

Doubling Down

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THEATER

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Sixteen short plays at this year's 20th '8 Tens @ Eight' festival

Twenty years ago, Santa Cruz's 8 Tens @ Eight was the first short theater festival of its kind. Now, over two-hundred people from all over the world send in their 10-minute plays to be considered for selection.

It's all because short plays fulfill a new need, says Wilma Marcus Chandler, the artistic director for 8 Tens @ Eight. The beauty of a theater "sample platter" is that it allows the audience to indulge in a full narrative—in a quarter of the time.

"Now with everything being so fast and our attention span being much shorter, I think this kind of fulfills an appetite for

story, or action, but within a framework where we can be satiated in a short amount of time," says Chandler. "It fills the need to be enlightened more quickly. You can get the message, the characters, the story, the intensity and the passion more quickly, without sacrificing anything."

For a festival that only advertises in a few theater and literary magazines, 8 Tens @ Eight has garnered an international following. This year is the festival's 20th anniversary production, and organizers received applications from all across the U.S. and Europe, including Russia. Plays are selected by a group of local panel readers who narrow down the final production pool; this year instead of having eight plays at 8 p.m., they're featuring 16.

But 16 short plays maxing out at 10 minutes doesn't mean they're only a snippet, says Chandler.

"You've got to make it all happen within a smaller framework. It's like a poem almost—every word has to be important, every action has to be valuable," says Chandler. "You don't have the luxury of Act 1, Act 2—it's all there for you, very concise."

After the reader panel chooses which plays will be featured, a group of local directors (of which Chandler assures there are many—she has a rotating pool of 60) decide on the work they will direct. As playwright and director Ian McRae points out, however, that reading the words on paper is never quite the same as seeing them performed.

"There are some that when you're reading them you don't, to be honest, like—and then you see it and you go 'God, how did I miss that?' Because you see somebody else breathe some life into it," McRae says. "You see it and ... it's charming and lovely and it's always an education in that sense."

As director, McRae is heading this year's "Winning," written by San Francisco-based Mercilee Jenkins, which circles around a conversation between two women at their annual Oscar award ceremony fête. One of the characters is battling cancer and when her friend catches her smoking, they discuss her diagnosis and what people expect of her as the "appropriate" behavior.

"It's handled with a lot of humor, the playwright was very specific and direct in not wanting it to turn into some weepy tear-jerker Kleenex fest," says McRae. "She was very insistent that the actress who plays the part of the character with cancer is not feeling sorry for herself and doesn't want anyone else feeling sorry for herself, either."

From drama to comedy, the beauty of a rapid-fire-shorts showcase is that the audience can glean all genres, says Chandler. And with 20 years of reading shorts that span every topic imaginable, distinctive themes do come up in the writing itself: "There are certain themes that permeate everything and they disappear—one year almost every play was about food. Another year there were a lot of stories about ghosts," says Chandler.

"This year many of them are about surviving crisis, whether it be illness or sexual identity or losing a child

or finding love,” she says. “And then finding your way toward some sort of beautiful transformation and redemption.”

That’s how art attempts to make sense of the world, says Chandler.

“Perhaps, because of the way the world is now with so much terrorism and fear and bad things going on—I think people, especially artists, try to give us answers for how to continue with integrity in our lives.”

Info: Jan. 9-Feb. 8. See schedule at www.sccat.org. \$22-\$40. PHOTO: Kip Allert and Evan Hunt in ‘Countess Befits Her’ by Steve Spike Wong, one of 16 short plays for this year’s 8 Tens @ Eight festival.
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