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## Fly-By-Night is keeping theater fresh, vital

By Tammy Holoman Special to Go Triad

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Patrick Brandt plays the silent film actor Madrid, and Kalen Gauden plays Kay in "Silent Pictures."

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**G**REENSBORO -- While serving up sandwiches at a Greensboro deli a few years ago, Rachel Downey and Laurel Ullman began talking about their shared passion for theater.

“We had both done a lot of theater, and Laurel and I just wanted to stage a show together,” Downey said.

Downey had a theater degree from Greensboro College, where she focused on stage management and directing. Ullman had received her bachelor of arts degree in theater from UNCG, and she and Downey had participated in myriad productions, locally and beyond, in different capacities.

The two soon discovered they had a lot in common and began hatching a plan with friend Tommy Trull, an award-winning playwright and poet who still teaches theater classes at Greensboro College and GTCC.

Together with a handful of fellow writers, actors, directors and technical

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specialists, over food and plenty of coffee at Downey’s house, the friends founded Fly-By-Night Theatre Company in 2009 with Downey as artistic director and Ullman doubling as an actor/marketing director.

The mission of the nine members would be staging never-before-seen shows, most of which they hoped could be written locally. After presenting plays in 2009 and again earlier this year, they recently announced their first full season.

The first performance, “Silent Pictures,” a comic-drama musical co-written by Trull and Chris Tilley, will be staged July 13-17 at The Broach Theatre in Greensboro.

“It’s a multimedia musical based on a short story by a Los Angeles writer named AshleyRose Sullivan, who I went to graduate school with,” said Trull, the group’s chief playwright, who received his MFA in playwriting from Spalding University in Kentucky.

“The core story is about a psychosomatically mute Spaniard in the 1920s who is fleeing heartbreak and winds up in the orange groves of California. He is discovered there and becomes a silent-picture star. He gets the opportunity to use this newfound stardom to maybe win the love of his life back. As that’s happening, the studio is making the switch toward ‘talkies,’ so he’s got to fight to save his role, essentially.”

Because the show’s lead character, Madrid, played by Patrick Brandt, doesn’t speak, the play incorporates the use of film, silent-movie style, to reveal what he’s thinking to the audience, Trull said.

Behind the scenes, Fly-By-Night’s members meet weekly for discussions and rehearsals at Downey’s home in order to stay within their budget.

Members fund the productions out of their own pockets, Downey said.

“Although we are doing some fundraising, ultimately, if we don’t make enough money to put the show up, we have to come up with it ourselves,” she said.

Originally presented by Fly-By-Night at the ninth annual Fringe Festival in January, “Silent Pictures” has been modified with new songs, dances and dialogue.

The group’s willingness to revisit and improve upon past productions is another way for members to hone their skills and their stories, Downey said.

“We may do something from this season a year and a half from now, but it won’t be the same show, now that we’ve done it and seen what works and what doesn’t,” she said. “We’ll

go back in and change characters or scenes.”

Fly-By-Night’s all-original productions set it apart, Trull said. “We’re not doing the shows that everybody else is doing all over the country,” he said.

“Theater needs new and exciting material to survive,” Ullman added. “We want to be one of those companies that produces that material and helps keep the theater world vital and fresh, and we hope people will come check us out.”

Fly-By-Night’s other shows this season include “Meteorites” by Phil Powell (Dec. 7-11, City Arts Studio Theater), a series of one-acts about disconnection; “The Greatest Actor Alive” by Tom Barker (January-February 2012, venue TBA), a theater company farce; and “The 27 Club” by Tommy Trull (June 6-10, 2012, The Broach Theatre), the story of an aging writer’s relationship with his rock star son and what results.

Contact Tammy Holoman

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