



The Sublet Experiment



Pictured: A scene from *The Sublet Experiment* (photo © Davina Pardo)

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Michael Criscuolo · December 1, 2006

The new production of Ethan Youngerman's romantic comedy, *The Sublet Experiment*, is indeed an experiment, for both the creators and the audience. The creators pose for themselves the challenge of performing the play not in a theatre but in actual New York City apartments, a different one each week, while the audience grapples with the challenge of reacting to events that are happening, literally, right next to them. I'm happy to report that, for both sides, *The Sublet Experiment* is a total success.

Youngerman and director Michelle Tattenbaum have mounted a production that is thematically and artistically satisfying, and a whole lot of fun to boot.

The story concerns two twentysomethings, Eric and Melanie, who have just met and are about to embark upon an unusual sublet arrangement: Melanie gets to share Eric's apartment with him, rent free, in exchange for some "intimacy." Their first meeting carries the nervous, careful energy of a first date. He sheepishly fumbles getting her a drink, while she is very inquisitive about his background. Before long, though, they are consummating their arrangement. The next morning, she's playfully chiding his choice of DVD rentals, and he's recoiling from the already boyfriend/girlfriend-y feel of the whole setup. Then, while Melanie isn't looking, Eric starts manufacturing evidence to prove his alleged career as a bathtub designer (his on-the-quick sketches are amusingly dismal). She returns the favor, as soon as he leaves for work, by rooting through his drawers and cabinets only to find them all empty.

It doesn't take long to figure out that something weird is going on, and neither character is who they say they are. Their respective identities will soon be placed in jeopardy by the appearance of a business associate of Melanie's and a reality TV refugee. But, that's all I can say without spoiling *The Sublet Experiment's* many delicious surprises. Suffice to say that Youngerman uses these characters to explore just how far people will sometimes go to get away from themselves.

Another theme *The Sublet Experiment* buys into is the idea that a simple change of scenery can offer one the opportunity for massive re-invention. All of the characters' hopes for a new lease on life are pinned to some place (a subletted apartment, a reality TV show stronghold, etc.) that can offer them something they currently don't have.

This is one of the ways in which staging *The Sublet Experiment* in an actual apartment pays off. On the night I attended, the play was being performed in a cozy and elegant one-bedroom on Perry Street in the West Village, which, as any New Yorker knows, is a highly-coveted neighborhood. I have to admit I felt like a big shot just spending the play's almost two-hour running time in such stylish, tony digs. If you can imagine how one's self-image might change (or improve) if they lived in such a place every day, then you can guess how important the idea of location is to *The Sublet Experiment*.

Performing in such an intimate space adds a heightened sense of immediacy to everything. As Eric prepares for Melanie's first visit, he frantically "cleans" the living room by hiding a stack of magazines under a pillow and tossing a sock under the rug. But, he's got to really cover his mess because if we, the audience, see anything peeking out from its hiding place, then Melanie definitely will. Later, when

CAST

Erin Maya Darke,
Adam Hyland,
Christian Maurice,
Marshall Sharer

AUTHOR

Ethan Youngerman

DIRECTOR

Michelle Tattenbaum

COSTUMES

Jessica Pabst

SOUND

Tim Boyce

STAGE MANAGER

Karen Dickerson

they first kiss—and even after they've ended up more invested in each other than they expected to be—the viewer can truly feel the charge in the air. With the actors never more than five feet away from an audience member at any time, we experience the unpredictable events of *The Sublet Experiment* along with the characters.

Youngerman's script smartly utilizes the production's site specific approach as an enhancement instead of a crutch. His play would still be worthwhile if it were done in a traditional theatre because it's well-written: time-honored rules of plot, structure, and character are all observed. More importantly, the author captures the rootless, yearning cadences of the twentysomething crowd with graceful aplomb.

Director Tattenbaum navigates the unorthodox space superbly, and does a great job of putting the play's themes across clearly. The room never feels crowded, nor is the action ever less than crystal clear. Adam Hyland and Erin Maya Darke anchor the production with their excellent, funny, touching performances as Eric and Melanie, respectively. Christian Maurice and Marshall Sharer back them up wonderfully as Eric (yes, another Eric), the reality show escapee, and Melanie's associate, Harry.

Whether you're a theatergoer in search of something different or something good, I cannot recommend *The Sublet Experiment* highly enough. It satisfies both criteria, and showcases a bunch of talented people on the rise. Catch them now before they're playing a venue you can't afford a ticket to.

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