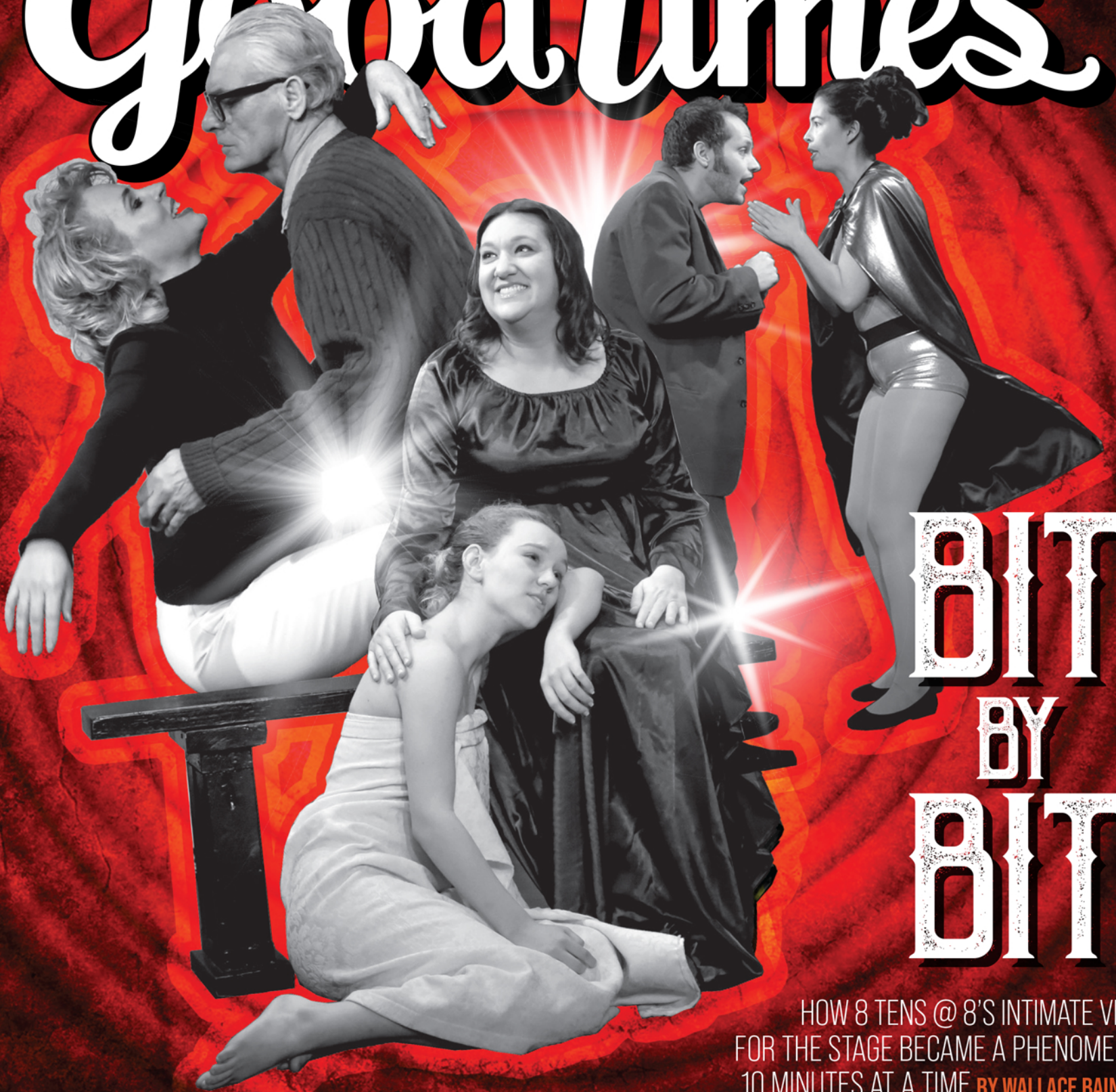


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GoodTimes



BIT BY BIT

HOW 8 TENS @ 8'S INTIMATE VISION
FOR THE STAGE BECAME A PHENOMENON,
10 MINUTES AT A TIME **BY WALLACE BAINE P20**



The Long and Short of It

How the pioneering '8 Tens @ 8'—which is celebrating its 25th year as it starts a new season this week—became America's longest-running 10-minute theater festival

BY WALLACE BAINE

TIME KEEPERS *The founder and artistic director of 8 Tens @ 8, Wilma Marcus Chandler (right), with longtime 8 Tens producer Bonnie Ronzio. PHOTO: JANA MARCUS*

In the winter of 2015, I sat in a darkened theater in Santa Cruz between my wife and daughter and had what was, in retrospect, one of the peak experiences of my life. I had written a short play about the death of Oscar Wilde (it was actually a comedy), and now I was watching actors with appropriate sets and costumes in front of a paying audience bring to life the product of my imagination.

I am not a playwright. This was the first and only time I had done something like that. But it was, I don't mind saying, a heady and intoxicating moment.

People laughed, sending a jolt of dopamine through my system. In my seat, I was keeping my cool. But inside, I felt like Gene Wilder in *Young Frankenstein*—hair flying, screaming into the thunderstorm, "Give my creation life!"

This month, local actor and writer Gail Borkowski will be slipping into the same shoes I tried on five years ago, at the same event, *8 Tens @ 8*. The acclaimed 10-minute play festival produced by Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre is now celebrating its 25th year as it opens a five-week run Jan. 10 at Center Stage theater.

A week before opening night, Borkowski, a first-time playwright, is breathless in anticipation.

"I'm trying hard not to think about it too much," she says. "It's going to be so exciting." Her play, titled *Waking Up*, is about a married couple who go to bed as white people and wake up black. Their maid has the same experience, only in reverse.

She wrote the play in an afternoon a couple of years ago after overhearing someone commenting about a "white man in a black man's body." The play asks its actors—and, by extension, audiences—to engage with the idea of skin color beyond the obvious gags.

"There's some humor in it, certainly," said Borkowski, who herself is African-American. "But the challenge for the actor is, really, can you put yourself in someone else's skin, to take what you think you know about that, and what you feel, and really be present in it, be awed by it, even be afraid of it?"

That's a lot to ask for in just 10 minutes, but that's exactly the point of *8 Tens*, and the other short-play festivals that have sprouted up around the world. In fact, we are living in the golden age of the 10-minute play, with festivals taking place across the country and in far-flung sites like Australia, South Korea and Great Britain.

But at 25, Santa Cruz's festival may rank as the grandmother of them all. It wasn't the first of its kind; founder and artistic director Wilma Marcus Chandler got the idea back in the mid-1990s from a similar festival in Louisville, Kentucky, which is now defunct. So, it appears, *8 Tens* is the longest-running 10-minute play festival in America.

22>



TENS THEN The first 8 Tens @ 8 crew in 1995.

< 21

Personnel-wise, the 25th anniversary season could rival a production of *Les Misérables*. Counting the actors, playwrights, directors and crew, there are about 85 people involved in staging the festival. At the top of the pyramid is artistic director Chandler and the show's longtime producer Bonnie Ronzio, who is in charge of making sure that eight separate plays—with eight separate sets and casts—coheres into something other than chaos. (The changing of the sets between each 10-minute play is part of the show. The switchover takes places in full lighting for the audience's benefit and is crisply choreographed to last no more than one minute.)

Chandler was already a longtime theater faculty member at Cabrillo College when she first flashed on the 10-minute play format as an excellent exercise for the students in her stage-directing class, after

which she founded the festival. Ronzio was the stage manager at the very first 8 Tens, before anyone had established a routine for the logistics of presenting such a show. She kept a steady hand on the festival even when Chandler stepped away as artistic director for a few years (Novelist Clifford Henderson and playwright Brian Spencer have also both served as the festival's artistic director).

After 25 years, says Ronzio, "we have perfected the wheel. Everything falls together. I know exactly what my budget is going to be every year. I know where I can rob Peter to pay Paul. And we are so blessed to pay everyone who works on the show."

As practiced by 8 Tens and its many imitators, the 10-minute play marks a radical democratization of live theater. Getting a full-length play produced by an established theater company, especially for a

< 22

first-time or unknown playwright, is a heavy lift. For most, it's little more than an unattainable dream. Getting a job as a director in such a production, or even to get cast as an actor, is a long shot, too. Festivals like 8 Tens give many aspiring theater professionals opportunities they simply wouldn't have otherwise.

The festival's name is a bit misleading. In fact, 8 Tens is actually offering up 16 distinct 10-minute plays in two separate programs, giving audiences a chance to double-dip over the course of its five-weekend run. In all, 8 Tens has presented roughly 250 short plays or staged readings to Santa Cruz audiences, offerings a rare opportunity every year for playwrights, directors and actors.

A GOOD 10 MINUTES

My experience as a playwright was a one-off. I had a great time, and then I moved on. But getting produced at 8 Tens can also serve as a springboard to bigger things. For example, Mike McGeever was an accountant from Chicago with a master's degree in computer science and exactly zero experience in theater when he submitted his 10-minute play *Frameworks* to Santa Cruz. His positive experiences at 8 Tens—he flew in from Chicago to see his play and work with director Bill Peters—inspired him to expand the play to full length, and to write a second full-length play that next fall will be produced by Freshwater Theater in Minneapolis.

McGeever's experience as a playwright in Santa Cruz opened his eyes to a new vocation. "My experience with Bill and Wilma really did help give me the confidence to push forward and keep writing," he says.

There are now playwrights across the country who regularly submit to 10-minute play festivals, and many consider Santa Cruz one of the plums on the circuit. Mary Caroline Rogers of Tucson, Arizona has had four plays produced at 8 Tens, dating back to 2011. Her play *The Memory of*

Us is part of this year's festival.

"I have a lot of respect for Wilma," says Rogers of the festival's artistic director. "She's not going to put anything on stage that is silly or meaningless. The material I've seen in Santa Cruz is always thought-provoking work, topical, life-affirming. You're not just sitting there. You get lost in the material. It's moving."

Seth Freeman is a veteran writer and producer whose career in Hollywood goes back 40 years. Among his prominent television credits is producer and lead writer for the 1970s newspaper drama *Lou Grant*. Freeman was a late convert to the 10-minute format.

"It's a very busy universe," he says, "which came as a complete shock to me when I first heard about it maybe 10 years ago. Frankly, my first thought was, 'Really? What a bad idea. Who wants to see that?'"

But Freeman moved quickly from skeptic to evangelist. Over the last decade, he has written scores of 10-minute plays, about 160 of which have been produced by festivals around the world. Freeman has two plays in this year's 8 Tens.

"Now that I've gotten into it and figured it out," he says, "what I like about [this format] is that my 10-minute plays are plays that should be 10 minutes long—not 35 minutes, not two hours."

Freeman usually makes the trip up from Los Angeles every time one of his plays is staged in Santa Cruz. "I really respect what they do at Actors' Theatre," he says. "They have good people. They put a lot into it. They're very professional. And that's not always the case [with other 10-minute festivals]."

Still, Freeman can't get into 8 Tens on the strength of his name and credits. The 8 Tens season begins with the judging of the more than 200 submissions by a panel of five writers. The plays are all judged blindly; i.e., without the author's name attached.

Ronzio and Chandler give simple instructions to the judges: Choose the best plays.



GIVING THREE W. Scott Whisler (left), Joyce Michaelson (center) and Jocelyn McMahon in *'The Birthday Gift,'* the standout closer from *'Night Q'* of last year's *8 Tens @ 8*. PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

< 24

"We tell them not to reject something just because you don't think we can build it," says Ronzio.

"If it's on a boat or an airplane," says Chandler, "don't worry about it. We can make that happen."

The judges don't factor in balance between dramas and comedies, or how shows fit together. "It's a literary contest," says Chandler. "If the best plays are 16 Greek tragedies, well, so be it."

Nor do they worry about plays that might offend audiences. Explicit language, political material, sexuality—it's all fair game. "We're not candy cane people," says Ronzio.

Chandler said that the festival has received scripts that she classifies as "porn." "We rejected them only because the writing was so poor," she says. "It's really all about the writing. I don't give a darn if the audience is upset. I want them to see that this is well-written and well-directed."

BACKSTAGE SECRETS

Once the 16 plays are chosen, Chandler begins the delicate dance of matching each play to a director. In many communities, finding 16 willing and qualified people to direct a play is a tough task. Not in Santa Cruz. "They're banging the doors down," says Chandler.

The decision to do two separate programs of eight plays each grew out of the tradition of doing a "Best of the Rest" evening of staged readings, featuring the best runner-up scripts. Soon, Ronzio ventured out to the next logical step.

"I decided, why not just do 16?" she says. "Everybody thought I was bonkers. But once I figured out the schedule, I knew we could do it. I sold it to the board and they went for it. Financially, it kicked us into a whole new bracket."

The make-up of the programs

and how the plays fit together are determined by just a couple of simple rules. "I always want to start each program with the most complicated play, set-wise," says Chandler. "And I always want to end the evening with something uplifting or funny. Those are really the only rules. In between, I try to balance who's in which play, figure out what the set shift is going to be, and make sure any actors doing two roles will be in plays before and after intermission."

Auditions for the roles begin in September, and the machinery for another *8 Tens* again grinds into gear. "Rehearsals start at the end of September," says Chandler, "and these actors are with it until February. I'm just so grateful to the talent base here and the willingness and loyalty they show, working in garages and living rooms, wherever they can find a space."

MarNae Taylor teaches theater at Kirby School in Santa Cruz, and she has also been an *8 Tens* true believer for more than a decade. She served on the Actors' Theatre board for eight years and has been an actor or director (or more commonly both) at the festival. This year, she is acting in two plays and directing another.

She says that the festival creates a unique kind of backstage vibe, a mix of newbies and veterans, all in different plays but committed to the same show. "People hang out quite a while with each other and it makes for a different kind of camaraderie," she says. "You get to know a lot more people in different ways in a short period of time."

"We have one actor who has three lines," says Chandler. "But he's there every night. He's thrilled to be there, and he's a wonderful actor. His heart and soul are completely in it."

As a director, Taylor enjoys working with the playwrights in a collaboration. She has, in fact, become close friends with Arizona playwright Mary Caroline Rogers through their work together at *8 Tens*. "And there are a lot of other directors around. I learn something from each and every one of them."

Chad Davies was another long-standing member of the *8 Tens*

family of actors and directors until 2017, when he moved to Tucson, a city well more than 10 times the size of Santa Cruz. "When we made the decision to move to Tucson, I went to see what kind of theater was here," says Davies by phone from his Arizona home. "And there was nobody doing 10-minute plays. That's when the light bulb went off."

The result is yet another festival, *Eight 10s in Tucson*, which will present its second annual festival in April. "It's going much better now," says Davies. "I'm going on an accelerated curve, and it's due in no small part to all the advice and the heads-up and the little tricks and tips that I got from Wilma and Bonnie."

It makes sense that the 10-minute play would find fertile cultural ground now rather than in, say, the golden age of Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill. The YouTube-ification of popular culture has destroyed the time structures of drama and comedy imposed by television, allowing generations to grow accustomed to smaller and smaller fragments of entertainment.

"The idea that short blasts of theater would appeal to younger people is fine by me," says Davies. "Because it gets their butts in the seats of a live performance. That's progress. And once they're there, there's no screens, no fast-forward, no pause button."

Screenwriter Seth Freeman says that the digital age makes the 10-minute festival possible. "That's how a playwright in Southern California or Wales or wherever can see opportunities around the world and send their stuff off instantly, and at no cost."

But the format still allows for the magic of live performance. "Once you're in the theater," says Freeman, "you are engaged in an ancient form of entertainment that goes back to when we were living in tribes around the campfire."

8 Tens @ 8 Presented by Actors' Theatre. *8 Tens @ 8* runs Jan. 10-Feb. 8, with two programs of eight 10-minute plays. \$32 general; \$29 senior/student. Center Stage Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. For a schedule of programs, go to sccat.org.