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The Soul of Wit

Biting comedy and strong acting make the 14th Annual Eight Tens Festival at Santa Cruz's Actors Theatre.

By Jessica Lussenhop

Eight Tens at Eight has all the trappings of a well-balanced hors d'oeuvre--sweet and savory and just enough to chew on for the start of Santa Cruz's sumptuous theater season. Despite the fact that the 10-minute time limit makes the cumulative feel of the evening pretty light, the mini-melodramas are embedded with some very heavyweight acting talent.

Among the standouts is Jaye Wolfe, who appears in the opening play as a man descending cheerfully into Alzheimer's in *Why Did I Come in Here?*, a clever and surprisingly uplifting look at the end of life by Philip Pierce of Seaside. Rita Wadsworth is practically perfect as a gleeful, digital-age peeping Tom in *Neighborhood Watch*, in which reality television finally gets real, and no one wants to look away.

The comedies are broken up by the more serious (and wordless) play *DOG*. Ian McRae portrays a moment of crisis using all the tools of man's best friend--dry dog food, leash, bowl and howl--to craft a few minutes of very human sorrow. Santa Cruz's own Nancy Gauquier takes on the difficult task of describing a young war veteran's return from Iraq in a very angry sequence that functions more as poetry than reality.

Of the younger cast members, Michael Gomes and Nathan Character are pretty remarkable for their versatility. They star together with moody intensity in *At a Crosswalk*, wherein the temptation to jaywalk becomes a cryptic but palpable metaphor for life. Gomes proves himself to be a master of facial expression, not only by putting on such a convincingly pained mask, but by seeming to lose 10 years when he changes into a hormonal cricket for *The Sound of Moonlight* by Diane Sampson. With or without the clattering costume he dons along with Jim Schultz, the pair make extremely amusing insects (along with Gomes' enviable and freakish ability to make his pupils point in opposite directions).

Not to be outdone, Character morphs into a horny, anthropomorphized reindeer in *Santa Qaddafi and the Sweatshops of Guangdong*. The most bitingly funny of the comedies, this work courtesy of playwright Matt Hanf of Elk Grove imagines Santa Claus as less myth and more man, especially when his Christmas Miracle is globalization. The mix of Character, Ken DeRuggeris as Santa and Rosalee Wollman as Santa's regular-sized helper (North Pole by way of Joisey), makes this the perfect note on which to end.



The Chirp of the Wild: Michael Gomes (left) and Jim Schultz are crickets with issues in 'The Sound of Moonlight,' part of the Eight Tens Festival at Actors' Theatre.

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THE 14TH ANNUAL EIGHT TENS at EIGHT FESTIVAL
Thursday-Sunday at 8pm through Feb. 15 at Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz.
Tickets are \$20/ \$17 for students and seniors; Thursdays and Sundays are two for \$25,
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