

Room with a murder mystery



THE SUBLET EXPERIMENT

Written by Ethan Youngerman; Directed by Michelle Tattenbaum

Performing Thurs., Dec. 14-Sat., Dec. 16 at an apartment on 8th Ave. in Chelsea

Performing Thurs., Jan. 4-Sat., Jan. 7 at an apartment on Grand St. in Williamsburg

For exact locations, visit www.subletexperiment.com

Erin Maya Darke and Marshall Sharer in the "Sublet Experiment," a roving play that's performed in a new apartment and neighborhood each week. It premieres in Chelsea next weekend. Photo by Davina Pardo.

BY STEVEN SNYDER

Most theater productions go through the effort of staging scenes only once. But in a new play that's building buzz as it crawls its way across the city, staging has become an ever-evolving, weekly affair.

Called "The Sublet. Experiment," this four-person play about New York's subletting culture and an unexpected romance that erupts from an unlikely crime is the brainchild of playwright Ethan Youngerman and director Michelle Tattenbaum. But it's not the play's story that has attracted the attention of the theater community - though a tale of Craigslist, identity theft, YouTube and reality television is timelier than some theater regulars are used to - so much as the way Youngerman and Tattenbaum have decided to perform it.

Starting before Thanksgiving and continuing at least through January, "The Sublet Experiment" is enjoying an impossibly long run (most off-off-Broadway productions are lucky to eclipse three weeks) by embracing a change of space. Each weekend the show opens in a new venue, an apartment that has been sublet by the two creators and modified into a makeshift theater for a three-night run.

Thus far, the show has journeyed from Washington Heights to the West Village and, this weekend's venue, Astoria. Next week-end, starting Dec. 14, the "Experiment," which plays for audiences of anywhere between 14 and 30, arrives in Chelsea for a limited, nearly sold-out weekend run before moving on to Williamsburg, the Upper East Side and, as Tattenbaum says, "who knows where next."

Setting aside, the play itself is difficult to take out of context.

On paper, it's a story about identity. Melanie (played with allure by Erin Maya Darke in an evocative performance of shifting loyalties) arrives one day in response to an online ad seeking a subletter. She's greeted by Eric (Adam Hyland, in a carefully measured performance that shifts smoothly, and completely believably, from a character who is reserved to one who's suspicious and outraged), a lanky young man who rushes around to reorganize his living room before letting in his prospective tenant.

Superficially, it's an encounter that seems normal because of the surroundings - a man needing a roommate, and a woman needing a place to keep her things.

But, in a theme that repeats itself throughout the production, appearances are deceiving. Adam is not as mild-mannered as he appears, and this seemingly innocuous meeting is far more sordid than we imagine. Later in the show, the apartment's door swings open and we're introduced to another Eric (Christian Maurice), who curiously enough shares the same name as the apartment's owner, and Harry (Marshall Sharer), who's invited up by Melanie whenever Eric is not around.

As motives are revealed, and as deceptions unravel, it's the audience - sitting only inches away - who watches and eavesdrops on the action surrounding them, aware of the parallel stories poised to violently collide.

The play is only made more powerful by its setting. The apartment feels like a natural, organic extension of the story's themes, and its interaction with the audience is intoxicating. Removed from the cramped rows and standard stage-audience relationship so many are used to in the theater, this somewhat improvised, apartment-bound experiment awakens us to this story, and these characters, in ways that would have been impossible in a more distanced scenario.

Immersed in the physical space of the interactions, we hear every sigh, and see the slightest smile. It's a new way of watching and, because of that, a more intriguing experience to plunge into.

And we're all too aware that the actors are plunging right along with us, similarly discovering and feeling their way through this space. One could see this play twice, in two different locations, and have vastly different experiences - the actors, the setting, the interaction ever-changing.

This isn't just a gimmick. It's a reordering of the experience, and the economics that have led theater to become something all-too-often stagnant, safe and predictable. And in remixing the formula, there's a chemical reaction we've never seen before - an experiment taking on a life of its own.