



A&E

Review: '8 Tens @ 8'

Local short-play festival returns with new slices of life

LEFT TO RIGHT: W. SCOTT WHISLER, JOYCE MICHAELSON AND JOCELYN MCMAHON IN 'THE BIRTHDAY GIFT,' ONE OF THIS YEAR'S '8 TENS @ 8.' PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

BY LISA JENSEN

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One of the most popular events in the Santa Cruz theater season returns as Actors' Theatre presents its spanking new 2019 edition of the *8 Tens @ 8* festival. This annual crowd-pleasing event, now in its 24th year, features a program of eight 10-minute plays submitted by playwrights from around the country and performed and directed by members of the local theatrical community.

Festival organizers have again added a second program featuring eight more plays, with both sets—identified as Night A and Night B—playing in repertory through Feb. 3. If Night B (not yet seen by press time) is as enjoyable as Night A, audiences can look forward to lots of laughter, punctuated with moments of wistful reflection.

If I had to pick a discernible theme among the plays bundled together for Night A, it would be “time flies”—for the bereaved, missing departed spouses, for parents coping with the departure of adult children, and for young people on the brink of a new, possibly scary future. In fact, the first play of the show—and one of the best—is called *Tempus Fugit*. Written by Greg Atkins and directed with plenty of bounce by Cathy Warner, it's a very funny time-travel comedy in which a sweet nerdy guy (Nat Robinson), about to propose to his girlfriend, is visited by her future self (both incarnations played with panache by Alie Mac) trying to talk him out of it.

Mafia widows straight out of *Real Housewives of New Jersey* convene at a funeral to take charge of a future without their variously iced and offed menfolk in Steven Capasso's *Gossip Queens*, directed by Bonnie Ronzio and performed with sitcom energy. In *The Dating Game*, by Rod McFadden, a very different widow wisecracks her way through the pitfalls of online dating while grieving for her beloved husband. Helene Simkin Jara, heartfelt in the central role, also has a sly way with a one-liner.

A widow also figures in John Chandler's *Jello Salad*, attending a family reunion with her restless daughter (Solange Marcotte), just home from her first year at college. With everybody warning her against her rascally, black-sheep uncle (Gino Danna), of course, the two of them bond, but the range of the story doesn't quite fit the short format, and the final epiphany — while poignant — doesn't quite feel earned.

Another mom (a droll Nicolette Nasr) insists on a ceremony when her college-bound son (Tristan Ahn) is about to flush his deceased goldfish down the loo in Elizabeth Flanagan's *Frodo Lives* — an event that becomes both a wistful metaphor for leaving childhood behind, and a pep-talk for embracing future possibilities. In *Morning In America*, a grown daughter (Mac again) discusses media overload in the Information Age with her disgruntled dad (well-played by Marcus Cato), who starts each day with the question, “Is he still president?”

Richard Lyons Conlon's *Jackson* is a middling story about corporate cubicle-mates given a brisk, funny production from director Miguel Reyna and performers Nat Robinson and Jocelyn McMahon.

And Night A concludes on a high note with *The Birthday Gift*, by Elizabeth Douglas, in which a daughter (McMahon) learns her freedom-relishing parents have remodeled the family home—without extra bedrooms—now that she, their youngest, has flown the coop for college. (“We're closing down Hotel Mom and Dad!”)

So, welcome back *8 Tens @ 8*, and prepare to be entertained.

The Santa Cruz County Actors Theater production of '8 Tens @ 8' plays through Feb. 3 at Center Stage Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. Call 800 838-3006, or visit sccat.org.

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