



8 Tens @ 8

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By Philip Pearce

FORTY MINUTES before opening night curtain time of the latest 8 Tens @ 8 festival, a line of patrons already stretched halfway into the surrounding complex of Santa Cruz artist studios. They weren't queuing for tickets, they already had them. Hugging and kissing, nursing bouquets and programs, they were waiting to nab the best open seating for another crowd-pleasing look at winning scripts from Actors' Theatre's nationwide 10-minute play writing contest.

Since its inception in 1985, it's become such a sold-out event, that the festival may still call itself "8 Tens@ 8," but it's now 16 tens performed in repertory on two evenings, eight on "Night A," eight others on "Night B." Having cravenly hived off to London and entirely missed last year's "B" evening, I promised myself I'd cover the entire field this year and it was a rewarding experience.

Whatever their other virtues or shortcomings, fifteen of the winning plays stick to a single incident and avoid the tyro writer's trap of trying to cram an hour's worth of plot into ten minutes worth of playing time. The nonconforming sixteenth script, which covers a lifetime, turns out to be the exception that proves the rule and emerges as one of the high points of "B."

This year offers more than the usual number of social problem plays—stories Warner Brothers would have told you generations ago were "ripped from today's headlines." "A" starts off with pedophilia, though it only pops up as an unjustified charge in the closing moments of Eileen Valentino Flaxman's loosely structured but winning "Esther Williams Explained." A bright and inquisitive pre-teen schoolgirl (Olivia Gillanders) meets an ingratiating 60-something African American man named Casper (JJ Porter) when she unwittingly wanders into the railroad crossing guardhouse he has occupied since he retired from gainful employment on the rail company's rolling stock. His erudite and goofy exchanges with the girl are heaps more interesting than the lame, unresolved suspicions her father voices when he bursts in just before the play ends.

Domestic violence lurks in the background of Jeffrey Strausser's "Homecoming," ("A"). A young mother named Celeste (Kye Solomon) begs late-night sanctuary in the house of a neighboring couple after she and her infant child suffer violence from her angry husband. But the neighbors who reluctantly let her in turn out to be a raging and terrified control freak named Walter (Tom Arns) and his seemingly demented wife Nora (Hannah Eckstein). The acting and Gail Borkowski's direction are a tad too frantic and unfocused, but the girl's interactions with the troubled couple and the secrets that everyone harbors make this a more convincing effort than the preachy ideological debates of the other "social problem" offerings.

In Paul Donnelly's "The New Client" ("B"), Margaret, a married lesbian (Alie Mac), is appalled when her lawyer spouse Lee-Ann (Jennifer Galvin) insists on taking on the legal defense of a homophobic couple whose bakery has refused to supply a birthday cake to the child of another lesbian couple. Lee-Ann's arguments and Margaret's explosive protests cover the relevant issues well enough, but the two women are more like embodied concepts than rounded characters.

It's much the same with Joe Starzyk's "After the Darkness," in spite of a powerful and terrifying performance by Donald Grube as a psychopathic murderer and the touching clarity of Andrea Konrad's decision to free herself by forgiving him for the brutal murder of her son. Skillful enough in its organization of the moral and theological issues, the play is more of a well-crafted parable than a fully convincing character study.

Climate change has gone viral in the futurist dystopia inhabited by the two characters in Hannah Vaughn's "M & The Water Man." He (Michael LaMere) makes what he says is his last delivery of bottled water to a lady named M (Joyce Michaelson) and spends ten minutes urging her to flee her desert home before she either freezes or burns to death. Her arguments for staying put seem farfetched and, despite a lot of shouts and kissing, it's just a repetitive he-says-she-says debate till M sensibly gives in and packs her bag.

Though 8 Tens 2018 leans heavily on these current social issues, the overall standards of performance and writing seem more in sync with the other contrasting comedy and character pieces.

A common theme of that group is strong-minded females sharing explicit, down-and-dirty conversations about the mechanics, equipment and permutations of sexual intercourse. It sometimes happens in an atmosphere of nostalgic horseplay and sentimentality, as in "Pink Roses and Apple Pie" by Lindsey Esplin, and sometimes with a frisky and Trump-like focus on the size of genitalia in Paola Bruni's "Michelangelo's Jesus," both plays offered on Night "B."

The sex comedy hit with most of the opening night audience was clearly "Phone Sets," by Karen Schamberg and Wilma Chandler. The versatile Joyce Michaelson and the equally versatile Hannah Eckstein get some raucous fun out of a pair of aging nuns who decide to collect cash for their sisterly retirement home by turning themselves into practitioners of phone sex.

Not about sex, considerably quieter and a lot wittier are Mark Nutter's "The Anonymous Donor" ("A"), which takes an ironic poke at self-seeking home-grown philanthropy, and Dennis Porter's wry and pointed "Lost and Found" which attacks the question of What is Art—and What Maybe Isn't.

My personal comedy favorite was an Evening "A" play by Steven Capasso, who also plays a convincing homeless man in "The Anonymous Donor." In "While Waiting for The Plane," two gifted young performers, Ben Fletcher and Sarah Kauffman, take on the roles of three successive, highly contrasting pairs of delayed airline passengers with a comic timing and precision that is as slick as anything that happens at this year's festival.

But then there are almost equally fine comic moments from the ebullient and witty Lillian Bogovich and the marvelously stolid Marcus Cato playing two mismatched members of a volunteer highway cleanup team in Irene Ziegler's "High Grass" ("B"). It's a delightful play about getting rid of junk. Early laughter at the odd couple's diametrically opposed approaches to highway hygiene gives way into a beautifully written, truthfully acted coda of pathos as Cato and Bogovich face up to who they really are by looking at significant pieces of personal property each has owned and had to discard.

Two other gems are "Sky Trail, Wilder," by Allston Kyle, and "Dragon Skin" by Steve "Spike" Wong, ("B"). James's script pairs a couple of men for a change. Blaine (Kip Allert) has persuaded Cullen (Dave Halper), the brother of Blaine's ex-girlfriend, to join him on a remote country trail to bury the body of Blaine's dog Fedora. Blaine's loss of a girl he still loves deeply links up, through his knowledge of Scandinavian burial customs, with keepsakes and souvenirs he inters along with the body of the lamented Fedora. The elements of Nordic folklore, personal loss and the need of some form of a living faith in something or anything are skillfully scripted by James, ably acted by Allert and Halper and sensitively directed by Bill Peters.

Wong has not only written but enacts the lone role in the one production that breaks the single incident rule of a good ten-minute play. And yet the play triumphs both visually and thematically. Clearly autobiographical, "Dragon Skin" is an extended monologue by a California-born Chinese named Steve. Using a costume trunk and a table set with Chinese calligraphy gear, Wong eloquently traces the pictorial shifts and starts of Steve's early struggles to become as American as he can make himself. Only in middle age does he finally make a first voyage across the Pacific to his family's homeland. There he meets the spirit of his long-departed grandfather and attains human wholeness, reality and stature by learning not just to accept but to rejoice in being Chinese. The closing moments of his triumphant epiphany, surrounded by the beat of Asian drums and a Center Stage framed in scarlet Asian banners are the most dramatic and visually beautiful of the 2018 Festival.

It continues through February 4th.