

The 8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival Returns

The 'longest running short play festival in the world' is back and better than ever

By Christina Wise

September 22, 2022

Community theater is essential no matter where you live. Lucky us to live in a town with a wide array of theatrical presentations. The high quality of our intimate local theater, perhaps best embodied in the **Actors' Theatre of Santa Cruz**—formerly known as the “little theater”—reminds us that live theater is something we shouldn't take for granted. It's a necessary boost to the culture of our community and more.

Actors Theatre's signature presentation of eight short plays in a single sitting is one of the best examples of the power of live theater to flip our scripts into new awareness, unexpected emotions, and rich expansions of outlook.

After a two-year hiatus, during which we all retreated to Zoom, the **8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival: The Reboot** is welcome.

A full house greeted the reboot (live, slightly reorganized version of last year's streaming), which opened last week in the intimate (tiny) theater in downtown Santa Cruz. After two years of waiting, there were actual live actors on that live stage performing for a live audience. I always look forward to these little morsels of live magic; whether they enlighten or entertain, they never bore.

Opening with a darkly funny long-distance phone conversation between an estranged mother and daughter, ***Are You One of Those Robots?*** by **Dierdre Gerard** began with an all-too-familiar situation. One person's need to speak to a human being is frustrated repeatedly by what sounds like a robotic menu of choices



Sarah Kauffman Michael and Matt Clarke charm in the semi-sweet little sitcom-like 'The Coriolus Effect.'

on the other end. Skillfully directed by **Gail Borkowski**, this opening piece delighted the audience with the smooth and utterly convincing acting of **Kristen Brownstone** and **Alyssa Woodbury**. The following work, ***Me and Him***, was my favorite, directed with a light touch by **Suzanne Schrag** and featuring an utterly confident **Miguel Reyna** as the sole character, a funeral director with a smooth “bedside” manner. The writing was clever, each turn in the fascinating monologue of mordant revelations a wicked surprise. Reyna took the audience by the hand and walked us down a mortician’s garden path. Terrific pacing and economy of gestures—this was a treasury of art imitating life, including the afterlife.

Among the most successful of the current 8 Tens crop was a skillful two-hander, ***Old Aquatics***, that showed off the acrobatic acting abilities of **Sarah Kauffman Michael** as a woman who’d over-imbibed on New Year’s Eve. Michael, who also charmed the audience in the semi-sweet little sitcom-like ***The Coriolus Effect***, was a master gymnast and seamless embodiment of inebriation. Her solid stage partner was **Scott Kravitz** as the cabbie who comes to fetch what he thinks is one more partier in need of a ride home. Excellent direction by **Gerry Geringer**, who knew exactly how to coax a slow, steady build-up from his actors. Clever writing, too—a sheer delight.

Special mention goes to ***Slow Dancing*** by **Adam Szudrich**, a one-person vehicle giving beautiful, fearless **Lillian Bogovich** time to capture our hearts with her dynamic memory of a romantic evening, smartly directed by **Buff McKinley**. And there were other short plays—less completely realized—that gave the opening night crowd a chance to be engaged, bewildered, uncomfortable, disarmed, and puzzled—but never bored. The overall results of these theatrical nuggets ranged from terrific to not-so-terrific. Discover your personal favorites.

Congratulations to the **8 Tens @ 8** production team, who seem to work miraculous scene changes and spot-on placement of all the properties *and* actors, entirely in the darkened stage between plays. Kudos to **Davis Banta** (Sound Design), **Carina Swanberg** (Light Design) and **Cheryl Wong** (Properties Manager.)

8 Tens @ 8: The Reboot runs Fridays and Saturdays at 8pm and Sundays at 2pm through Sunday, Oct. 2. Actors’ Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. \$38; \$35/seniors and students. santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets.