



Lookout Santa Cruz

## '8 Tens' Review: Beloved Santa Cruz 10-Minute Play Festival Returns to Actors' Theatre

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### Quick Take

After going dark in 2021 and '22, a local touchstone returns with the "8 Tens @ 8," two separate programs of eight short plays that present the finest of Santa Cruz's theater community.



Tom Arns (left) is Abraham and Andrew Yabroff is his son Isaac in John Bavoso's "An Awkward Conversation in the Shadow of Mt. Moriah," one of 16 plays in two programs at "8 Tens @ 8." (Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

Even at a swank tapas bar or enjoying dim sum on a Sunday morning, let's be real: 16 servings is a lot to digest. But last weekend, when I encountered the local theater tasting menu known as "8 Tens @ 8," I bellied up to the bar and announced to the bartender, figuratively of course, "I'll have one of everything."

That's right, 16 plays served up in two "meals" on a Saturday at the cozy Actors' Theatre in downtown Santa Cruz. "8 Tens @ 8" is believed to be the oldest ongoing short-play festival in the country — it's now in its 28th year, though the pandemic scotched it the past two years. It's become such a Santa Cruz touchstone that it's outgrown its title. Yes, a ticket gets you eight 10-minute plays in one sitting. But there are now two separate programs. If my second grade math still holds, that's 16 unique bite-sized scenarios and vignettes, none related to any other.

I'm not too interested in determining which program is better, Part 1 or Part 2. They aren't divided in any specific way — A Team or B Team, comedies or dramas, chicken or fish. Pick one. Then check out the other later. Having two programs in an intimate 89-seat theater creates a kind of hot-ticket buzz. As local theater audiences, our job is to find a way to see both programs. The festival goes through Feb. 19, so there is plenty of time to do it.

As for the content, the plays seem to be getting sharper and funnier each year. The 10-minute play is its own animal. In the early years of the festival, some of the plays

seemed a bit like a formless blast of on-stage drama that ended whenever the egg-timer buzzed. Now, writers have been working in this genre long enough — and Santa Cruz has gained such a reputation among those writers — that the festival can present 16 plays with no real weak links. They all seem to be built with a beginning, middle and end in mind. They all keep it simple, and all find a way to introduce character and dramatic tension quickly and efficiently.

In this year's mix, most are comedies, or at least amusing little dances with irony. But not all. One of the finest might be Donald Loftus' "Eddie & Edna" (Part 2), which touches on grief, memory, and the dimming light of growing older. Most of the on-stage encounters are between people in extraordinary or bizarre circumstances, but it's not just people. Among the players are a wizened old oak tree, a naughty dog and the bot we all know as Amazon's Alexa — in Ian Patrick Williams' "Slave Trade" (P2), Alexa has had it with her hectoring "master" and decides to switch the power dynamics.



Evandra Aurelia (left) and Lyndsey Marks star in Lindsey Brown's "Unreasonable Situations" in "8 Tens @ 8." (Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

If you've been around the local theater scene for a while, you'll certainly recognize many of the actors. People like Scott Kravitz, Helene Simkin Jara, Steven Capasso and Avondina Wills are familiar faces, and always deliver the goods. Everyone is terrific, but there are standouts. Andrew Yabroff plays a son in two different vignettes in Part 2, and makes comedy gold out of exasperation with a daffy mom and later an untrustworthy dad (who happens to be the famous Hebrew patriarch Abraham). Manirose Bobisuthi (P1) brings real power as a troubled young woman trapped in her unconscious mind.

If there were any of these mini-plays I would have liked to see expanded, it's probably Kevin Broccoli's "Father Michael's Doing Mass" (P1), which isn't much more than a couple of women (Karin Babbitt, Karen Schamberg) sitting in a church pew gossiping. But the chemistry and the dishy back-and-forth between them was delicious. I could have watched these two for an hour.

The subject of the Catholic Church looms large in this year's festival, which also includes Death coming for an unsuspecting young man while he's in church, and what

might be the season's standout play, Stephen Cooper's "Confessions à Deux" (P1), a brilliantly comic little morality dance that involves two priests, each charged with hearing the other's confessions. Actors Ward Willats and Tristan Ahn provide amusingly contrasting personalities in the roles, and if any of these plays might be developed into a sitcom, it's this one.

The program lists 27 actors in the festival — though one is a turtle and, no, I'm not making that up. Each play has its own director (a roster that itself reads like an all-star team of local theatrical talent). Add on the hard-working crew that has to strike and create a new stage set in the dark in front of an impatient audience, plus the 15 writers (one playwright, Stephen Cooper, landed two plays in the festival), and you have nearly as many people to present the festival as it takes to fill up the house. All that person-power makes "8 Tens" a celebration of a community more than anything else. There is no space for divas or stars here. It's more an orchestra than a rock band. But it's heartening to see local theater pros playing at the top of their game to meet the quality of the material, which, after all, is drawn from all across the country.

"8 Tens" is democratic in that way. It's the kind of event where everybody has to play more-or-less equal roles to make it happen. By the way, that includes you and me, the audience. We're there to fill the house. And, like many of the actors and directors in this festival who are juggling double roles, we're doing our best when we hit the mark not just once, but twice. Don't make "8 Tens" a sampler plate. Try the whole menu.

*"8 Tens @ 8" plays at the Actors' Theatre in the Art Center, 1001 Center St. Santa Cruz. [The festival](#) runs Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m., with Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2 p.m., through Feb. 19. Tickets are \$32 general; \$29 seniors and students; \$58 and \$54 for both programs.*

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