

THEATER REVIEW



JANA MARCUS — CONTRIBUTED

The sweet drama 'God Speed, Apollo' by Jody McColman (starring Camille Russell and Donald Grube) is a highlight of the 2017 '8 Tens @ 8' festival.

16 Tens Til Feb.

Annual 10-minute play festival back with dizzying variety of comedy and drama

By Joanne Engelhardt
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Just when 2017 seemed a little dismal with the rain and all, along comes Santa Cruz's 22nd annual 10-minute play festival, or "8 Tens @ 8" for short, to offer insight, a little humor, some thought-provoking moments and its usual homage to this particularly inimitable theater concept.

This is the third year the "8 Tens" festival has expanded to 16 10-minute (more or less) playlets with eight running in each performance. So if you want to catch all 16, it means going to two shows.

But here's a tip: If you're only going to one, look for the one labeled "Night B." Uncharacteristically, the festival seems heavily weighted with solid acting, intriguing, well-written scripts and taut direction on the "B" slate of eight.

That's not to say there isn't some of all of the above on "Night A," but there are a few washouts that night as well. For example, despite the presence of the exquisite Lillian Bogovich, "Iron Man" doesn't work because there's only so much even she can do when all the audience sees of her is her head (the rest being in an iron lung), and though she twists it one way or another and scrunches up her face in a multiplicity of ways, it's still a 10-minute monologue that seems much longer.

What works best in an abbreviated version of a play is to include a touch of drama — say an impending crisis or major event — and, sometimes, a dash of comedy. Night B's "Cooler's Reel" by Madeline Lowe Puccioni (lovingly directed by Gerry Gerringer) is a great example of both.

'8 TENS @ 8'

Produced by: Actors' Theatre

When: Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. through Feb. 5.

Where: Center Stage, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

Tickets: \$25 general; \$22 senior/student; \$40 two-night tickets

Details: www.sccat.org

It helps, of course, to have the spirited acting of nimble W. Scott Whisler, compassionate Carrie Browde and sensitive Geraldine Byrne, who all show up with more than passable Irish accents. Puccioni's remarkable script proves an entire story can be told in a mere 10 minutes.

Best acting honors of this year's festival belongs solely (and soulfully) to MarNae Taylor in the euphemistically named "Counting Dogs Like Sheep." Halfway through the Mary Caroline Rogers offering (perceptively directed by Daria E. Troxell and with Eric Gandolfi lending earnest support), Taylor delivers a heartfelt soliloquy that will bring tears to many in the audience.

Other "Night B" standouts include Seth Freeman's "Match Play" featuring a likeable John Wasielewski and Claudine Weinfeld (as the sexiest "mom" of the year); "Our Lady of Palmyra" by Allston James (directed by Noel Warwick and Suzanne Schrag), thanks to the spot-on acting of both Gary Edwards and Donald Grube; The sweet story "God Speed, Apollo" by Jody McColman, under Marcus Cato's steady direction and earnest performances by both Camille Russell and Grube; Cato and Steve Capasso give strong dramatic performances in Kathryn Chetkovich's "The Trans-action," thanks to Nat Robinson's no-nonsense di-

rection. Then Cato turns around and does a great comedic bit (in yoga clothing no less) in the otherwise-forgettable short called "No Telling."

There are a few "Night A" stories worth mentioning, but not before intermission. Act II opens with panache in Richard Chin's "True," directed by Anita Natale. Chin throws in a lot of clever dialogue, most of which come out of the mouth of the delectable, adroit Danielle Crook. She just nails it as the saleswoman trying to sell a customer (innocent-faced Alex Garrett) on a robot companion.

All of Act 2's shorts are quite good, though Brian Spencer's "Shakespeare's Boy" is a bit uneven albeit intriguing thanks primarily to Timothy Randazzo as Alexander/Juliet. "The Third Person" by Dan Borengasser includes some smart dialogue, smart direction (by Taylor) and delightful performances from Daria E. Troxell and Jackson Wolffe.

"The Nice View" by Cynthia Veal Holm ends the night on a fine note, thanks to thoughtful direction of Bill Peters and touching performances by Alie Mac and Nat Robinson.

Unfortunately, "Night A" gets off on the wrong foot with the overacting of Hannah Eckstein in "Flowers" by Sheila Cowley. Ann McCormick and Mary Ann LoBalbo are fine after Eckstein leaves the stage, but all of her exaggerated posturing is disconcerting. Of course, it's difficult to find fault with something that takes so much effort by artistic director Wilma Chandler, producer Bonnie Ronzio and their loyal band of assistants, as well as all the actors, most of whom are home-grown talent.

Fortunately, 22 years of performances gives "8 Tens" a large, loyal crowd who make sure they go every year. But a word to the wise: Some performances are almost sold out.