



PHOTO BY JANA MARCUS

Clifford Henderson's 'Salt and Pepper' was part of the 2016 '8 Tens @ 8' festival.

New year, new moods

'8 Tens @ 8' play festival reaches out for tenderness and connection

By Wallace Baine

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If you're the kind of person prone to reading societal narratives into the selections of the annual "8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival," then obviously we are all in a yearning and contemplative mood as 2017 dawns.

Actors' Theatre again presents 16 plays, each 10 minutes long, in two separate programs at "8 Tens @ 8," opening Friday and running through Feb. 6.

"Every year, we get a theme," said the festival's artistic director Wilma Marcus Chandler, "a flood of plays about this, that or the other thing. (This year), the plays are so serious and tender. I think people are longing for some kind of kindness and connection, some meaningful relationships with each other."

The festival has long been known for its deft blend of sweet and salty, the poignant standing shoulder to shoulder with the comic. And though this year's festival includes plenty of moments of comic relief, Chandler said the dominant theme is one of tenderness.

Four of the 16 selected plays for this year's festival come via Santa Cruz County writers – Brian Spencer, Claudia Sternbach, Kathryn Chetkovich and Janis Hashe. And, just in those instances, the theme holds firm.

For instance, Spencer's offering, "Shakespeare's Boy" (directed by Andrew Ceglio) is about the first production of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet," in an era in which all roles were played by male actors. "It's about the longing the actor playing Romeo

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'8 TENS @ 8' 10-MINUTE PLAY FESTIVAL

When: Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. with Saturday and Sunday matinees at 3 p.m.

Where: Center Stage Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz.

Tickets: \$25 general; \$22 seniors/students; \$40 two-night package.

Details: www.sccat.org.

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has for the Juliet character and how what he wants can never happen, because Juliet is being played by a straight boy who is only playing the part because he loves acting. But still the longing remains.”

Sternbach’s “Iron Man” (directed by Susan Forrest) is a touching play about a woman who has lived her entire life in an iron lung and the man who attends to her. Hashe offers up “No Telling” (directed by Chandler), a play on meditation, which touches on the mind’s longing for serenity.

And playwright Chetkovich comes in with “The Transaction” (directed by Nat Robinson), a character study about a deal involving a kidney dona-

tion in which the donor is more interested in receiving gratitude than money for his kidney.

Other plays in the theme include Portland playwright Jody McColman’s “God Speed, Apollo,” about a father and a daughter facing the evaporation of the girl’s childhood against the backdrop of the final Apollo moon landing.

“I’m really moved this year that so many of these plays have a kind of longing for connection,” said Chandler.

Yet, there is comedy too. Richard Chin’s “True” (directed by Anita Natale) ponders the role that sex robots can play in the lives of long-time married couples. “Cooley’s Reel” by Madeline Puccioni (directed by Gerry Gerringer) posits a man who wakes up one day to find that he is now a woman.

The plays are divided into two nights, the “A Night” and the “B Night,” each one with a different selection of plays, which means to see the entire run of 16 plays requires two tickets on two different dates.

The festival has expanded to include 16 plays in part because of the consistent rise in quality of the plays submitted from all over the country and several parts of the world. The plays are chosen blindly (without the author’s name attached) by a panel of judges.

“The concept of the 10-minute play has really flowered,” said Chandler. “It isn’t so much just skits anymore. At one time, years ago, the plays were skits. Now they are fully formed plays with messages and statements and vistas into other worlds.



PHOTO BY JANA MARCUS

Brian Spencer’s ‘Tis a Tale’ was presented at last year’s ‘8 Tens @ 8’ festival.

These plays have a beginning, a middle and a climactic moment, in which we travel the story, as opposed to getting a little elbow in the ribs.”