend to finish relieving himself in the men’s room of Grand Central Station. That one pressing need is

enough. *The Men's Room Monologues* is funny, insightful and well-acted by Sarah Kauffman.

There is the same focus and compression in my personal favorite of the evening, Charlotte Ortiz Colavin's *Louie Louie*, that being the double-barrel name of a kookie but resourceful girl—the enchanting Kennedy Cartwright—obsessed with posing, provoking and pleading her way into being photographed by a buttoned-up, camera wielding lady named Wanda—the frighteningly single-minded Gail Borkowski. But Wanda will only focus on grass blades and tree boughs, never on people. *Louie Louie*'s one-track efforts to change Wanda's mind are touching and disarmingly simple. The two women reminded me of a conversation I once had with a neighbor whose regular and insightful play-going led me to wonder whether she might try auditioning for a show, to which she replied, “No way. Every full-time exhibitionist needs a full-time voyeur like me.”

Other items on the bill include Lisa Hadley's *Kanreki Blues*, which I might have understood better if I knew anything about Japanese philosophy, martial arts or 60th-birthday celebration techniques. The idea seemed to be that Rick Kuhn, as Bob McIntyre, an American devotee of Kanreki, wants to spend his sixtieth birthday in Asian meditation in order to gain inner peace and harmony, but only manages to do that by finally making friends with an annoying neighbor. It seems like a good idea and the costumes of three phantom Asian visitors who appear like the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future, certainly fill the stage with some gorgeous Japanese warrior paraphernalia.

Champagne and Chopped Liver by J. M. Eisenman is about a retired



Jewish couple in Boca Raton, Florida, preparing a video greeting for their son and his new WASP fiancée on the subject of marriage. They cover a lot of Borscht Circuit jokes you've heard before and not many that you haven't, but the writing is slick and the performances by

Frank Widman and Ali Eppy so endearing that I figure originality helps but

it isn't everything.

Widman is also featured in *Oscar's Wallpaper* in the role of Oscar Wilde preparing himself to die in a Paris hotel. He and Jackson Wolfe as his aging live-in lover do well by the script, in which Wallace Baine provides some action and dialogue that are witty enough but, as with any stage presentation of Wilde, not as good as Oscar's own.

In this busy evening Wolfe and Rick Kuhn appear in Brian Spencer's *Murder Most Foul*, a play that breaks the fourth wall, starts out with another interesting enough comic idea (a playwright decides to murder the critic who has relentlessly panned his works) but gets itself tangled up in too much verbiage and some flimsy motivation.

A real plus this year were the settings for the eight plays, which designer Skip Epperson and his crew create out of a lot of large box-shaped pieces, skillfully shifted and adorned to become locales as varied as Oscar's cluttered hotel bedroom and a stretch of park with the tree that Wanda likes to photograph. For a viewer like me, who loves the process almost as dearly as the product, the scene shifts, with their atmospheric musical background, are a high point.

The printed program offers the usual title "8 Tens @ 8," but it turns out this year's festival is really 16 Tens @ a couple of eight o'clock performances. Past festival judges, if I'm not mistaken, have selected sixteen scripts from a pile of submissions, sent them on to eight directors, each of whom chooses one to direct. The remaining eight were then offered weeks later in an evening of staged readings called "The Best of the Rest." But this year, because it's the 20th anniversary of the festival, all sixteen scripts are getting full productions on one of two nights, known as "8 Tens at Eight, Night A and Night B." Preparations for this week's London Theatre tour keep me from a second visit, so you've only had my comments on Night A. Sorry.

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