



Wilma Marcus Chandler (left) has passed the baton as Actors' Theatre artistic director to Andrew Ceglio (right). (Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

CITY LIFE

Safety concerns shut down the comeback of celebrated theater festival '8 Tens @ 8'



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Santa Cruz's Actors' Theatre has again had to shelve its festival of 10-minute plays, this time amid the Omicron surge, but new artistic director Andrew Ceglio still has ambitious plans for 2022 and beyond.

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The much-anticipated return of the annual "8 Tens @ 8" play festival — a Santa Cruz theater tradition dating back 25 years and one of the most prominent festivals of its kind in the country — will have to wait. The Omicron variant has seen to that.

Actors' Theatre, the producers of the popular festival of 10-minute plays, announced Wednesday that in-person performances of this year's festival, slated to begin Jan. 14, would be canceled amid the rapid and unpredictable spread of the latest variant of COVID-19.

"I did not enjoy making this decision," the company's new executive artistic director, Andrew Ceglio, said in a statement. "But I feel this is the only way to ensure that we keep everybody safe."

As a spoonful of good news to accompany the bucket full of bad, Actors' Theatre also announced that the plays scheduled for this year's festivals would be performed for the camera, with a full-length film to be released for streaming in February.

The cancellation marks the second consecutive year that the festival has been waylaid by the COVID-19 virus, and it puts a wrinkle in the theater company's ambitious comeback plans for 2022, which include the programming of several new productions beyond "8 Tens," and a significant change in leadership.

The year 2020, in fact, represented a double body blow for the plucky Santa Cruz-based theater troupe. The first blow was, that like all performing arts groups, the company's plans were immediately derailed by the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. But the second blow was even more devastating, when the organization lost producer/director and one of its two principal leaders, Bonnie Ronzio, who died of cancer two months after the shutdown.

The theater's then-artistic director, Wilma Marcus Chandler, said at the time of Ronzio's death that "I feel like I've lost a part of myself," but she also vowed that Actors' Theatre would continue on.

True to her word, after nearly two years of inactivity, Actors' Theatre was set to return with an even bigger and bolder "8 Tens @ 8" festival in its customary January calendar slot before Wednesday's cancellation announcement. The festival had even outgrown its title. With its fully staged 10-minute plays divided into two separate programs — that's two nights of "8 Tens," plus an extra one thrown in like a *lagniappe* — the festival more accurately could have been tabbed "18 Tens @ 8."

But "8 Tens" was to be only the first offering in a new era at Actors' Theatre. Chandler, who founded the 10-minute-play festival, is stepping aside as the theater's artistic director, handing over creative control to longtime Santa Cruz actor/director Ceglio.

In addition, Actors' Theatre is still planning to present three more fully-staged productions in 2022, including the one-person hip-hop play "Milkcrate Monologues," the South African drama "The Train Driver," and the holiday adaptation "This Wonderful Life." There will also be a pair of summer weekend events of staged readings. Additionally, Actors' Theatre is planning a quarterly reading of full-length new plays from Monterey Bay playwrights as a development tool for writers, plus various classes will be offered on the theater arts.

"It's been 27 years," said Chandler, reflecting on her run as the theater's artistic director, "but it's time for new people and new energy. And I'm thrilled about all this new energy that's happening."



Wilma Marcus Chandler of Actors' Theatre.
(Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

Chandler will not, however, be fading away. She'll direct "The Train Driver" in November, and will remain on the theater's board of directors. She said that at rehearsals for "8 Tens," actors and directors were "jumping off the walls with excitement about being back to work. And I've talked to people all over the country who submit plays to us, and they're saying, 'Thank you for opening your theater again.'"

Ceglio is a familiar face and name to Santa Cruz theater audiences, most notably for his work at Cabrillo Stage, where he is an actor, director and choreographer for nearly 15 years. This marks the first time he's taking the reigns of a theater company, and this year's "8 Tens" marks a kind of leadership transition as he works with Chandler in steering the company forward. The productions after "8 Tens" represents Ceglio's initiative to put his stamp on Actors' Theatre's mission and aesthetic. He said that Chandler gave him the go-ahead to make changes to the season's schedule once he took over the artistic director position.

"I hit the ground running with Wilma," said Ceglio, "and really dug down deep on what Actors' Theatre was really all about for her. We had a lot of late night one-on-ones, just really picking her brain and her heart on what this company means from her perspective. And from that I kind of crafted the rest of the season, which was not only to support what this company means to Wilma, but also to expand upon the foundation that she and Bonnie (Ronzio) put down."

The first of the productions, "Milkcrate Monologues," is the work of actor and writer Ron Johnson, and is slated to debut at Actors' Theatre in May. It's a series of monologues from the viewpoint of an African American man growing up in the 1980s and '90s, embracing the rhythms and thematic concerns of hip-hop.

"It's a fusion of hip-hop verse, with this very classical theatre arts kind of storytelling that focuses on a lot of relevant topics nowadays," said Ceglio, who co-producing a production of the play in 2019 in Los Angeles. "We had people from all walks of life and different ages who were really able to connect with the piece. And that's something that's really important to me, to bring worlds together right now."



Andrew Ceglio of Actors' Theatre.
(Kevin Painchaud / Lookout Santa Cruz)

Ceglio is also going to plant a stake for Actors' Theatre in the summer, a time of year when the company is usually dark with theater audiences distracted by the big summer seasons at Santa Cruz Shakespeare and Cabrillo Stage. As a kind of counterprogramming, Ceglio aims to stage a couple of weekends featuring stripped-down productions of new plays, each with an audience Q&A after the show.

"We're going to be looking to the audience to give us some feedback and offer that up to our playwrights and our composers," he said. "And we're doing so at a very affordable cost. These these two pieces in the summertime, they're going to be donation admission only. So if all you got is \$5 in your pocket and you want to see a new piece of theater, that is to specifically go to supporting the playwrights and the actors of that piece."

For the latest on Actors' Theatre and details on its upcoming season, [visit its website](#).



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