

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

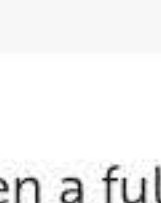
The applause isn't over yet: Your fall/winter theater guide



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Quick Take

Summer theater might be winding down, but the curtain isn't closing anytime soon. Santa Cruz County's stages are packed with comedies, dramas, musicals, opera, holiday favorites and a few surprises, giving audiences more reasons than ever to head to the theater.

It's been a full summer of theater, and the rousing applause isn't over yet. If you thought the curtain was coming down for the year, think again. This fall and winter, Santa Cruz County's stages continue to be packed with enough comedy, drama, music and holiday cheer to keep your weekends fully booked. Even a few new production companies are joining the list, making one thing clear: Local theater isn't slowing down anytime soon.

Let's start with **Santa Cruz Shakespeare**, which has given us an incredible three-show summer with "[Much Ado About Nothing](#)," "[Macbeth](#)," and "[Fences](#)." So why stop now? It has expanded to two offerings this fall: Noël Coward's razor-sharp comedy "**Private Lives**" (opening Sept. 5), and the emotionally intimate musical by Jason Robert Brown, "**The Last Five Years**" (opening Sept. 12), both in the Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park.

SC Shakes has also expanded its revel offerings to a Tuesday night series, which will highlight two local treasures not to be missed. First, Joe Ortiz's one-woman, one-act musical "**Smoke Cabaret**" starring Lori Rivera plays on Sept. 15. If you've never heard Rivera sing jazz, here's your chance. Ortiz wrote "Smoke Cabaret" specifically for Rivera, and after more than 40 performances from San Francisco to Greenwich Village, she knows exactly how to inhabit the role. Rivera's smooth, smoky vocals alone are worth the price of admission.

On Sept. 29, the Santa Cruz Opera Project's production of "**La Bohème**" will grace the stage at the Audrey Stanley Grove. Expect a fun, interactive experience that will include the Cabrillo Youth Chorus under the direction of Carlin Truong.

In December, audiences can catch the return of "**A Christmas Carol**," for the third time, at the Veterans Memorial Hall in downtown Santa Cruz, playing Dec. 4 through 25.

Tickets to SC Shakes are available [here](#).



Mike Ryan and cast in the 2025 production of "A Christmas Carol," returning this holiday starting on Dec. 4. Credit: Kevin Lohman

Across town, [Actors' Theatre](#) continues to champion new work with the year's final showcase of the **36 North Playwrights' Collective** on Sept. 14. Headlining is Ruth Elliot's monologue, "**I Will Not Be Doing An Exit Interview**." Admission is free for the script-in-hand play reading. The popular series has audiences packing the theater for a chance to see new plays and participate in audience feedback during a Q&A afterward.

For its annual Halloween chill-thrill, Actors' Theatre will present Charise Castro Smith's "**Feathers and Teeth**," opening Oct. 16 and playing through Halloween night, Oct. 31. Director Miguel Reyna describes the play as part creature feature and part revenge tragedy. The dark comedy delivers a riveting exploration of grief and obsession, centering around an angsty teenager reeling from her mom's recent death, dad's new girlfriend and a few vicious creatures. The twisted tale comes with a heavy helping of blood. Note: This show has graphic violence.

Lest we not forget, Actors' Theatre is most renowned for being the longest-running short play festival in America with the **8 Tens @ Eight**. Going into its 31st season, the festival marks not only the beginning of a new year, but also the official start of a new theater season. Always sold out, get your tickets early for the Jan. 15 opening of 16 award-winning short plays performing in repertory.



"Pelusa" by Eric Alan Bower from the 2026 "8 Tens" festival, featuring Tom Boyle and Ward Willats. Credit: Davis Banta / Right Hand Creative

One of several new theater offerings in town this fall is Simon Hayward's **SH Theatrical**. It is mounting a production of "**Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde**" by Moisés Kaufman, the playwright who brought us "The Laramie Project." Drawing on trial transcripts, letters and historical documents, the play examines the prosecution that destroyed Oscar Wilde's career and forever changed his life.

The show's themes are an interplay among social forces, gender identity and the understanding of art. "Its treatment of society's ability to destroy people who are considered threatening because of their difference is amazingly relevant today," says Hayward, who is also directing the production. Catch this show Oct. 9 through 25 at the Veterans Memorial Building in downtown Santa Cruz. Tickets available [here](#).

If traditional Shakespeare isn't your thing, how about Shakespeare inside a wrestling ring? "**Henry IV Part One**" by William Shakespeare, in the style of a live WWE show! Produced by Josephine Czarnecki's GayInnocentHeartless Theatrics, "**HenryMania**" is an adaptation of "Henry IV" directed by Kira Lanoue and edited by Scottie Tsubota.

"It's 100% Shakespeare infused with the world of professional wrestling," says actor Ian Dyer, who plays Falstaff. The producers encourage audiences to come cheer with Falstaff, boo at Hotspur and witness the reigning champion, King Henry IV, pass on the title to the one true heir of the English throne. The show performs with a full wrestling ring, live matches, video segments and more. Catch this wacky fun at London Nelson Community Center in Santa Cruz for one weekend only, Sept. 24-27. Tickets available [here](#).



Shakespeare goes WWE with "HenryMania" at the London Nelson Center, one weekend only, Sept. 24-27. Credit: Photos by Davis Banta, creative by Delilah Eryavec

One of the season's most intriguing shows might be **Cabrillo College Theatre Arts Department's** production of "**Machinal**." Written in 1928 but startlingly modern, Sophie Treadwell's expressionist drama explores the crushing expectations placed on women and remains as unsettling today as when it premiered nearly a century ago. Inspired by a sensational real-life murder trial, "Machinal" tells the electrifying story of a young woman who, trapped by stifling expectations in a hard, mechanized society, performs an act of desperation to free herself, only to pay the ultimate price. The play runs Oct. 30 through Nov. 15 at the Crocker Theater in Aptos. Tickets available [here](#).

Opera lovers have a rare opportunity this fall when "**The Girl of the Golden West**" comes to the **Colligan Theater** in Santa Cruz. Giacomo Puccini's only American opera, set during California's Gold Rush, blends romance, betrayal and redemption against the backdrop of the Sierra foothills. Even more unusual, the score will be performed complete and in English, something opera fans don't often get to experience.

The production is the brainchild of well-known tenor and voice instructor Thomas Clark and directed by Gary L. Stanford, Jr. The cast includes Jordan Best (Santa Cruz Opera Project) as Minnie, the saloon owner, Xavier Prado as the Bandit and Robert Balonek as Sheriff Jack Rance. Conducting from the piano is Umberto Barisciani, visiting from Italy. Playing only four performances in Santa Cruz on Sept. 4, 6, 11, and 13, get your tickets [here](#).

If laughter is what you're after, Neil Simon rarely disappoints. On Sept. 18, **Mountain Community Theater** brings "**Rumors**" to the stage at Park Hall in Ben Lomond, directed by MarNae Taylor. "Rumors" remains one of Simon's funniest farces, piling misunderstanding upon misunderstanding until everything spins gloriously out of control.

For the holiday season, MCT presents a celebration of the universal joy of the holiday with Donald Margulies' "**Coney Island Christmas**." Set in 1930s Brooklyn, this heartwarming tale of a young Jewish girl cast as Jesus in her school's Christmas pageant explores themes of cultural identity, family traditions, and what it means to be American. Directed by Daria Troxell, it runs Nov. 20 through Dec. 13. MCT tickets [here](#).

Renegade Theater Company brings even more holiday warmth to the season with the critically acclaimed musical "**Come From Away**." Few modern musicals have earned the affection of audiences quite like this Tony Award-winning hit. Inspired by the true story of the tiny Newfoundland town of Gander, the show follows the extraordinary kindness shown by its residents after 38 airliners carrying nearly 7,000 stranded passengers were diverted there on Sept. 11, 2001. It's a moving celebration of compassion, resilience and the reminder that, even in the darkest moments, strangers can become family. Directed by Izzy Pedego, with musical direction by Jorge Torrez, the production opens Dec. 4 and runs through Dec. 19. Tickets and more info [here](#).

One thing is certain: The applause isn't fading anytime soon. With longtime favorites expanding their offerings, new companies stepping into the spotlight and a season packed with everything from Shakespeare and opera to holiday classics and brand-new works, Santa Cruz County audiences have more choices than ever.

The only thing more crowded than the stage this season might be your calendar.