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A TRUE HOME THEATER EXPERIENCE

Hoboken only Jersey stop on thespians' trek inside private homes

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If you've ever wanted to poke around a stranger's home, "The Sublet Experiment" is a rare opportunity. Staged in private apartments - and arriving in Hoboken for a Feb. 1-4 run - the play appeals to the voyeur in all of us.

Since November, the production has migrated from New York neighborhood to neighborhood, making stops in Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens.

Hoboken is its most exotic destination yet - in a matter of speaking.

"It was really important to us not to just do this in Manhattan," said playwright Ethan Youngerman, 29, who hosted the play's opening weekend in his Washington Heights apartment. "It just seems cool to cross state lines."

"The Sublet Experiment" was inspired by the generation-defining experience of apartment hunting for transient, cash-strapped twenty-somethings.

"I was looking for a sublet and saw this posting that basically said 'free rent for sex,'" recalls Youngerman, who saw numerous solicitations in that genre during his apartment search.

Youngerman is hesitant to elaborate on the plot for fear of giving too much away, but he'll say it's essentially a romantic comedy, and the four-person cast includes a reality show reject and two softened criminals - bound together in a sublet situation.

The play is directed by Youngerman's frequent collaborator and Yale classmate, Michelle Tattenbaum, 30, who relied on her actors' improvisational skills in the absence of any set performance space.

"I really worked with the actors to mark transition motions," said Tattenbaum, who instructed actors to tailor their reactions to the physical conditions of a space.

Each Thursday of a run is the cast's first time in a space - though certain key moments are rehearsed before the performance.

Tattenbaum hopes that seeing the show in a private residence - where audience members can use the bathroom or take a drink from the fridge prior to showtime - gives the viewing experience unique authenticity.

"The experience for them should hopefully be that they're flies on the wall," said Tattenbaum, who lives in Park Slope, Brooklyn. "You should really feel like you're watching people's lives."

Youngerman and Tattenbaum petitioned friends and acquaintances in the theater world for use of their apartments, and their hook-up in the Mile-Square City is playwright Jenny Levison, a Hoboken resident for the past year and a half.

Not the squeamish sort, Levison was easily sold on the proposition of having 15 audience members tramp into her living room for four straight nights.

"I had seen (the play) already at an apartment in Chelsea, and I loved the way it felt to sit in the

audience in someone's apartment," she said.

The play's production team will clean her bathroom and move her television, but otherwise, the dwelling will appear in its normal state.

Though Youngerman didn't write "The Sublet Experiment" with the venue-switching conceit in mind, it has been an undeniable cornerstone of the play's success - helping it to garner write-ups in The New York Times and New York magazine.

While acknowledging that the staging was a ploy for media attention, Tattenbaum says it's entwined with the play's thematic concerns.

"The story of the play is enriched by us doing it in different apartments," she said.

The show is committed to continuing its nomadic existence through March but is seeking a permanent home, says Tattenbaum, who noted the difficulties of moving props and folding chairs every weekend.

But for the time being, they'll stay on the road - heading to Tribeca after the run in Hoboken.

Staging their show in New Jersey - far from Broadway marquees and Lower East Side venues where theater is enshrined - played into Youngerman and Tattenbaum's desire to turn the ritual of theater-going inside out.

"Hoboken is certainly our most fun subversion of the paradigm," Youngerman said.

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