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Annual 8 Tens @ Eight Festival challenges playwrights to create drama with the clock ticking

The unique variety and swift pace of the 18th annual 8 Tens @ Eight Festival makes it a theater extravaganza unlike any other. Presented by Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre, this year's showcase runs Jan. 4-27 and offers audiences the unique opportunity to view the latest works by eight of the finest contemporary playwrights from around the country all in one evening, jam-packed with intrigue, humor, drama and wonder.

Here's how it works.

Since 1995, playwrights from around the country have sent in their raw scripts to Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre, in the hopes that their piece might be one of the eight selected to become a full-fledged production. Submissions are accepted year-round, but must meet the summer deadline (usually June or July). Over the next six months, eight plays are anonymously selected by a panel of judges consisting of local writers, directors, and theater enthusiasts, assigned to directors at random, and rehearsed for three months, before premiering in front of a sold-out audience. The only criteria for entering: Each play must be 10 minutes or less.

The process of assembling these productions is commendable, but what has ultimately built up the festival's dedicated following is the dissimilarities between each play presented. After all, entrants are invited to submit scripts of any genre, style, or theme. "The production opens a window into a world and then closes it very quickly," says Wilma Marcus Chandler, artistic director and founder of 8 Tens @ Eight.

Coincidentally, three of the eight productions in the 2013 lineup were written by Santa Cruz-based playwrights, although none of the names or locations of the writers were disclosed to the judges until after the winning scripts were selected.

Santa Cruz's Iain McRae brings a bit of local flair to the festival with "Dudes Like Us," an introspective piece in which two aging surfers rehash old memories as they wait for the swells to come in. The play centers around themes of friendship and self-reflection, as the two men discuss philosophy, world relations and the meaning of life. Although this is the first time McRae has submitted original work for 8 Tens @ Eight, he is not a stranger to the festival, which he has been involved with as an actor and as a director for the last seven years. "What is special about this [festival] is the amount of people it brings together," he says. "You have eight playwrights, eight directors, local actors, and crew."

Playwright Susan Forrest is another festival veteran. Both a previous winner and three-time runner-up in the Best Of The Rest Festival—a follow-up to 8 Tens @ Eight, in which the eight best "runners up" are presented as staged readings (this year's runs Jan. 31-Feb. 3)—Forrest never misses a season. This year, she co-wrote "Be It Ever So Humble," a play about the multi-generational winners of the National Agoraphobics Association Award, with longtime friend Karen Shawburg. The offbeat comedy was inspired by their friend Oline, a fellow member of their Weight Watchers community. A memorable character, Forrest describes Oline as "Pixelated, odd and funny, just like the play."

Whether McRae's or Forrest's plays pique your interest, the beauty of 8 Tens @ Eight is that there is something for everyone to enjoy. Also featured in this year's lineup is "Maybe Later" by Paula Alder of Santa Cruz, "Prison Coach" by Zazu Lein of San Rafael, "For Art's Sake" by Elyce Melmon of Woodside, "Pieces of a Puzzle" by Earl Roske from Fremont, "Emma On



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8 Tens @ Eight runs Jan. 5-27 at Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. Tickets are \$20/general, \$18/seniors & students. Best Of The Rest runs Jan. 31-Feb. 3 at Center Stage. Tickets are \$15. For tickets, visit brownpapertickets.com.

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