



New lease on life

Young Michiganders are half the cast in 'The Sublet Experiment' in New York

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NEW YORK -- The strangest play Erin Maya Darke was ever in was a Flint Youth Theatre production that had a sandbox on stage for the audience to play in.

What she's doing now, Darke admits, comes close.

The 22-year-old Flint native is performing in people's apartments, a different one each month, in a play called "The Sublet Experiment." It's a comedy with four actors, a lot of romance and a bit of suspense, set (conveniently) in an apartment. Nearly any apartment will do.

Since its premiere last November in playwright Ethan Youngerman's Washington Heights (upper Manhattan) apartment, "The Sublet Experiment" has been presented in Brooklyn, Queens, other Manhattan neighborhoods and Hoboken, N.J.

It just concluded a stint in a SoHo loft.

Beginning April 12, it's off to Brooklyn Heights. In SoHo it played to record crowds of 39 or 40. Some venues could accommodate only 12.

Half the cast is from Michigan -- Darke, and Christian Maurice, 26, from Bloomfield Hills. Unless Lily Tomlin brings back her one-woman show, "The Sublet Experiment" can claim the greatest proportion of Michiganders in any show in New York.

The Detroit connection

Darke and Maurice didn't know each other before "The Sublet Experiment" but they have followed a similar path, the Way of the Aspiring Actor.

Darke moved to New York about a year and a half ago, after graduating from the University of Michigan-Flint. By day she waits tables. (Old joke: You're an actor? Which restaurant?)

Maurice has been in New York for seven years, having graduated from Marymount Manhattan College after transferring from Oakland University. By day he works at a rehearsal studio, booking appointments, managing the desk and performing other tasks.

He also has a monthly gig representing Chevrolet at NASCAR races. He got the job through a Detroit agency that books talent for the North American International Auto Show.

Darke and Maurice both answered online audition notices for "The Sublet Experiment." After auditioning separately they met for the first time last October at the initial read-through with playwright Youngerman and director Michelle Tattenbaum, who are also the producers.

You may recall that something particularly interesting was going on back in Detroit.

It was during the World Series, Darke says. She walked in and immediately noticed that Maurice was decked out in Tigers regalia.

"She walked in with a Detroit hoodie," Maurice says, "And I said, wait a minute, hold on! We

started talking hockey ..."

They've been friends, as well as colleagues, ever since. And their affection for Detroit sports isn't limited to baseball and hockey. "We went to a Pistons-Knicks game," Darke says.

Both have had previous acting jobs in New York but nothing as long-running as "The Sublet Experiment," whose run is open-ended, or as much fun. "I'm having a great time," Darke says.

"I enjoy it," Maurice says. "The audience is 6 inches from your face." Apparently, that's a good thing. This is not, however, an audience-participation show.

Cross and double-cross

Darke plays Melanie, who answers an unorthodox Internet ad for a roommate. The action begins when she knocks on the apartment door. Eric, played by Adam Hyland, placed the ad.

Maurice's character, billed only as A Man (for reasons made clear in the play), was recently kicked off a reality TV show. The fourth and final character, Harry (played by Marshall Sharer, is clearly up to no good, but there's enough deception to go around, and each character seems eager to take advantage of the others.

Patrons, on the other hand, receive more than their money's worth: a well-executed full-length play (1 hour, 40 minutes), a unique experience and the kind of bargain rarely found in New York. Tickets are \$20. That would get you about 25 minutes of a Broadway show.

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