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## All the world's a stage as play moves between apartments

- Play is performed in people's apartments, moves frequently
- Audience sits at sides of room, is reminded not to participate
- Actors adapt to quirks of each home and its furniture
- Play is a comedy about romance and real estate

**NEW YORK (AP)** -- The air is filled with uncertain expectancy as purple-haired 20-somethings, urbane 50-somethings and those in between stream into the loft.

The 40 or so people exchange smiles without quite mingling. Some head for the pingpong table, while others put on lipstick or pull beers from the fridge.

The atmosphere is something between the first hour of a party and a real-estate open house, and it is, in fact, a bit of both. The apartment is the stage for a form-meets-function theatrical production called "The Sublet Experiment."

The play, a modern comedy of romance and real estate, has been performed since November in an ever-changing series of apartments and lofts, garnering something of a reputation as a novelty even in a city full of theatrical innovation. As The New York Times put it, the play offers "the most titillating peep show in New York: other people's apartments."

The play has appeared in three of the city's five boroughs and across the Hudson River in Hoboken, New Jersey, in venues ranging from sprawling lofts to small one-bedrooms -- all but one occupied and offered for free. The set consists of whatever there is in the host's apartment, except for a few imported props. The audience has ranged from 12 to 40 people, depending on the size of the apartment.

The audience sits around the space, and the action unfolds with an almost unnerving immediacy and intimacy. While spectators are politely reminded that they are just that -- not participants -- the setup doesn't let the audience fade into the comfortable distance and darkness of a conventional theater.

### Playwright: A 'cheating' way to draw audience in

"You always hope, when you're writing a play, to draw the audience into the world you create. And in some ways, this is cheating," playwright Ethan Youngerman, 29, says of his "The Sublet Experiment."

But if the setup makes spectators feel like voyeurs -- and it's hard not to, while listening to intimacies in a stranger's living room -- it is not without artistic purpose.

Financial considerations initially inspired the idea of producing "The Sublet Experiment" in apartments, but Youngerman and director Michelle Tattenbaum quickly saw that producing the play in peoples' homes reflected its themes of living in borrowed spaces. It is a cunning and swift-footed comedy that begins with an offer to share an apartment in exchange for sexual favors, and goes on to explore the assumptions people draw about others from their

surroundings.

### Actors adapt when phones, buzzers ring

"The Sublet Experiment" furthers a long history of theater in art galleries, streets and other nontraditional spaces, but it is something of a departure in its own nomadic, ad-hoc direction, says Joe Salvatore, a New York University education-theater professor who is not involved in the production. The shifting, unpredictable surroundings -- phones and buzzers have occasionally rung unbidden -- mean the actors "have to make new choices every time," Salvatore noted.

Tattenbaum's and Youngerman's friends and others have volunteered 13 apartments so far, enough to keep the show going at least through the end of April; the production rented a loft for March to take a break from moving, Tattenbaum said. The show, performed four nights a week at \$25 a ticket, has yet to advertise. Its audience has been drawn so far from word of mouth, e-mail lists and news coverage, Tattenbaum said.

### Free toilet paper for hosts

Hosts get free tickets, and the production staff supplies chairs for the audience, refreshments, clean-up, even toilet paper. The producers advise hosts to clear their living rooms of valuables that might be easily filched, but nothing has been stolen or damaged to date, Tattenbaum said.

"It's really funny to tell people about it because everybody is fascinated by the idea," said Noelle Teagno, who hosted the play in December in the sizable one-bedroom she and husband Graham Stevens, both actors, share in the Astoria section of Queens. But she acknowledged, "It's a little weird to come home and see a line of people waiting for your bathroom."

"The Sublet Experience" also can be startling for the actors, who have had to adapt to its constant changes. Since the first two apartments, they haven't run full rehearsals in each new environment, although they do spend perhaps an hour figuring out how to fit some key moments and elements into the new space.

"I love the fact that the show refreshes itself every week," says actor Adam Hyland, 28.

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