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STAGE AND STREAM

New Actors' Theatre head Andrew Ceglio looks to the future as the pandemic drives drama online **BY CHRISTINA WATERS P14**



STAGE NOTES *Andrew Ceglio singing with the Cabrillo Jazz Band in 2012. First known to local audiences as a performer, Ceglio recently took over as Executive and Artistic Director for Actors' Theatre. PHOTO: JANA MARCUS*





PLAYING WITH POSSIBILITIES

As the famed '8 Tens @ Eight' festival goes virtual, Actors' Theatre points a way toward the future of stage companies **BY CHRISTINA WATERS**

Actor Willem Dafoe once said, "With theater, you have to be ready for anything." Nobody knows that better than the intrepid producers of Santa Cruz's Actors' Theatre, who were poised to plunge into a season of live theater this week with the celebrated *8 Tens @ Eight* festival.

Alas, reality—in the form of the Covid-19 Omicron variant—brought down the house. In a heartbreaking, yet not entirely unexpected development, the *8 Tens @ Eight* festival has been canceled for 2022.

"Actors' Theatre has worked so incredibly hard to get to the point of finally opening," says new Executive and Artistic Director Andrew Ceglio. "But with the Omicron data, and if things continue on their present course, our run of the *8 Tens* would fall right at the peak of this current Covid surge."

Luckily, Actors' Theatre had already been looking ahead, and used grant funds to hire a film crew to document the entire suite of plays. The crew was in place over the weekend to capture live

performances for future on-demand viewing. So while the live theater experience must wait a while longer, the enjoyment of savoring the work—the dramatic tension and comic surprise of these plays—will still be available. It's a clever and forward-looking way of snatching theatrical victory from the mouth of defeat.

"This is the way of the future," Marketing Director Jana Marcus told me shortly after the tough decision was made. "At Actors' Theatre, we are so fortunate to produce original content that is not beholden to large licensing houses. With the on-demand platform, Actors' Theatre will be able to reach a wider audience for what is the longest-running short play festival in America."

8 Tens founder and longtime Actors' Theatre director, Wilma Marcus, believes in the company "that is deeply a part of the Santa Cruz artistic community, supported over the decades by many, many writers, theatre lovers and theatre professionals."



WOODS YOU RATHER Ceglio in Cabrillo Stage's 2019 production of 'Into the Woods.' PHOTO: JANA MARCUS

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Marcus is pleased with the hiring of Ceglio to inherit the helm of the iconic local company. "I'm happy to have handed the baton to Andrew Ceglio. He is multi-talented, very dedicated to Actors' Theatre and has come on board at just the right moment to bring new energy, new enthusiasm and lots of hands-on experience with the many aspects of theatre arts," she says. "We are in good hands with this transition."

HOLDING PATTERNS

During the unpredictable pandemic, performance venues and organizations have been stuck on hold, hoping for a thaw that would allow for live audiences and actors on stage once again. Actors' Theatre leaders went to great lengths to try to ensure that a live theater season would be possible this year, including selling only half the seats

for each performance, allowing more space between patrons and installing a new HEPA filtration system that circulates fresh air every seven minutes and meets current CDC regulations. They also required that all actors, staff and audience require proof of full vaccination.

At the center of things, holding the moving parts together, has been Managing Director Jana Marcus.

"During the two years of the pandemic, we lost Bonnie Ronzio, who as producer ran everything, but we also gained the lease to the Center Stage Theater, which had previously been with Jewel Theatre. Both those events involved unraveling the past and rebuilding the future," says Marcus. "Preparing a show after two years involved mundane things like just trying to figure out what was in our storage unit for props, to really huge things

like Wilma stepping down and handing the reins to Andrew to run the company as Executive and Artist Director. It has been a round-the-clock experience since late October, with donor drives, season announcements, building new procedures and protocols, receiving grants and allocating for them, website updates, hiring staff, buying equipment, etc."

The company's backup plan—filming to preserve the performances—predicted the future and offered a salvage strategy.

"Ticket holders of the canceled sold-out run of the *8 Tens* festival will have options," a disappointed but determined Marcus told me last week. "Actors' Theatre will be contacting patrons shortly with options of either a refund or to seamlessly move their purchase to the on-demand platform to view the film in February."

NEW DIRECTION

"I am the type of person who has backup plans for my backup plans," admits Ceglio. "The pandemic has in many ways provided all companies with the opportunity to reinvent themselves." Well-known to local theatergoers for his acting chops, Ceglio came on board last year when *8 Tens* founder Wilma Marcus announced her intention to retire. After years of working in almost every possible nook and cranny of acting—producing and directing in the Santa Cruz area as well as film production work in Los Angeles between 2014 and 2018—Ceglio was hungry to get back into live theater.

"I did some minor directing here and there in the Santa Cruz area—*Company* at Cabrillo Stage, as well as directing one play for *8 Tens* in 2016," he says, "but my work with Actors' Theatre had been minimal. Then Wilma Marcus called me last January. Bonnie [Ronzio] had just died and Wilma wanted some new person in place so she could retire."

Ceglio's immediate response was, "Absolutely, 100 percent yes!" It's a phrase he pulls out of his repertoire in the blink of an eye. And it's an attitude that bodes well for the future of the 26-year-old theater company.

Ceglio had his eye on the future when he came on board last year, first as Associate Art Director, "essentially shadowing Wilma, and learning the ropes," then more recently as Artistic Director. "One of my big pushes for this coming year will be to establish a strong online and social media presence for Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre. As much as I would love for things to be the old-school way of networking and connecting in person, this is the age we live in now, and there are some strong benefits to developing this aspect of the company."

Ceglio originally suggested the filming of the 2022 *8 Tens* performances, because "it will help audience expansion, and would be a guarantee that should things get bad, Covid-wise, we would have a high-quality video." Ceglio

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PLAYING WITH POSSIBILITIES

“I am the type of person who has backup plans for my backup plans.” — ANDREW CEGLIO

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reasoned that “the company would still have a revenue stream, should performances need to be abridged due to pandemic considerations.” A crystal ball couldn’t have done better.

“Regardless of what happens with the pandemic or when it may subside, being able to offer our productions through an on-demand or livestream format is something that I plan to make a permanent fixture of the company,” he says. “Actors’ Theatre is fortunate to have a long history of fostering and collaborating with new artists and new works, many which are unlicensed properties. This provides many benefits: it allows us more flexibility when it comes to on-demand or livestreaming contracts, and it makes it possible for playwrights to have more freedom and be more involved with the negotiation process of how their work is presented.”

Ceglio was intimately involved in programming the rest of the current season. All three of the post-*8 Tens* plays are by emerging playwrights, including *The Milkcrate Monologues*, written by Ron Johnson, a local hip-hop artist who lives half the year in L.A.

“The piece fuses theater, married with hip hop,” Ceglio says. That’s where his longtime L.A. contacts came in handy. “Absolutely 100%. And I have already scouted a 2023 season as well,” he says, adding that during the off-season he plans outreach with the community, “looking for more local artists here in Santa Cruz.”

Known to locals for his work as an actor with Cabrillo Stage, Ceglio admits that for the last eight years he’s been more focused on directing and producing.

“I’m being selective about on-stage roles. But the stage is always my first home,” he says. “It’s so seductive.”

SPACE-TIME COMPRESSION

The ten-minute lifespan of the season-opening *8 Tens* is what makes them so appealing. “The challenge here is telling a satisfyingly complete story—with a beginning, middle, and end—in such a short span of time,” explains Santa Cruz playwright Kathryn Chetkovich. “It’s not just a situation or an evocation of a mood, but a full narrative arc, with characters who want things and risk things and find themselves saying things we suspect they’ve never said before, and where something ultimately happens that you didn’t expect—but that nevertheless feels inevitable when it does.”

Local theater veteran Gail Borkowski was deep into rehearsal when I caught up with her last week, just before the filming of the *8 Tens* play she directs, “Are You One of Those Robots?” I was in the audience several years ago for Borkowski’s playwrighting debut at Actors’ Theatre, *Waking Up*, about a white couple that goes to bed one night and wakes up the next morning as African-Americans. The play was a vivid, funny and wildly surprising wake-up call to everyone watching. It did, in a mere ten minutes, exactly what good theater should do.

“The 10-minute play is 10 pages long,” Borkowski says. “Telling a complete story in such a short time, it’s pretty phenomenal.”


She likes the *8 Tens* format “because it’s short, not as many rehearsals, not as many schedules to coordinate. It is part of what excites me. The magic from rehearsing in a living room to moving into working with lighting and props, then finally to the stage.”

The pandemic has changed much about bringing a play to life. “As theatre people, we’re passionate.

We're huggers—I'm a hugger," Borkowski says with a laugh. "And even though *that* has been compromised, I'm so thrilled being in this community. The journey is as exciting as the arrival."

When the lights go down and actors appear live onstage, we in the audience are plunged into another world, a world of the imagination. Our daily lives melt away and a place and time we've never experienced before materializes before our eyes.

Complete magic. The challenge for us now is to watch the short plays on our screens and suspend disbelief, fall under the spell of actors, words and movement, and let the magic emerge.

"Where many people just see roadblocks and the departure from the old ways," says Ceglio, "I see opportunities and possibilities for us to become even more creative with how and where we can provide enriching theater experiences." 

Actors' Theatre '8 Tens @ 8' Short Play Festival

"A" NIGHT

WONDER PEOPLE

by Madeline Puccioni.
Directed by Hannah Eckstein.

ARE YOU ONE OF THOSE ROBOTS? by Dierdre Gerard.
Directed by Gail Borkowski.

ME AND HIM

by Michael John McGoldrick.
Directed by Andrew Davids.

NOBODY'S HERO

by Charles Anderson.
Directed by Evan Hunt.

FREE HUGS by L. H. Grant.
Directed by Marcus Cato.

OLD AQUATICS

by Steven Kobar.
Directed by Gerry Gerringer.

TOGETHER AT LAST

by Stella Pfefferkorn
(YoungPlaywrights Festival Winner). Directed by Kathie Kratochvil.

KEW GARDENS

by James Armstrong.
Directed by Bill Peters.

GOD ON THE COUCH

by Dan O'Day.
Directed by Peter Gelblum.

"B" NIGHT

STRESS FOR SUCCESS

by Terrence Patrick Hughes.
Directed by Kathie Kratochvil.

GONE

by AJ Davey Ouse (Young Playwrights Festival Winner).
Directed by Andrew Ceglio.

ROSA & LEO

by Adam Szudrich.
Directed by Jim Schultz.

THE MALTESE WALTER

by John Minigan.
Directed by Cathy Warner.

DITMAS

by Glenn Alterman.
Directed by Helene Simkin Jara.

THE CORIOLUS EFFECT

by Robert Lynn.
Directed by Anita Natale,

SLOW DATING

by Adam Szudrich.
Directed by Buff McKinley.

UNHEARD

by Glenn Alterman.
Directed by Sarah Albertson.

DRESS BLUES

by Donald J. Loftus.
Directed by Karin Babbitt.

Live performances have been cancelled, but the performances will be available on-demand virtually. Go to santacruzactorstheatre.org for streaming options. Send email inquiries to ATboxofficetickets@gmail.com Season subscriptions, including the on-demand film of the 8 Tens plays, are available at santacruzactorstheatre.org/tickets.



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