

COVER STORIES

# The Rebirth of Actors' Theatre in Santa Cruz

The return of an iconic and pioneering local theater group to a scene that seems to once again be ready for it

THE SUCCESS OF ACTORS' THEATRE'S 'THE MOUNTAINTOP' LAST MONTH CONFIRMED TO BONNIE RONZIO AND WILMA MARCUS CHANDLER THAT THEY WERE ON THE RIGHT TRACK FOR A FULL 2018 SEASON. PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

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Wilma Marcus Chandler remembers what put the Santa Cruz theater scene on the map for the first time. In 1982, Chandler, Donna Gorman, Diane Grunes and Donna Zavada produced a National Festival of Women's Theater that drew 80 theater companies to Santa Cruz from around the world.

"We had companies from Israel and France and London, and all over America," says Chandler. "They came and they did their work, and they did workshops, and it was amazing. It took place in Actors' Theatre, it took place at Loudon Nelson, it took place on the streets. It was a Fringe Festival kind of thing, and it was really exciting. And I think that's what kind of got Santa Cruz a little bit known internationally for theater."

Of course, Santa Cruz had a flair for drama long before that. The seminal local theater group was probably the Santa Cruz Community Players in the 1950s; after that dissolved came companies as varied as Pasatiempo Productions in the '60s, Bear Republic Theater and the Cabrillo Players in the '70s, and Pacific Coast Productions and Shakespeare Santa Cruz in the '80s.

"It started fomenting, and it's been going ever since," says Chandler.

One of the most important moments in the history of the local scene, though, came in 1985 when Barbara Zollinger, Abbey Goss and Rod Wilkerson founded Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre at the now-famous "Center Stage" at 1001 Center Street.

The company made its mark in the '80s producing contemporary plays, and drawing from a thriving community of local playwrights. Actors' Theatre pulled together some of the most talented directors, actors and crew in the history of Santa Cruz theater, including Chandler. In the '90s, it hit new heights when its annual *8 Tens @ 8 10-minute-play festivals* became known as a fixture of West Coast theater.

But by 2011, the struggling Actors' Theatre had turned over the Center Stage Theater to Julie James' Jewel Theatre Company, which became the only local theater group producing plays year-round for several years. It seemed like it might be the end of the Actors' Theatre story—but it wasn't, thanks to Bonnie Ronzio, who had been a central part of the group since starting out as a stage manager in its early days.

"I was called back to be on the board just before we gave the theater up in 2011," says Ronzio. "At that time, we were all really burned out. But there was something about it—I said, 'I can't let the *8 Tens* go. I gotta keep it going.' So I decided to keep the company going, and I ran it out of my house. We did *8 Tens* for a few years, and then, thank god, Wilma came back."

Together, Ronzio and Chandler devised a plan to resurrect Actors' Theatre as a year-round theater company—a plan that has come to fruition with a full season of productions for 2018 that includes not only *8 Tens @ 8* (recently expanded to 16 10-minute plays as *8 Tens @ 8 x2*) but also stagings of Will Eno's *The Realistic Joneses* and John Logan's *Red*. Under an agreement with James—whose Jewel Theatre now operates mainly in the Colligan Theater at the Tannery Arts Center, but who still runs the Center Stage Theater—they will produce the entire season back at 1001 Center Street.

Why bring Actors' Theatre back now? For Chandler, it's very simple.

"I feel like a theater company has to produce theater, and this town is hungry for it," she says. "Julie can't do it all, and our choices are different. We do new work or cutting-edge contemporary theater. We have a certain reputation, and we need to keep that going."



## TURNING THEATER AROUND

Actors' Theatre's iconic reputation came from humble beginnings. Goss and Wilkerson, who married in the mid-'70s and are still together today, ran a company called West Abbey Theatre into the early '80s, in the Soquel building originally known as the Osocales Theatre when it opened in 1948 (it became the Soquel Cinema in 1951, and is now a church).

"At that time, Santa Cruz was cooking. There were 15 theater companies," says Goss. "Through the years, they've come and gone."

In 1985, Zollinger approached them about starting a new company.

"Barbara said she was thinking about funding a theater project, and asked if we would help her," says Wilkerson. "She was the major donor, the angel of the project. Abbey was the executive director and artistic director. I was kind of the original volunteer."

What most people don't know—even those who have spent many hours seeing drama, comedy, improv or any other art form at 1001 Center Street—is that the Actors' Theatre founders designed it to be that intimate and versatile.

"Abbey is the one who designed the theater," says Patricia Grube, a local playwright and author whose plays were produced at Actors' Theatre in the '80s and '90s. "The stage used to be at the other end. She turned the room completely around. Before that, there was a stage and kind of a flat area. When Abbey took over the place, she redesigned the whole thing. She designed the stage at the Art League, too. She was wonderful."

The reorientation allowed the group to put in a dressing room and some of the other touches that made it such a utilitarian theater. "We looked at it, and it just made sense," says Wilkerson.

"I love the space," says Ronzio, who now serves as president of Actors' Theatre, with Chandler as vice president. "I have worked every venue in town, and it is my favorite place. I like the intimacy, the size; it's got everything. I'm just crazy about it. We've tried to elevate our shows year after year—every year we think 'how can we take it to the next level?' And the space has always allowed us to do that."

Ronzio's father was an actor, and she was reading lines with him by age 10. But she never got the theater bug—that is, until Goss hired her on as stage manager for one of Actors' Theatre's early productions, Herb Gardner's *A Thousand Clowns*.

"Everything kind of came back to me. The smells—the lumber, the paint. I was flooded with memories of my childhood and I was like, 'Why didn't I get into this before? Where have I been?'" Ronzio remembers. "Abbey said, 'Oh, you're fantastic,' and she started using me as stage manager for everything that came through."

That was a key part of Goss' vision as the artistic director of Actors' Theatre. A longtime educator, she wanted to bring people into local theater who didn't even know they could do it.

"I love theater. I love talent," says Goss. "I wanted people who thought, 'Oh, I can't do that. I can't get up on stage.' We had really good people, and it was a great space."

Chandler believes the Center Street stage also made an ideal center for the local theater community. Despite her family's background running the box offices of Broadway theaters while she was growing up, Chandler had been focused exclusively on dance—teaching at UCSC and Cabrillo, among other schools—until she got a speaking part in a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* at Staircase Theatre, a Soquel venue that made its mark locally from 1972 to 1979.

Bitten by the theater bug, she got a master's in drama from San Jose State University and a job in Cabrillo's Theater Arts Department. As a director, she felt Actors' Theatre allowed her to draw from all of the county's talent hotspots.

"Working there, I was able to bring Cabrillo people, UCSC people, community people, Watsonville people into that one cohesive area where we could bring everybody together," she says. "I don't like calling it 'community theater,' because I think it branches beyond that to university theater, college theater, El Teatro Campesino. I call it regional theater, and I just love how it became a central magnet for so many people."

## PRODUCTION VALUES

Early on, Actors' Theatre was known for producing many works by local playwrights, including not only Grube, but also Philip Slater—the late playwright and UCSC sociologist who authored the bestselling 1970 book *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, and was one of the first Americans to take LSD—as well as Audrey Stanley, Jim Bierman and Claire Braz-Valentine.

Indeed, there was a tight-knit group of talented local playwrights in Santa Cruz at the time, which Actors' Theatre was able to tap into like no local company before or since.

"The thing I really liked in the beginning was we had a group of playwrights, and we were trying to think how to get our plays produced, so once a month we would have a reading of a new play," says Grube. "It would be two nights, and after the reading they were allowed six rehearsals. It was a good way to get everyone their first reading of a play. That went on for quite a long time. We had a lot of readings, but most of us did also have plays produced, too."

The first time Grube ever saw her work produced on stage was a play Actors' Theatre regular Clifford Henderson directed called *Grandpa's Breakfast*, which Grube had written about her grandfather.

"Clifford directed it, and I learned so much," she says. "I realized then that when you write something, you have something in mind, and when someone takes it to produce it, they bring out things in it that you didn't realize were there. That was my first real wonderful feeling about having something directed."

There are several productions that stick out in Henderson's mind as highlights.

"We were doing really edgy stuff. It wasn't just local playwrights, at all—that was a big focus, but we were doing [Athol] Fugard, and all these really lovely plays," she says. "I was acting at that time, and I remember Phil Slater's play *Bug*, that I believe Bonnie directed. *That* was pretty darn edgy; it had never been produced before, and we got good houses for it."

In *Bug*, Henderson played Maddy, a woman who unexpectedly becomes the leader of an ecological movement after her predecessor is killed. Unable to handle the pressure, she runs away to live with her sister, Rita, and Rita's troubled, cynical son, *Bug*.

"His characters were quirky and wonderful, and his dialogue was always really good," Henderson says of Slater's work. "It just had that Santa Cruz flair. Phil was such a Santa Cruzan to the bone, you know? And it resonated here."

Another of her favorite Actors' Theatre productions has a more personal subtext: it's where she met her partner, Dixie Cox.

"This was probably my most favorite thing ever: we produced Carolyn Gage's *Amazon All-Stars*, which was a lesbian musical that was a huge success. It was a sell-out every night," says Henderson. "It was a musical about a lesbian softball team, with lots of song and dance. That's where I met Dixie."

Together, Henderson and Cox would go on to produce the Santa Cruz Improvathon, a fundraiser that started at Actors' Theatre and kicked off the local comedy improv mania of the '90s.

"It was kind of how the whole crazy improv thing started in Santa Cruz," she says. "It's still huge. Dixie and I moved over to the Broadway Playhouse [as the Fun Institute], but we are still teaching that Saturday morning improv, to huge classes. That's where that started."



Michelle Binsch played Amelia Earhart in Actors' Theatre's 1993 production of 'Blue Skies Forever,' written by local playwright Claire Braz-Valentine and directed by Clifford Henderson. PHOTO: SUSAN HELGESON

## ABRIDGED TO SUCCESS

But if there's one thing Actors' Theatre—and possibly Santa Cruz theater in general—is most known for, it's *8 Tens @ 8*. Oddly, the long-running 10-minute play festival came about 22 years ago in part because of a scheduling quirk.

“We used to have a company that would come down from San Francisco and rent the January spot. I was working in the office at that time,” says Grube. “They backed out, and we just had an empty January. Nobody seemed to want to go to the theater in January.”

The Actors' Theatre crew knew that a theater group in Louisville, Kentucky was having success with a 10-minute play festival, even publishing collections of the best scripts.

“There was nothing like that on the West Coast,” says Chandler. “So I wrote to them and said ‘Can we be your sister city?’ And they didn't care. So we started the West Coast version, and we were the first ones. The first year, we did only Monterey Bay area writers. The second year, we did California writers. Third year, we did West Coast writers. And then we went all over the country, and now it's international.”

Since producing the first *8 Tens @ 8* in 1995, they've juried more than 3,000 plays, and produced several hundred. The festival is regularly written up in regional and national publications like *American Theater Magazine*. The short format allows both writers and directors room to experiment, without risking the success or failure of a full-length endeavor. And a 10-minute play can have its own special resonance.

“I think my all-time favorite play was from Dale Addius, who used to work at Cabrillo,” says Chandler. “Dale wrote a play called *The Perm*, which takes place in a beauty shop, and it's a two-person play about a woman whose husband accidentally hit a child on the road. It starts out as a comedy, and ends up as a very serious piece. I just thought it really exemplified the power of a 10-minute play, how it can move from what you think you're going to get to something much larger. I think a lot of them are like that.”

“What I always find exciting about it is within those 10 minutes, the character development is so deep and so strong,” says Ronzio. “The interpretation that each director gives a piece, working with the playwright and developing the characters, is just amazing.”

This year, the company's six-member board read through 180 plays to pick the final 16 that will be produced in January. One of them, *Dragon Skin* by Steve “Spike” Wong, is being directed by Patricia Grube's son, Don Grube. Another, *M and the Water Man* by Hannah Vaughn, will be directed by Gerry Geringer, who is also directing this season's production of *The Realistic Joneses*.

“This season is going to be incredible,” says Chandler. “*The Realistic Joneses*, and then I'm directing *Red* in the fall, which is about Mark Rothko's life, the painter. And we're actually going to paint a Rothko onstage. They're both beautiful plays.”

“Wilma has been the driving force behind this,” says Ronzio of the company's year-round rebirth. “I was happy doing the *8 Tens*, and building our little nest egg. When the nest egg got healthy enough, we wanted to do more theater. We added some more people to the board, and decided we would do *The Mountaintop* last year, and we had *God of Carnage* the year before. So we had the *8 Tens* and the one down, and we felt pretty solid about it. We decided we needed at least three plays a year—and we went for it. Julie has been great about giving us time slots.”

In a way, this is exactly why Julie James kept the Center Stage Theater when JTC moved to the larger Colligan Theater two years ago.

“I knew if we didn't keep it as a theater, the landlord might not be able to,” says James. “If there wasn't a small theater company that could afford a year-long lease, what would happen?”

James sees Actors' Theatre as a group that has navigated the ups and downs of the theater world the right way.

“The great thing about Actors' Theatre is they've always had a following, and they've kept their *8 Tens @ 8* every year to keep that following there with them. And now they've come to a point where they can expand, and use the space more again. It's just really cool and wonderful that they're having this re-blossoming,” she says. “All of us in theater—I have business relationships with Santa Cruz Shakespeare, and Mountain Community Theater—we all want to support each other. Because the more of us there are, the better it is for all of us. I think we all feel that way.”

Chandler agrees that those relationships sustain the often-precarious theater scene.

“Jewel has really emerged, and god bless 'em, they're doing really professional work,” she says. “Mountain Community Theater's been around for a long time, and has really become polished over the years. They have a very dedicated board and dedicated constituency who have really worked to make that rise. They're doing great work up there. Others come and go. There are a number of small companies now that are still trying hard to finance. A lot of it is money. There are no theater spaces, there are high rents, and scheduling is a nightmare.”

Both Chandler and James characterize the vitality of the theater scene as “ebbs and flows.”

“But we all are doing interesting stuff in different ways, and there are enough people, it feels like to me,” says James. “Because here we are, we've been growing, and Actors' Theatre is growing, and Santa Cruz Shakespeare is growing, and has been able to get out of the UC and maintain an audience. I think the only way for us to all do it is to work together. Our ultimate goal is to keep theater alive, and keep theater in front of people, and in their hearts.”

For founding Artistic Director Abbey Goss, the knowledge that Actors' Theatre will live on is both astonishing and emotional. “Yesterday I had a good cry when I found a whole box of scripts we had used,” she says. “I thought, ‘It was so wonderful to be involved with.’ When you're not doing it, you sometimes wonder if you really did it. I'm thrilled it's going to go again.”

*Actors' Theatre's 2018 season opens with the ‘8 Tens @ 8,’ Festival, Jan. 5-Feb. 4 at Center Street Theater, 1001 Center St. in Santa Cruz. For more information about this season, and for tickets and subscriptions, go to [sccat.org](http://sccat.org).*