

The Dramatist

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Northern Ohio

by *Faye Sholiton*

Dramatists have a guild, not a union, because we own our work and our ownership is inviolable. This distinction didn't stop four Cleveland DG members from launching "Playwrights Local 4181," a group devoted exclusively to supporting theater artists in Northeast Ohio. On their to-do list: new play development, staged readings, full productions, professional development, partnerships with other theatres, new technologies, and community outreach.

The project is the brainchild of playwright/educator David Todd, who moved back to Cleveland in 2014. He noticed that many area dramatists were not being served by even the most supportive produc-



PL4181 founder David Todd



STEVEN MASTROJANI

ing companies. Markets large and small had playwright centers, he thought. Why not Cleveland?

Early in 2015, Todd met with colleagues Tom Hayes, Arwen Mitchell and Michael Geither to create a “center of gravity” for area dramatists. Echoing the area’s blue collar vibe, they chose a worker motif. Everyone pitches in for the common good. (“4181” represents Cleveland’s latitude and longitude.)

The group hit the ground running, assigning titles and tasks. Todd is Artistic Director. Hayes is Managing Director. Mitchell is Literary Manager and Geither is Director of Education and Engagement. They quickly obtained non-profit status and found space at Waterloo Arts, in the city’s newly revitalized North Collinwood neighborhood. Arts organizations now offer an active schedule of programs, exhibits and live performances there.

By November, PL4181 had brought to Collinwood the first Cleveland Playwrights Festival. The two-day event featured staged readings of six short works, Michael Laury’s full-length *Dye Jung*, and a live performance/podcast of Geither’s *Flame Puppy*. There were workshops on craft and a professional development panel. By any measure, the event was a success, with more than 150 artists and area residents attending.

Now underway is a Spring Play Lab that offers writers three months of support with their full-length scripts. PL4181 provides directors, actors, and dramaturgs as well as space for table readings, feedback, rehearsal, and public staged readings. New works by Nivi Engineer, Claire Robinson May, and Amy Schwabauer are the centerpiece of the April Lab.

PL4181’s first fully staged production comes this May with Les Hunter’s *To the Orchard*. Winner of a Foundation for Jewish Culture New Play grant, it had early readings at Boston Playwrights Theatre and Brooklyn College. It took a move to Cleveland to stage its world premiere.

PL4181’s second production is slated for this November. It’s a documentary-style piece about the November 2014 shooting death of twelve-year-old Clevelander Tamir Rice. Police opened fire after mistaking the boy’s toy gun for a real one—and compounded the

damage by delaying a call for help. Neither officer involved will face criminal charges in a case that has gained national prominence. Six writers are interviewing community members, media, and law and government officials to reflect the impact of the tragedy and its aftermath. Following the play’s opening at Waterloo Arts, it will tour throughout the city and its inner-ring suburbs.

Plans are also in the works for a March 2017 weekend-long celebration of Cleveland-born playwright Mac Wellman. On the drawing board: a production of *Bitter Bierce*, Wellman’s homage to satirist Ambrose Bierce. Other Wellman plays (or Wellman-inspired scripts coming out of Wellman-style workshops) will be performed. The playwright is scheduled to attend the festivities.

The company couldn’t manage without partners. PL4181 relies on co-sponsorships with multiple organizations, including universities and theatres working on the Wellman festival. They now provide or curate live theatre performances at Waterloo Arts events. And their staff of educators lead writing workshops throughout the city.

Playwrights Local partners next with the Dramatists Guild, co-sponsoring our April regional meeting as part of its spring festival. The Guild benefits by welcoming potential members. And who knows? Guild members just might find solidarity in this new union.

For more information, visit www.playwrightslocal.org;

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