Write Fit

After being upstaged by national productions, Playwrights Local 4181 is shining a spotlight on original works. / BY ANDREW POULSEN /

WHILE THE TWINKLING MARQUEES AT
Euclid Avenue and East 14th Street make it no secret that Cleveland gives its theater scene major billing, a new company wants to illuminate a group of creators usually behind the curtain: playwrights.

Playwrights Local 4181 has formed as the city’s first theater company exclusively dedicated to the development and production of plays written locally.

“Everyone we know believes the art resources in Cleveland are rich, but the playwriting element has fallen between the cracks,” says David Todd, artistic director at Playwrights Local. “As a local playwright, you’re set up with a discouraging situation where there’s really no path that you can try to take to produce or put your work out.”

Many local theaters stage national or classic productions, providing a smaller outlet for new work. So Todd, along with the group’s managing director Tom Hayes and director in residence Dale Heinen, researched playwright-driven theater in cities such as Chicago, Minneapolis and Cincinnati during the summer of 2015.

Then in the fall, Playwrights Local launched an inaugural playwrights festival. Whereas devised theater groups rely on collaboration between the players, directors and other crew members to come up with productions, Playwrights Local promotes pieces conceived entirely by playwrights.

Les Hunter’s To the Orchard, which the Baldwin Wallace University assistant professor wrote a decade ago and recently returned to, runs May 27-June 5 at Waterloo Arts and June 10-12 at Dobama Theatre. The play tells the story of a young woman struggling to reconcile her sexual orientation with her father’s traditional Jewish beliefs.

“The play is about a key identity issue for Jews in America,” says Hunter. “And that issue is learning how to connect our heritage with living in the secular world.”

The group also offers free readings and workshops to help playwrights hone their craft.

“We want to raise awareness for Cleveland as a playwriting city and add another facet to what is going on in the arts,” says Todd.