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CATEGORY ARCHIVES: THEATER REVIEWS

8 Tens @ 8

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By Philip Pearce

ACTORS' THEATRE'S 8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival is an annual crowd-pleaser at Center Stage, Santa Cruz. Now that *8 Tens* has doubled its output to 16 plays over two successive nights, labeled A and B, the festival seems, among other benefits, to be inviting some new fans to crowd in beside those of us who annually check in to watch fresh stage material from writers all over the USA.

This year's Night A opened the festival last Friday with an emphasis on comedies, themes ranging from the bumpy road to romantic love, to inter-generational conflict, to the joys of getting even with that guy or gal who's done you dirt.

It started with Greg Atkins' provocative romantic science fiction farce *Tempus Fugit*. Is there anyone out there who hasn't looked regretfully back at one or more youthful blunders and thought, "If only I had known *then* what I know *now*?" So a futuristic charmer named Cynthia, living in the year 2039, time-travels back twenty years to warn an amiable bachelor named Gary against the disastrous blunder of proposing to—you guessed it—the feckless and promiscuous girl our Cynthia used to be back in 2019.

But the future Cynthia's warnings keep halting while she hides whenever the present day Cynthia shows up at Gary's place. Best plotted of all the "A" scripts, *Tempus Fugit* takes on the frantic pace of a French farce as director Cathy Warner connives brilliantly with the three-member cast and an uncredited costume designer to work lightning-quick costume and hairdo changes as the two Cynthias (both played by the energetic and enchanting Alie Mac) narrowly avoid meeting one another. Nat Robinson is pure gold as the hopeful but beleaguered Gary and Solange Marcotte deserves a medal for briefly doubling with her face conveniently and logically covered at moments when both Cynthias are on stage at once. Sound like fun? It is. And kind of a pity that this opening number turns out to be the best item in the whole A Night program.

Geriatric romance gets a once-over in Rod McFadden's aptly named *The Dating Game*. Seventy-something widow Marge (Helene SimkinJara) offers some pretty good jokes about the tortures of granny-aged online dating and Sheryl Loomis is sprightly and helpful as an old schoolmate named Nettie who urges Marge not to give up her extended cyber search for Mister Right. The acting is fine, the outcome happy, but blandly predictable.

Things are more romantically acid and barbed as the busy Nat Robinson returns in Act 2 as an office worker named Simon in Richard Lyons Conlon's *Jackson*, so called because that's whose image appears on the twenty-dollar bill Simon's fellow office worker Pauline finds missing from her desk top when she returns from the ladies' room. Jocelyn McMahon's feisty Pauline shouts and spars with energetic skill and seems to win in her efforts to pin the theft on a guy she has dumped after a brief office romance. But closing moments suggest she may not, after all, have actually won their Tracy-Hepburn battle of the sexes. It's a lively and well-acted romp.

Steven Capasso's *Gossip Queens* is also about getting even. Three East Coast Mafia widows study fellow mourners at a funeral, pick out some people who have done them wrong and discuss payback. Joyce Michaelson, Hannah Eckstein and Rachel Newman have a lot of fun exercising their New Joisey dialect skills as the three mature, fast talking molls.

William J Royce's *Morning in America* got the biggest opening night laugh when retiree Charley (the artful Marcus Cato) opened the play by confronting his daughter Gayle (Alie Mac again) with the anguished question, "Is *he* still president?" Nobody in cast, script or audience needed to ask who Charley was referring to. John Chandler's *Jello Salad* is also about parent-child conflict as Gino Danna, Solange Marcotte and Sheryl Loomis work hard to inject life into a script about a black sheep uncle's efforts to help his teen-aged niece rebel against their hidebound family. It's a hopeful idea but the characters, as written, lack either the charm or the chutzpa that would make us care much about their struggles.

Heaps better as a tale of child-parent conflict, *Frodo Lives* by Elizabeth Flanagan opens with the arresting central image of a full-scale flush toilet over which Claudia (Nicolette Nasr) and son Sam (talented newcomer Tristan Ahn) cover a lot of interesting inter-generational territory as they argue the best social, religious and ecological way of flushing Sam's late lamented goldfish Frodo down the cistern. Kind of a shame the title gives away the surprise ending!

The evening closes with *The Birthday Gift*, (above photo) a diverting family comedy in which married couple W Scott Whisler and Joyce Michaelson celebrate daughter Jocelyn McMahon's 21st birthday by presenting her with the keys to a truck big enough to pack all her stuff in and the news that an architect friend is converting the family home into a collapsible mini-house suitable for the two of them to take on extended up-market European tours, or use for yoga retreats or a newly liberated sex life carried on without inhibitions or underwear.

The 2019 selection of A-Night plays is well acted, astutely directed, tastefully mounted and generally entertaining. But I missed the focus and realism that have marked some previous years' selections as meaningful enough to be worth a second visit.