

Bringing It All Back Home

by Doug Strassler

The Sublet Experiment reviewed January 12, 2007

The murder of Kitty Genovese, the Queens woman whose stabbing in 1964 was witnessed by 38 neighbors, introduced the term "bystander effect" into the national lexicon. Obvious tragedy aside, what made the killing so noteworthy was that all of the witnesses not only saw the crime but watched each other's reactions and followed suit, by doing nothing.

Such sobering reality is absent in Ethan Youngerman's clever comedy *The Sublet Experiment*, save for the premise that distinguishes it from most other theatrical works. Each week the play is performed in a different private apartment. The performance being reviewed, for example, took place in a one-bedroom apartment in an Upper East Side high-rise, and future performances will occur in such places as Chelsea, TriBeCa, Brooklyn's Carroll Gardens, and Hoboken, N.J.

The audience members themselves play a role in each performance. With careful blocking (and, I assume, weekly modification) by director Michelle Tattenbaum, the play's characters and events are right in the audience members' faces, creating a real sense of intimacy. In this way, Youngerman completely shatters the fourth wall and forges a unique blend of television-style closeness (all reactions are up close and clearly visible) while still honoring a time-honored theatrical style of storytelling.

But this also means there is nowhere to hide. Every reaction—each yawn, each glance at a watch, each smirk—can be seen not just by all the actors in the room but also by the other audience members, who take subtle cues from each other's reactions.

Eric (Adam Hyland) has met Melanie (Erin Maya Darke) through a craigslist online posting and has made an interesting arrangement. Melanie will room with Eric as a "subletter," meaning that she will live with him rent-free—not to occupy a vacant room but to share Eric's, paying for room and board with her companionship.

Eric, a bathtub designer, is a rather bumbling ladies' man, but Melanie seems taken in by his lack of savoir faire. Both actors have some cute grace notes: Darke is beguiling from the start, and Hyland has some priceless hesitations and awkward double takes that reveal his character's lack of confidence.

THE SUBLET EXPERIMENT

Various - check website

Category: Drama
Written by: Ethan Youngerman
Directed by: Michelle Tattenbaum
Produced by: The Sublet Experiment Company
Opens: December 1
Closes: December 31
Running Time: 1 hour, 45 minutes

Theater: Various - check website

Address:

BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$20.00
 None.
Phone: (212) 352-0255

CREDITS

Creative Team

Written by: Ethan Youngerman
Directed by: Michelle Tattenbaum
Produced by: Michelle Tattenbaum, Ethan Youngerman, and John Pinckard
Sound Designer: Tim Boyce
Costume Designer: Jessica Pabst
Web Design and Graphic Design: Joe LaRue
Publicist: Ron Lasko/Spin Cycle

There's more to these new roommates than meets the eye, however. Melanie and her partner, Harry (Marshall Sharer), have planned a less than foolproof plot to rob Eric of all his belongings before he returns home, but their scheme turns out to be more difficult than they first assumed. Eric, we learn, has as many secrets as Melanie does.

Cast

Adam Hyland as Eric
Erin Maya Darke as
Melanie
Marshall Sharer as Harry
Christian Maurice as A
Man

Secrets and lies are a key motif for Youngerman, and *Sublet* reminds us how defining one of the key elements of New York life—location, location, location—can be. Simply by taking up residence in a new apartment, Eric and Melanie are able to establish new identities and new personalities for themselves when meeting new people. Youngerman keeps the play fresh with a revolving door of new character revelations, peeling back the layers until we finally get to the truth about who Eric and Melanie really are.

Sublet also thrives on its voyeuristic aspect. The audience members remain on their toes because they are on display as much as the actors are. (And, I must admit, with both the playwright and the critic having been identified and sitting less than 10 feet from each other, the heat was really on.) And given such little rehearsal time, it is a testament to Tattenbaum and all the members of the ensemble, which also includes the hysterical Christian Maurice as a man with secrets of his own, that everyone appears totally at home in each apartment. (According to publicity information, the apartments used belong to friends or relatives of Tattenbaum and Youngerman.)

Of course *Sublet* is indeed an experiment itself, and at times its theatrical roots betray its more intimate premise. Some laugh lines needed a faster reaction from the actors, since the room's intimacy differs from the dynamic of sitting in a theater, where reactions tend to take a few more seconds to build. If the audience does not laugh immediately in this small space, the actors should proceed right on to the next line rather than waiting a beat or two.

Still, those occasional pacing problems will likely work themselves out. Audiences and critics alike bemoan the fact that new plays are often either too old-fashioned or not fresh enough. With his *Sublet* experiment, however, Youngerman has devised a clever fusion of cleanly developed narrative and invigorating new technique, merging style with substance while remaining attentive to both. In the process, he has proved himself to be a true original, a singular visionary standing out among the many young writers out there. Youngerman is truly one playwright to watch.