



The Star-Ledger

Waiting in the wingchair

Theatergoers cozy up to living-room comedy

Saturday, February 03, 2007

NEW JERSEY STAGE

The Sublet Experiment

Where: 823 Washington St., Hoboken

When: Today at 8 p.m., tomorrow at 7 p.m.

How much: \$20. Call (212) 352-3101 or visit www.theatermania.com.

BY PETER FILICHIA

STAR-LEDGER STAFF

It was a full house for Ethan Youngerman's new play, "The Sublet Experiment": All 12 people were in their folding chairs.

That's about as many as the "theater" could accommodate, for Youngerman's play isn't staged in a playhouse, but in someone's apartment.

Youngerman and director Michelle Tattenbaum have taken the show to eight different New York apartments since its Nov. 16 world premiere at 723 W. 183rd St. On Thursday, the comedy had its New Jersey debut at 823 Washington St. in Hoboken, where it plays tonight and tomorrow.

Then it goes to Broadway -- albeit 395 Broadway in Lower Manhattan.

The Washington Street fourth-floor walkup belongs to Joshua Waletzky and Jenny Levison. She's a playwright and Youngerman's friend, so she offered her place.

"It meant I had to clean it," she says. "But in return, they promised to clean the bathroom."

Theatergoers may use that bathroom, though they're urged to do so before the show begins; the 100-minute play offers no intermission. Included in the \$20 admission is a beer that can be taken from the fridge.

The dozen attendees in Hoboken came from as far east as Manhattan and as far west as Summit. Articles in publications (Time Out New York) or Web sites (Hoboken 411) spurred them to make the trip to Washington Street. Apparently, if it is already built, they will come.

Guests entered a long hallway with three doorways on the left. One leads to a kitchen, another to a dining room without a table, and the third to a living room, where most of "The Sublet Experiment" would play. The audience sat demurely in a semi-circle of chairs.

Youngerman, a Yale graduate, got the idea for the play when he was seeking housing in New York. "From searching Craigslist," he says of the online classifieds, "I saw plenty of ads that said, 'Free Room in

Exchange for Sex.' That struck me as a good jumping-off place for a comedy."

It is. "The Sublet Experiment" tells of Eric (Adam Hyland), a shy bathtub designer, who places an ad for a roommate who'll swap sex for shelter. Melanie (Erin Maya Darke), who responds to the listing, seems not merely inured to the arrangement, but genuinely enthusiastic.

Melanie has a hidden agenda involving her friend Harry (Marshall Sharer), who makes a few unexpected appearances. Eric turns out to have a few secrets, too, which will be divulged by a character simply called "A Man" (Stephen Squibb), lest the audience be told too much.

At times, the play has the insouciance of Hitchcock's mystery-comedies, helped by this very winning quartet of young actors. While it's no masterpiece, it's a fascinating experience that allows an audience to be close to the action -- sometimes less than an inch away. (Hyland missed a spot while shaving that morning, and Darke's second toe is slightly longer than her big toe.)

With the "house lights" always up, audience members can easily see others' responses. Perhaps this inhibits one from laughing; many lines, clearly out for comedy, didn't get as much as a giggle. Or maybe the sound of laughter was seldom heard because the play just isn't that funny.

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