

Scene: a typical New York apartment. (Really.)

In *The Sublet Experiment*, a new play by Ethan Youngerman '99, traditional notions of public and private collide in a way that mirrors many people's first experiences with life in a big city. It's designed to be performed not in a theater but in someone's apartment—a different apartment, in a different New York City neighborhood, every week. There are no house lights, no formal seating, and no stage or wings. These conditions mean that the audience, usually about 15 people, is on display as much as the actors (and the apartment).

Further mind-bending comes courtesy of Youngerman's labyrinthine script, which starts with a man who sublets an apartment to a woman in return for sex, and goes on to explore themes of youth,

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deceit, identity, and the meaning we give to spaces. It's a genre mash-up to boot: by turns a slice-of-life play, a romantic comedy, and a heist-driven thriller.

The Sublet Experiment just completed a six-month run, during which it was performed in nearly 20 different apartments in four New York boroughs (it has yet to play on Staten Island) and in Hoboken, New Jersey. The unorthodox production, Youngerman thinks, is part of the play's appeal. “People like to get an inside look at a world, to get behind the scenes,” he says. “It's a big part of what we want from entertainment.” And as it turns out, it's a lot of what Youngerman's characters want from each other. This desire to get beyond the surface of people, apartments, and situations gives rise to ethical dilemmas and quests for love, safety, and home in *The Sublet Experiment*. One central character constantly switches apartments in an effort to figure out how much of his identity is circumstances, materials, and surroundings, and how much is unchanging.

A constant for Youngerman has been his collaboration with director Michelle Tattenbaum '98. The pair worked together on plays and musicals at Yale, interned at the Manhattan Theatre Club together, and produced Youngerman's *An Archipelago of Clouds* at the New York Fringe Festival in 2000.

After developing the rotating-apartments plan, Youngerman and Tattenbaum worked to make sure the script could be performed in any kind of domes-

tic space. For example, every scene has to end with a character exiting or entering, since there are no curtains or stage lights to signify the end of a scene. Tattenbaum then looked for actors who would be able to adjust to unpredictable performance spaces and could handle having an audience up close for two hours. “We talked a lot about film acting,” Tat-



tenbaum says. “When you're acting for the camera, there's a lot of stuff and equipment and people around you that you completely ignore. The acting style in the play is much more akin to film than it is to traditional theatrical acting.”

From a network of Yale friends and theater friends, Tattenbaum and Youngerman lined up initial performance dates in apartments in the West Village, Chelsea, Astoria, and Williamsburg. But for the play's opening weekend, Youngerman volunteered his own apartment in Washington Heights. Looking back, he describes the performances as surreal. “It was like my imagination had created this great party. These are characters who had been in my head, and now they're in my living room.”

Though it was conceived with New York in mind, both artists believe the show could succeed in any place where residents are concerned with the boundaries of neighborhood and domestic identity. Says Tattenbaum, “The job of artists in our culture is to breakthrough boundaries for other people. This show gives people permission to violate social boundaries in a real way and in a pretend way.”

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Left to right: actors Erin Maya Darke, Marshall Sharer, and Adam Hyland in *The Sublet Experiment*. Playwright Ethan Youngerman '99 and director Michelle Tattenbaum '98 have staged the play in borrowed apartments all over New York.