What happens when a produced, published, and award-winning playwright moves from a major metropolitan area to a smaller city in a state whose professional theatres are spread from coast to mountains and take hours to drive between? Does her playwriting career suffer or thrive? Looking at the biography for Jacqueline E. Lawton, it is easy to see her thriving with her move from Washington, D.C. to Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

In addition to writing plays, Lawton currently serves as an Assistant Professor in the school of Dramatic Arts at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), one of sixteen public universities in the state. Lawton’s success as a dramaturg and playwright has continued, as well. She is a recipient of the 2015-2016 Kenan Institute’s Creative Collaboratory Project Grant which is an opportunity that would not have been open to her had she stayed in the D.C. area. The grant is to fund Lawton’s writing a play, Ardeo. The play is to explore the “personal narratives from health practitioners and patients at the North Carolina Jaycee Burn Center at UNC-CH.” Lawton is to begin working on the project in February. According to Lawton, “this play will highlight the power, impact, and significance of narrative medicine to create new stories of healing and understanding.” After conducting interviews with staff and patients, Lawton will have two months to write the script for the public reading scheduled in May. The members should look for emails in April with information about a meeting that is to be held in conjunction with the play’s reading.

Lawton is happy with her move down south, which she made about a year ago. “It’s a beautiful state with endless blue skies,” she commented. “The biggest transition was learning how to write around so much sunshine!” Getting used to a different lifestyle has been good for her, as “the pace of living is slower, the food is great, and it’s an affordable place to live well. I have more time to write than ever before, which is good because I’ve got a number of commissions that need to be written!”

Those of us who are from North Carolina know that it is a place where one can carve and etch out a career; however, sometimes those outside of our fantastic state may have different conceptions of what it is like here. With this in mind, I asked Lawton whether she felt her moving to North Carolina had slowed the pace of her career at all.

“I don’t know how much further my career would be if I had ever lived in New York…and I may live there one day,” she replied. “I do know that living in D.C. helped me to establish myself in a way that living in Texas, where I grew up, wouldn’t have. Moving to Chapel Hill hasn’t negatively impacted my career at all. I’m still part of the national conversation and my work is being read and presented throughout the country.”

Lawton sums up her feelings about her move when she states that she does not “know what it means to be a North Carolina playwright, yet…but I look forward to finding out and seeing how it impacts my voice as a writer.”

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-
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 Laurenty’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.

Philadelphia
by Tom Tirney

The former ballroom in the beautiful Drake Building in Center City Philadelphia is being converted into a dual theatre facility that will soon house four companies—InterAct, Simpatico, Azuka, Inis Nua—as well as the new play development organization, PlayPenn. The as-yet-unnamed theatre space will represent the only multi-company space in the city and opens January 2016.

This is a boon for Center City and for writers. Together, these five companies produce over 80% of Philadelphia’s new work and premiers in any given year. While InterAct is the only theatre in the city that dedicates its entire season to new work, the partner theatres sharing the space generally have at least one premier as part of its programmed schedule. And PlayPenn’s professional readings are entirely devoted to new play development.

Fittingly, the first play to go up at the Drake is Guild member’s Kristoffer Diaz’s #the revolution, produced by InterAct. Premiering on January 22, 2016, this dark comedy skewers slacktivist politics by chronicling a social-media driven revolution that upends equality in America. This is Diaz’s second premier in Philadelphia following a 2009 production of The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity.

InterAct, Simpatico, Azuka, and Inis Nua will present full seasons of work in both theatre spaces which have been designed so that two plays can run concurrently. Further, PlayPenn will hold its educational classes, seminars, and annual July summer conference at the Drake as well.

InterAct Theatre is spearheading this move into the 8,500 square foot performing space after eighteen years at the 106-seat