It's difficult to determine where talent comes from, says long-time theater director and educator, Fred Sternfeld. Some people are born with an innate ability to put themselves in make-believe circumstances, while others may need an outside spark to get the fires of their imagination burning.

Sternfeld, 56, has been working to provide that spark for 35 years—even longer, considering that he directed his first play at the tender age of 19. The 20-year Beachwood resident may not be directly under the stage lights, but ensuring that young actors don't melt under those lights is still a great place to be.

"They already have the desire," says Sternfeld. "I'm gratified that I can help them on their journey."

Along with directing three or four shows a year at local professional theaters, the bearded stage veteran has been teaching thespians to "break a leg" since the 1970s. He has served as artistic director for Beck Center for the Arts, holding similar positions during stops at Jewish Community Centers in Seattle and Dallas.

Sternfeld, originally of South Euclid, returned to the region in the early 1990s to help run Research Organics, Inc., a family-owned biochemical manufacturing company. That was just his day job, however. Sternfeld jumped right back into the theater scene as the artistic director of the Jewish Community Center of Cleveland's Arts & Culture program. In 2004, he joined Fairmount Center for the Arts, overseeing training for actors of all ages as well as student and professional productions.

His newest venture is the Hathaway Brown Theatre Institute (HBTI), a summer theater program for stage-hungry students from elementary school to college. The venture (www.hb.edu) will consist of coursework in drama, dance and music as well as fully-staged productions.

Pupils of all experience levels, including those with professional theatrical aspirations, will glean the tools needed to approach playing a variety of roles and to give better auditions.

"It will be a conservatory approach similar to what they get in college," Sternfeld says. "It's about creating a three-dimensional character and a truthful presence on stage."

"Many actors are not naturals," notes the director. "Even a person with a vivid imagination needs guidance to simulate the life of a pretend person." Sternfeld has seen that talent teased out of young people again and again over the years.

"Kids are capable of a lot," he says. "They can create some really incredible work."

It's always fun for Sternfeld to see one of his young charges "make it." The theater teacher has worked with Betsy Hogg, a Shaker Heights native who has appeared on Broadway in renditions of "The Crucible," "Fiddler on the Roof" and most recently, "Peter and the Starcatcher."

Sternfeld also mentored Jessie Gill, a current Beachwood High School student with
credits that include “Oliver” at Cain Park and “The Pillowman” at Cleveland Play House.

His longevity has allowed Sternfeld to dabble in a number of genres. He’s directed musicals (“Ragtime” at the Cleveland JCC/ Tri-C and “Disney’s Beauty and the Beast” at Beck Center) and socially conscious dramas (“Yellowman” at Karamu). It’s difficult to choose a favorite from the 100 shows he’s helmed, although a recent rendition of “The Miracle Worker” at TrueNorth Theatre is at least one personal standout.

Comedy, drama, musical or other, “the most important thing is to tell a compelling tale that moves people to thought, laughter or tears,” says Sternfeld. “I enjoy stories that say something important about the human condition.”

When he started off, Sternfeld was acting in those stories. As a high-schooler involved in youth theater, he volunteered to be a stage hand for a show. The folks who produced the play had different ideas.

“They dragged me to a piano, to sing something,” says Sternfeld. “They wanted me to be in (the play) because they didn’t have enough guys and I said, ‘What, me?’”

In college, Sternfeld started off pre-med, soon switching majors to concentrate on his love of theater. He recalls being transported by a student showing of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.” The manner in which the cast, as Sternfeld puts it, “found their way to the heart of the story” called out to him.

Some of Sternfeld’s ardor for the stage came from his mother, Violet, a painter and sculptor who also dabbled in theater. Violet even appeared in several of Sternfeld’s shows during his early years in the director’s seat.

His directorial debut was at Camp Wise, with “The Music Man.” It wasn’t long into the famous musical that Sternfeld realized he had trouble, and not the good River City kind.

“I was nervous; I didn’t have much training at that point,” Sternfeld says. “I mainly learned what not to do.”

The director is still learning, he adds. Stagecraft is a lifelong vocation, one constantly sifted through the filter of experience. When he’s not traveling, hiking or spending time with his two grown sons and wife Randi, Sternfeld will continue to hone his craft amid the strong local arts scene.

Good theater “is an important part of the fabric for any city,” he says. If it’s up to Sternfeld, he’ll have a lifetime keeping young actors on cue.