

ABC

Santa Cruz Theater Scene Pays Tribute to Bonnie Ronzio

Ronzio died of cancer three days short of her 70th birthday

BONNIE RONZIO WAS THE ULTIMATE BEHIND-THE-SCENES PLAYER OF ACTORS' THEATRE AND THE 8 TENS @ 8 PLAY FESTIVAL. PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

BY WALLACE BAINE

POSTED ON MAY 28, 2020

SHARE TWEET COMMENTS

Savvy audiences know that when it comes to theater productions, what they see the actors doing on stage is only made possible by the work of many others off-stage—the proverbial tip of the iceberg.

When it comes to the Santa Cruz theater scene, in hundreds of productions over several decades, Bonnie Ronzio was the rest of the iceberg.

Ronzio died of cancer on May 22, just three days short of her 70th birthday. She was indispensable at Actors' Theatre and the *8 Tens @ 8* play festival—a well-regarded director, a tireless producer, a smart technician, and a stage-managing genius.

“You just knew when you were directing a show and Bonnie was backstage, your actors were going to be happy,” says longtime friend and theater director Clifford Henderson. “I can't say enough about how organized she was. And she just had a language with actors that made them feel good about themselves.”

She was the ultimate behind-the-scenes player. From lighting and sound to logistics to finances, to scripts to managing actors and writers, Ronzio did everything short of sweeping the floors ... and she probably did a lot of that as well.

For the past two decades-plus, Ronzio was part of a dynamic duo in producing and presenting the *8 Tens @ 8* 10-minute play festival, along with the festival's artistic director Wilma Marcus Chandler. Ronzio and Chandler were both ambitious, strong-willed personalities who found just the right basis on which to create a successful collaboration.

“When two strong people come together and compromise, it just gets better, and they were two amazing collaborators,” says longtime friend and theater director Clifford Henderson.

“I personally feel like I've lost a part of myself,” says Chandler, founder of *8 Tens*. “I'm very grateful for her knowledge and the strength she gave me to continue working. Sometimes when it was very difficult, when we went through hard times with the theater, she always had the backbone and the strength and the wisdom and the vision to keep going and say, ‘No, we're going to do this, and this is how we're going to do it.’”

Ronzio was a native New Englander, having grown up in Rhode Island. Her father, Frank Ronzio, was a long-time stage and movie actor whose credits include 1979's *Escape from Alcatraz*.

Bonnie Ronzio came to Santa Cruz in the early 1970s. Though she had grown up listening to actors rehearsing lines in her childhood home, she didn't become part of the Santa Cruz theater scene until the mid 1980s. Clifford Henderson had written a stage musical called *Big Fish Eat Little Fish*, and was looking for someone to serve as stage manager.

“She was hysterically funny,” says Henderson. “But we almost had to drag her on stage. I think she really enjoyed it, but she didn't continue (performing) ... I tried to get her to get back to it later, but that was it. She was done.”

She moved on to directing and directed, among others, the prominent Santa Cruz-based playwright Philip Slater. She also served on the board of Actors' Theatre and became more involved in the unglamorous side of producing theater.

When Chandler decided to go ahead with a 10-minute play festival in the 1990s, one of the biggest challenges was the logistics of staging eight short plays—with eight casts and eight separate stage designs—all in one evening. There was no one other than Ronzio to call.

Over the years, with a small crew, Ronzio honed the delicate dance of presenting eight plays back-to-back until she had developed it into an art form in itself, as anyone who has watched the quick set changes between the plays in the festival can confirm.

“We have [perfected the wheel](#),” Ronzio told me last December when *8 Tens* presented its 25th anniversary season. “To be honest, things have gotten easier. I'm using the same tech people, the same designers.”

Still, Ronzio's greatest achievement may have been as a director. In 2017, she directed a solo show written and performed by Santa Cruz actor Steve Capasso. He and Ronzio shared an East Coast upbringing and, he says, a certain no-nonsense East Coast style of relating.

“One of the first things she told me when she was directing my play,” says Capasso, “she would stop and say, ‘Why are you saying that line? Because if you can't give me a good enough reason why that line belongs in the play, guess what, it's outta here.’”

Capasso says his relationship with Ronzio deepened with their work together as actor and director. He remembered Ronzio on a couple of occasions kissing his cheek, then telling him some uncomfortable truths.

“I really felt she loved me as a person,” he says, “and respected my work as an actor. She didn't always say that I did a good job. Sometimes it was, ‘I don't know what you're talking about here.’ But that's the honesty with her. She's not going to blow smoke up your ass. Sometimes I thought, ‘I must be doing a good job because Bonnie is not ripping me a new one right now.’”

Actor and writer Spike Wong had a similar relationship with Ronzio. When Wong's autobiographical play *Dragon Skin* was chosen to be performed in San Francisco in 2018, Ronzio became his director. Wong says that Ronzio had high standards for excellence and wasn't afraid to push her collaborators to meet those standards.

“Her communication was always right on,” he says, “all designed to polish the piece and bring things out of me that still needed to be said, without any sort of fear or threatening behavior on her part.”

On one level, say those who knew her best, Ronzio was an intensely private person. Many of those who knew her did not know she was sick until close to her death.

“I don't think I ever got to really know her,” says Capasso, despite a close working relationship with her. “But what I did get to know I loved and respected.”

Chandler says that Actors' Theatre and *8 Tens* will continue without her. “We are totally carrying on with her vision to present great theater into the future.”

Still, she says, the idea of continuing without Ronzio is daunting. “I miss, and I will continue to miss, her skills in juggling so many things at one time, the inner workings of the building, the structure of the plays, the creating of a whole season, the finances, always having the big picture in mind, dealing with actors backstage. I feel as if I'm going to have to work very hard to live up to what she created.”

Listen to the author's discussion with Wilma Marcus Chandler about Bonnie Ronzio:



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RELATED POSTS



WALLACE BAINE

Staff Writer at Good Times | Blog

Wallace Baine has been an arts writer, film critic, columnist and editor in Santa Cruz for more than 25 years. He is the author of “A Light in the Midst of Darkness,” a cultural history of the independent bookseller Bookshop Santa Cruz, as well as the book “Rhymes with Vain: Belabored Humor and Attempted Profundity,” and the story collection “The Last Temptation of Lincoln.” He is a staff writer for Good Times, Metro Silicon Valley and San Benito/South Valley magazine.