**Santa Cruz welcomes back short play festival after three years**

8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival runs through Feb. 19

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After an unexpected COVID-caused delay of three years, Santa Cruz Actors’ Theatre is offering its annual 8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival. Judging by the close-to-sold-out shows, it’s apparent local residents are delighted to have it return.

Sixteen short plays were selected for the 2023 festival, with eight performed at a time. Running through Feb. 19, the two separate productions are dubbed Part 1 and Part 2. All are performed at Center Stage in downtown Santa Cruz.



From left, Thomas Webb, Naomi Rollins and Karin Babbitt in the short play “Man’s Best Friend,” part of Santa Cruz Actors’ Theatre 2023 8 Tens @ 8 Short Play Festival. (Courtesy Actors’ Theatre)

This review covers Part 1; a review of Part 2 will run next Thursday.

Act 1 of Part 1 opens with a charming little story about “Man’s Best Friend,” directed by Buff McKinley. A rather angry Jeffrey (well played by Thomas Webb) walks into an animal shelter with his dog, Bagel (Karin Babbitt looking doggone cute). He tells the patient animal shelter employee Lucie (Naomi Rollins) that he’s returning Bagel who, he insists, is aggressive.

“I just wanted a boon companion,” he insists. “My home is where I find peace and he’s impinging on that.” He recalls how he and his cat, Leo, lived peacefully together for 20 years, but finds Bagel disrupts all that. Eventually Jeffrey goes home happily, but readers will have to see this show to find out why.

It takes a while to even figure out what the second short, “The Most Precious Thing” directed by Sarah Albertson, is about. The program explains that the two actors (Manirose Bobisuthi as Jaqueline and Tristan Ahn as Charley) are inside Jaqueline’s mind. Sadly, this short play covers too much ground in approximately 10 minutes, and although it ends on a positive note, it’s muddled in the middle.

“Wonder People,” the third playlet also suffers from throwing too much at an audience in a few minutes. Directed by Hannah Eckstein, it features Ward Willats as Ken and Lee Ann Gray as “WW.” The two meet up at an “uptown bar” in Oakland, and then they meander through a maze of all things Wonder Woman: Which one was the best, who wore what, when which magic device was introduced, etc. Unless you’re a really big Wonder Woman fan, you’ll be lost. (It also runs too long.)

The first half of the program ends with a bang when “Honest ‘Abe’ Mazulu,” directed by Rebecca Haley Clark, is presented. Webb returns as M. Poulenc, a suave bigwig in the Geneva office of the Suisse Banc de Geneve. His assistant brings in a man, Abe Mazulu (steady Avondina Wills), to find out more about the bank. The two banter for a few minutes, which, at times, seems repetitious. But make sure to pay attention because the ending definitely leaves the audience astonished.

After intermission it’s “Youth for Dark,” directed by Kathryn Adkins. It’s saddled with too much dialogue about several separate topics (although they’re actually all connected). Gino Danna plays Mr. Durkis, the principal of an unspecified high school, while A. J. Davey Ouse is David, an overly smug student who believes he’ll win in a war of minds with the principal.

Next up is “Confessions a Deux,” which takes place in a Catholic confessional and is directed by Helene Simpkin Jara. Willats’ open face is perfect for the compassionate priest, Father Martin Gregory. Ahn also is well cast as a younger priest, Father Henry Shannon. The dialogue zings in this short play, with both Willats and Ahn earning lots of laughter as they confess their sins to each other.

“The Tree” is charming, funny and moving if you can accept that Lee Ann Gray (wearing the best costume in the show) is a tree. Gray certainly acts the part as she tries to convince the husband (nicely performed by Gino Danna) that he shouldn’t cut her down. But his wife is insistent, so he sits under the tree and talks it over with the tree, reminiscing about all the things that have happened in, around and under that tree during the many years the couple has lived there. He tells her, “Your roots are dead,” and she responds, “You have to stop the rot!” Although it doesn’t sound like much of a play, it will absolutely hold your attention.

The last short in Part 1 is also in a church. Directed by Jim Schultz, “Father Michael’s Doing Mass” features two good friends, Vicky (Karen Schamberg) and Sheryl (Karin Babbitt). They both agree they came to Mass this Sunday only because Father Michael is doing the Mass. The two women are a bit like Golden Girls, gossiping about how Father Michael “was so handsome when he started.” Both agree that “when Father John gives Mass, no one comes,” so they sit patiently and wait to see how Father Michael has aged. Although the women are sweet, the short doesn’t really have much to offer. But Babbitt’s Vicky does end the show with a chuckle. Talking about why people don’t come to Mass anymore, Vicky says “I blame phones.”

Tickets for either Part 1 or Part 2 of the “2023 8 Tens @ 8 Festival” cost $32 for general admission and $29 for students and seniors. There are also package deals and discounts for Thursday performances.

To check out the play schedule and purchase tickets, go to [santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets](https://www.santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets) or call (831) 431-8666.