

## THEATER REVIEW

# '8 Tens' doubles down with delightful 20th anniversary season

By Joanne Engelhardt

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The good news about a 10-minute play is that if it's good one, those 10 minutes just fly by. The other good news is that if it's not-so-great, well, it's only 10 minutes out of your life.

To commemorate its 20th year of offering up the "8 Tens @ Eight" festival, a smorgasbord of 10-minute plays, the Actors' Theatre this year is producing 16 "playlets" – fortunately over the course of two nights because 16 in one night would definitely be theatrical overload.

There's one more piece of good news: Most of the 16 really are quite good, and some in the other category at least have first-rate acting to make them endurable.

Theatergoers can choose either night "A" or night "B" (or both), so named not because one is better than the other but because there has to be some name differentiation so no one buys tickets twice to the same eight plays.

Top acting honors go to Frank Widman, who not only is the only performer in three different shorts, but skillfully plays them all though his characters are very different in both temperament and dialect. His Oscar Wilde in Wallace Baine's lyrical "Oscar's Wallpaper" is predictably bristly and British to the end, while his Syd Gluckman is a stereotypical New York Jewish man in J. M. Eisenman's "Champagne and Chopped Liver." Both are part of the "A" night program. He returns in night "B" as an elderly gentleman, resigned to being lonely when he unexpectedly decides to try a different kind of love in "Surprises" by E. Borg.



JANA MARCUS — CONTRIBUTED

Evan Hunt (left) and Marty Lee Jones trade jabs in John Boni's 'Pound for Pound,' directed by Brian Spencer, part of the 'B Night' slate at '8 Tens.'

## '8 TENS @ EIGHT'

**When:** Wednesday through Saturday at 8 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. through 3 Feb. 8.

**Where:** Center Street Theater, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz

**Tickets:** \$25 general; \$22 seniors and students; \$40 package for two nights (www.brownpapertickets.com)

**Details:** www.sccat.org

Because all of the selected scripts (from more than 200 that were submitted this year) have not been produced before, it's somewhat difficult to know whether it's the writing, the directing and/or the acting that makes each play come alive.

Whatever the successful combination, these are the ones that resonated most with the opening night audiences last weekend:

• "Am I Good," written by Jean Blasiar and directed by Sarah Albertson with

a screamingly funny performance by the youthful Caber Russell as Brody and an innocently sexy performance by Ann McCormick as Nora Fisher.

• The aforementioned "Oscar's Wallpaper," with subtle direction by Tandy Beal. Widman is ably supported by Jackson Wolffe as Oscar's affectionately

dubbed friend Bunny.

• Eisenman's "Champagne and Chopped Liver," directed by Peter Gelblum, which benefits from over-the-top performances by both Widman and a delightful Ali Eppy as Syd's wife Sadie.

• A hauntingly eerie "Louie, Louie," written by Charlotte Ortiz Colavin,

which is delicately directed by Kathryn Adkins and with an engrossing performance by Kennedy Cartwright in the title role.

These four are part of Night "A." The best in Night "B:"

• There's a lot of roughhousing going on in Greg Rowe's "Like a Lullaby," as directed by Mike Ryan. All three actors (Kip Alpert as Michael, Nat Rob-

inson as Rick and Scott Kravitz as Tom Junior) sustain the mood, although it's a stretch to imagine the working-class Tom waxing poetic in the midst of creating mayhem.

• Ruth Elliott is uplifting as the down-but-not-out cancer patient Ruth and Deborah Bryant connects as her stalwart friend Leslie in Mercilee Jenkins'

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# 8 Tens

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“Winning” (with crisp direction from Ian McRae).

- Pound for pound, the biggest laughs of the night come in John Boni’s infectious “Pound for Pound,” with sprightly direction from Brian Spencer and spot-on acting from Marty Lee Jones and Evan Hunt as very erudite bar buddies.

- “Change of Heart,” written by Vincent Durham and lovingly directed by Gerry Gerringer. This one will bring a tear to the eyes of many audience members. MarNae Taylor and Robert Summers are especially touching in this play which, fittingly, is the last one of the evening.

Several other individual actors such as Megan Parle as Ginger in “Poison Control,” Wolfe’s Max in “Murder Most Foul,” Danielle Crook in “Office Hours,” and Sarah Kauffman as Claire in “The Men’s Room Monologues” also deserve admiration.

There are at least flashes of brilliance in just about every entry, and most have thoughtful direction and acting as well.

The ninth “play” each evening is actually unexpectedly enjoyable (although sometimes a bit

too lengthy): the scene changes. Obviously, when there are eight very different plays onstage in one night, each set has to be cleared, then a new one constructed before the actors take their places. This year the hard-working stage crew members (Amy Fette, Gabby Radojevic and assistant stage manager Buff McKinley) got a terrific boost from Cabrillo Stage’s set designer Skip Epperson, who came up with a remarkable set of Lego-type building blocks that are snapped together and apart with visible efficiency.

Kudos, too, for the sound design (Davis Banta) and sound operating team of Carolyn Collins and Fabian Gauthier who provide a mélange of harmonious music during those long scene changes.

So, there you have it: A potpourri of theater that is uniquely Santa Cruz and clearly a homegrown treasure after 20 years of leadership effort from “8 Tens” artistic director Wilma Marcus Chandler and Santa Cruz Actors’ Theatre president Bonnie Ronzio. They consider it their gift to the community and, as Chandler explains in her program message, “... the arts are a testament to what is most valuable and decent in humanity.”