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## Powers of 10



**All in the Family:** For 'Eight Tens @ Eight,' the writer may lay out the blueprint, but the actors and directors build the drama.

### Popular annual festival at Actors' Theatre showcases the intense and unpredictable drama of short plays

By Heidi Johnston

JUST BECAUSE a theater work is short in duration doesn't mean that it can't be long on action and characterization. Which is what the Actors' Theatre's annual short-play festival has proved to sold-out houses for four years. The short 10-minute format of the festival's plays is a crucible for intense and unpredictable drama--and entertainment is doled out in creative spoonfuls guaranteed to satisfy every whim.

"I liken it to a Chinese dim sum dinner where you get a huge variety with many tastes," says Wilma Chandler, artistic director and a

contributing playwright for this year's edition of the festival, "Eight Tens @ Eight."

"Each year the variety of material is just amazing. There have been over 85 submissions this year," Chandler adds. "There are plays from the perspective of dishwasher utensils to the poignant portrayal of a Holocaust survivor."

Though developed as a showcase of local playwrights, "Eight Tens @ Eight" brings together dozens of performers for a collaborative effort. For some playwrights, the process of staging a play means that an individual dramatic vision comes to life like an errant child.

"My job is to provide a blueprint of the action," Patterson says. "The actors bring it to life on the physical plane."

Evan Hunt, director of Patterson's *Bob's Dinner*, explains that some playwrights aren't so willing to let the director and cast bring their work into the world.

"Some writers I have worked with have been hostile," Hunt says. "They show up and want to direct the play. John's not like that at all."

Frank Hilmes wrote *Mrs. Scheinbaum* in 40 minutes on a lunch break. For him the blueprint was elusive. "It was a puzzle; I am still amazed at how well it works," Hilmes says. "Somehow the characters took over the play. When they started to talk it all came together. [The actors] bring in one case 80 years in the other 40 years of emotion which comes out in that 10 minutes."

Created by prison inmate Paul Moran, *Rats in a Maze* tells of frustration and racism. Moran's is a unique vision, a challenge for any director to stage, explains Claire Braz-Valentine, who directs the play for the festival. Braz-Valentine, though, has worked with a prison art program for 10 years, and her direction of Moran's play

guides the players through the context of the work. For actor Keith Fair, the context isn't too far out of the realm of his personal experience.

"I was born in the Jim Crow South--I can identify with racism," he says. "The play offers a strategy to offset it."

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**Eight Tens @ Eight** runs Thursday to Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 3pm through Feb. 6 at the Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. Tickets are \$11 general for Thursdays and Sundays, \$13 general for Fridays and Saturdays, \$11 seniors and students (all shows). (425.7529)

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