

# Short and Sweet: 8 Tens @ 8 fills the Actors' Theatre stage

By [Christina Waters](#)

January 29, 2025



BORDER CROSSING Eva Schewe, Ward Willats and Gurjeet Bagri lend star power to 'Giver of Beauty.'  
PHOTO:PortraitsByTashi.com

Liberal splashed with references to AI, gender confusion, the odd capitalist critique and psychotherapy gone wrong, the Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre stage currently offers an eclectic array of 10-minute attractions. New this season was the use of projected backdrops that changed with each play, adding mood and context. The projected photos by various designers expanded the scenic possibilities of the theater's small stage, transporting us into the specific world each play required. Great idea!

Could we please just clone Ward Willats? Or at least his voice? Perhaps the only drawback of this season's rambunctious 8Tens@Eight Festival is that the dashing Willats appears in exactly one and only one of the wide-ranging productions. But I'll settle for it. Besides, there's ample excitement and surprise in the 16 swift pieces showing in two installments (Part 1 and Part 2) through Feb. 16.

Seasoned players return to the tiny stage this winter—Avondina Wills, David Leach, Helene Simkin Jara among others—as well as notable newcomers inspired by the energy of fresh scripts chosen from hundreds of submissions. Our annual short play festival has gotten so good, so reliably appealing, that most nights play to full houses of highly receptive audiences. Of course it's all pot luck, but each of the evenings has its hits.

*The Nearest Far Away Place*, by Aleks Merilo, offered steadily increasing tension powered by newcomer Jennifer Honka and never-better Michael LaMere. A surprise twist at the end worked its magic perfectly, thanks to actors, script and direction by Cathy D. Warner.

Honka later teamed up with scene-stealing Mathew Chipman, Geneffa Jahan and Lucille Nye in *Grouchy*, a little gem that depended on clever word play, over-the-top performing and Chipman's ownership of the stage. All were knockouts in this one, newcomer Jahan holding her own easily against the catty duo of Nye and Honka. Here's hoping all four of these actors show up regularly on future stages.

Which brings me to the versatile Willats, hilarious as the long-suffering partner of Eve Schewe in *Giver of Beauty*. The two portray a clueless tourist couple attempting to cross the border into Tibet. Gurjeet Bagri was tone perfect as the unflappable border guard while Schewe and Willats worked their way into hilarious meltdown thanks to a brisk sit-com script by Randy Warren. Karin Babbitt's direction was spot-on in this post-SNL sketch.

Part 2 offerings included spitfire acting from the incredible Manirose Bobisuthi as a foul-mouthed witch in *Duels and Detentes*. In an almost charming but definitely distinctive two-hander, *The Wakers*, both David Leach and Tom Boyle created an unusual and compassionate couple engaged in irregular sleeping habits.

The second half of Part 2 provided my two favorites of this season. *The Scorpion Dance* by Jon Haller proved a charismatic send-up of equity bias assumptions in the hands of director Andrew Davids, himself a notable regional actor. In this one Rebecca Clark (of Santa Cruz Shakespeare fame) delivered the goods as a performance coach for defendants preparing for their day in court. Avondina Wills, as a know-it-all corporate defendant sparred impeccably with Clark in this study of emotional intelligence that had me completely captivated.

The other bit of pungent theater was thanks to playwright Jim Larson and director Sally Bookman's *Exit Strategy*. The set-up was timeless and timely, a daughter trying to convince her father to sell his house and move to assisted living, while his housekeeper busily eavesdrops. Susy Parker was all daughter-knows-best persistence, a brilliant Tom Boyle having fun as the defiant dad. Playing housekeeper Denise Keplinger provides the zingers that move toward a crisp, entertaining ending.

Live theater at its most brisk, theatrical diversity at its most playful. Quick, grab some of the remaining tickets.

*8 Tens @ 8* runs through Feb. 16 at Actors' Theatre, 1001 Center St., Santa Cruz. [santacruzactorstheatre.org](http://santacruzactorstheatre.org)