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Eight Plays in 80 Minutes

Sudden mood swings and short attention spans capture the stage at the Eight Tens @ Eight Festival

By Leyna Krow

A Spanish poet is looking for the perfect adjective—at least for the first 10 minutes. Then it's a provocative park statue's time to shine. Follow that up with a death in the family and you're three-eighths of the way through the Eight Tens @ Eight Play Festival.

An annual event at the Actors' Theatre of Santa Cruz, the Eight Tens Festival is comprised (as the observant may have already inferred) of eight 10-minute plays in a single evening.

According to Wilma Marcus Chandler, the festival's artistic director, "Each play is its own little world. It's a bit like opening windows: you don't get to see the whole house, but you do get a glimpse of what's going on inside."

Preparation for each year's festival kicks off with a playwriting contest. What began 11 years ago as an exercise for Santa Cruz playwrights has become a West Coast phenomenon with writers from California, Oregon and Washington submitting plays at 10 pages a pop in hopes of having their work performed. This year, almost 120 writers vied for the eight spots. Next year, promises Chandler, the contest will be extended nationally, with the theater accepting submissions from writers throughout the United States.

"The biggest challenge as a writer," says Mark Bradlyn, a Santa Cruz local and author of one of this year's Eight, "is trying to cram a whole story, complete with a beginning, a middle and an end, into 10 pages. The audience needs to be curious from the moment the lights go up and feel satisfied by the time the curtain closes."

The plays in this year's show run the gamut of theatric representation. From a clash of ideologies in a Japanese internment camp in "Wired Dreams" to the chaotic absurdity of a family's fire evacuation plan gone awry in "Route 3" to a surrealist poet pursued by spies in Bradlyn's "Adjective," this night of theatrical shorts is decidedly eclectic.

Putting on eight plays in just under an hour and a half is no easy task. Each one requires its own lighting specifications as well as musical score and sound effects. Crew members are allotted a mere 60 seconds for scene changes between plays.

According to set designer Lisa Joseph, "One of the most fascinating things is the choreography of changing the sets within a minute. Each director has a different vision for what the scene should look like. It takes a lot of collaboration to make it work."

For actors, the Eight Tens Festival provides a unique chance to strut their stuff in multiple roles during the course of a single evening. Actor Richard Saldavia performs in both "Wired Dreams" and "Route 3."

"I get the thrill of playing a part that's very funny and a part that's very serious, both in the same night," Saldavia said. "For pure fun and the ability to show what you can do, nothing beats the Eight Tens."

Lauded as "theater for people who aren't sure if they like theater," the Eight Tens Festival is by far the most popular production staged by the Actors' Theatre. All of the showings sell out well in advance each season.



Photograph by Steve DiBartolomeo

Spy Verses Spy: A poet stumbles into the world of espionage in Mark Bradlyn's "Adjective."

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It's hard to say it's a matter of short attention spans, says Route 3 director Maria Crush of the festival's popularity. "I think people really just like the variety." Chandler likens the show to a meal of dim sum: "You get a little taste of everything."

For less-than-regular theatergoers, this format is refreshing. Rather than having to invest themselves in a single two-hour play, those who aren't quite sure what they like can try out this sampler of eight scenes without any real commitment.

As Chandler quips, "If you don't like a piece, wait 10 minutes and there will be something else entirely."

The Eight Tens @ Eight Play Festival runs Jan. 13-Feb.19, Thursdays-Sundays, at the Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. Tickets are \$15/general, \$12/students, 2-for-1 for Thursday showings, available at Civic Auditorium Box Office or call 831.425.PLAY.

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