

Santa Cruz Actors Theatre continues stellar short play fest with ‘Best of the Rest’

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This year’s 8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival, put on by the Santa Cruz Actors’ Theatre, was full of brilliant moments and this third installment was no exception. A series of eight staged readings directed by Evan Hunt and Simon Hayward, it is, as Hayward suggests, more aptly described as the rest of the best. There’s something about a series of short plays that allows the treatment of topics that might be too heavy in a longer work. These well-written eight-minute shorts cover a series of serious topics. With a minimal set and low budget production, this

group of short plays deliver big results with sharp acting and smart scripts.

The first play is “Outside the Box” written by Emily Turner and acted by LeAnne Ravinale as Zoe, a recently single woman who has adopted a dog to cope with her loneliness. This is a challenging script, as there is only one actor and Ravinale does a good job of keeping the audience’s attention with her emotional vulnerability. Her melancholy meditations gradually win over the audience and her new canine friend.

Maria Norton’s “End of Life Sex” tackles an edgy subject with courage and feeling. Susy Parker plays Gayle, a woman who is looking for companionship with an ad. She finds a fellow teacher named Rob, played by Mark Matthews, who is drawn to her partly from a place of grieving. They are two emotionally damaged people looking for physical contact for different reasons and their encounter ends on a sweet note.

“Grown-Up Stuff” written by D. L. Siegel tackles the difficult topic of antisemitism through a conversation between a married couple, played by Sonia Motlagh as Ru and Gurjeet Bagri as Cal. They are in the middle of a heated argument about whether to have a conversation with their kindergarten-aged daughter about the reality of bigotry in the world. Set in New York, this scene explores the moral quandary of having to explain how language and symbols are used to hate.

Jim MacQueen's short play "Beyond the Bus" provides comedic relief as Andy Waddell plays Peter at the pearly gates of heaven, interviewing the victims of a bus accident. Kevin Karplus' colorful Tricks the Clown wrestles with having killed his own father. Marc Grossman's Father Baxter tries to use his good deeds to balance out his transgressions. Naomi Bowers plays Mary Ann, a bride-to-be. Helene Simkin Jara is the retired teacher Mrs. Evans who was the cause of the worst childhood memory to many of her students. Matthews returns to the stage as Jonathan Wright, a millionaire who is used to getting his way. Sophia Alexander Sidholm plays his young wife Brandy, who has to make a not-so-tough decision.

After the intermission, Julia Marks' play "For How Janelle Monáe Once Made Me Feel" features three young friends in an internet-inspired Barbie Dreamhouse. Jen Stanford as Molly teams up with Naomi Brewers as Sam and Sidholm returns as Addy in this meditation on friendship in the digital age.

"Drawing the Line" by Seth Freeman returns to the dramatic mode with a tense conversation between Marc Grossman as Peter Landis, an aging surgeon, and Parker as Jackie Barnett, his daughter-in-law and chief of surgery for his hospital. It is a loving narrative between two medical professionals dealing with a difficult decision.

"Frisbee on the Beach" by Robert Fieldsteel is an emotional dialogue about grieving between Stanford as Nancy and Motlagh as Dolly who have recently lost their young son. It is an exploration of how the trauma of losing a child affects a relationship, and it is deeply moving.

The last play, "The Fabulists," is a charming father-daughter narrative with a comical flourish. Sidholm again delivers a great performance as Emily who is grieving her older brother, connecting with her father and sharing a near-death story that involves the two imaginary characters Pete and Bill, played by Karplus and Matthews. Waddell gives a powerful performance as Mitchell, Emily's father who is slowly clawing his way out of the depths of depression for having lost his son.

The annual short play festival that Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre produces at the start of the year is an artistic treasure of Santa Cruz County theater. It is a chance to experience risk-taking writing and ambitious acting, as each play lasts only eight minutes, but with skillful direction can achieve flashes of greatness that lasts a long time. The 8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival continues until Sunday. Get your tickets at santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets.