

Terrific Tens

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18th annual 8 Tens @ Eight one of the best ever

The philosophy behind Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre's annual short play festival, 8 Tens @ Eight, has always been what I call the Bus Theory: if one play doesn't get you where you want to go, there'll be another one along in 10 minutes. What's great about this year's festival is the quality of the plays overall is so high. Not one of this year's eight 10-minute plays ever runs completely out of gas; all are well-written, well-acted, and cleverly staged, and most have a story arc that delivers the viewer to a valid destination.

Take Elyce Melmon's "For Art's Sake," directed by Helene Simkin Jara. A gentle satire on art criticism, it imagines a museum encounter between a young techno-geek (Nat Robinson), whose idea of having a life is his 572 Facebook friends, and the young woman (Danielle Crook, who also has a lovely singing voice) in Bouguereau's symbolic painting, "The Broken Pitcher" (beautifully recreated onstage); she steps out of her frame to complain that that rascal David busted her pitcher with his slingshot and her chastity has been impugned ever since.

Spirited acting highlights include Zazu Lein's "Prison Coach," directed by Sarah Albertson, in which a no-nonsense granny (Ali Eppy) and a tough ex-con (Scott Kravitz) conspire to get her feckless grandson to face the consequences of his white-collar crime. Ditto the cast of Susan Forrest and Karen Schamberg's humorous "Be It Ever So Humble," directed by Wilma Marcus Chandler, where a trio of agoraphobic sisters speak entirely in clichés. Declan Brennan and Robinson are terrific as "idiot savant" twins with a plan in Brian Spencer's focused staging of William Baer's "Morons." And director Gail Borkowski brings cogent simplicity to her staging of Marlene Miller's domestic drama, "Just Say It" (nicely played by MarNae Taylor and Miguel Reyna).

This year's Double-Threat award goes to Ian McRae. He's very funny as Phineas P. Japester, a drill instructor in Dan Borengasser's "Clown Camp," directed with pizzazz by Marcus Cato; in his red nose, fright wig, and fatigues, Japester trains a platoon of raw recruits in the art of being a bozo. ("No irony!" he warns them. "No satire! No bons mots!")

McRae also scores as the author of "Dudes Like Us," a funny, wistful, wholly engaging meditation on surfing, aging, life, and even language as a couple of veteran surf buddies (the wonderful Steven Capasso and Rick Kuhn) try out paddleboards. Bill Peters' inventive staging places the actors on pedestals, painted to suggest boards, on an empty stage. It works beautifully (right down to the water they occasionally splash over their heads).

Finally, Seth Freeman's "Imperfectly Frank" serves up delicious acting from Karin Babbitt and David Guzman as a pair of Old World Indian parents in San Francisco, thrilled that gay marriage laws have expanded the opportunities for arranged matches, and eager to marry off their son, Frank (Adrian Torres) to a rich boy—even though Frank is not actually gay. ("But darling, you will learn!" trills his mom.) Torres also directs this crowd-pleasing closer to a bountiful festival.

The 8 Tens @ Eight Festival plays through Jan. 27 at Center Stage Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. For tickets, visit brownpapertickets.com/event/303245.

The Best Of The Rest

8 Tens runners-up get their own four-day fest

Where do the new plays featured in Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre's annual 8 Tens @ Eight Festival come from? According to Artistic Director Wilma Marcus Chandler, entries come from all over California and from

as far away as London, Australia and Korea, in response to an open call for 10-minute plays posted in Poet's and Writer's Magazine, American Theater Magazine, and other national publications. This year's festival plays were culled from some 130 submissions.

A panel of seven local readers, well-versed in the Santa Cruz theater scene, select 16 finalists in a blind judging process. Working from a list of about 50 local directors that she uses in rotation, Chandler selects eight festival directors and asks each one to pick the play he or she wants to direct. These are the ones produced in the 8 Tens festival.

But what happens to the runners-up? The remaining eight plays are honored as well, in the four-day Best Of The Rest mini-festival. The plays are cast and staged just like for 8 Tens, except that the actors hold and read from their scripts. This year's Best Of The Rest Festival runs for four performances only, Jan. 31 through Feb. 3.

Actor and director Scott Kravitz, who is also Artistic Director of the Best Of The Rest Festival, says the relationship between the two programs is the "theatrical equivalent to the White Album debate. If the Beatles' White Album was pared down to be one record instead of two, which songs would you leave off? The Best Of The Rest is basically like the outtakes bootleg."

Two plays from Santa Cruz ("Miss Wesson Oil" by Ariana Moxie, and "Maybe Later" by Paula Alder), five from the Bay Area, and one from Connecticut are featured in the festival. Let the revels continue!



The Best of the Rest Festival plays Jan. 31-Feb. 3 at Center Stage Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. For tickets, visit brownpapertickets.com/event/312477.

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