

February 21, 2008

Moving Soon to an Apartment Near You

By PENELOPE GREEN

BROOKE BERMAN is living in Seventh Heaven this week. That's the name of the three dorm rooms that New Dramatists, a nonprofit center for playwrights housed in an old church on West 44th Street, offers its 49 artists-in-residence for short stays.

Ms. Berman, who is 38, has made her garret room cozy with familiar objects: a necklace of buttons hanging from a nail, her white iBook embellished with "Charlie's Angels" stickers and a collage of words and pictures torn from magazines, across the middle of which is glued the word "HOME."

Having lived in more than 30 apartments in 20 years — three of them in the last six months — Ms. Berman is skilled at making herself comfortable almost anywhere very quickly.

"I can make anything home," says Ruth, Ms. Berman's proxy and the central character in her latest play, "Hunting and Gathering," presented by Primary Stages through March 1. "A couple of books, a scented candle in a tin, some fresh flowers, and we're good."

(Sadly, candles aren't allowed in Seventh Heaven, as Ms. Berman pointed out, indicating a stern notice on a whiteboard outside her room.)

Starring Keira Naughton and Mamie Gummer, "Hunting and Gathering" presents the tentative, transient lives of three aging Gen X New Yorkers and a brash college student (Ms. Gummer, who is Meryl Streep's daughter) trained in the school of low expectations. It's a sitcom-light bildungsroman that uses real estate, or the lack thereof, as a metaphor for character.

The idea for "Hunting and Gathering" came in 2001 when Ms. Berman was asked by an arts organization to write a 10-minute play on the subject of home.

"I listed every apartment I'd ever lived in," said Ms. Berman, who was 32 at the time and had 15 addresses behind her. "I was interested in the juxtaposition between our home life and our ability to connect with other people. And I was just beginning to realize that after 30 an air

mattress isn't charming." (She gives that line to Ruth, played by Ms. Naughton.)

Seven years later Ms. Berman finds herself in the same tentative state. Living on money from the odd grant, temp jobs and teaching positions, she is emblematic of her Gypsy tribe — theater people are the original urban nomads — and a vivid example of the increasingly precarious domestic life of an artist trying to live in New York.

Rent for a studio or a one-bedroom in the East Village, for example, has more than doubled in 10 years, said Douglas Hochlerin, a broker with Bond New York, a firm specializing in Manhattan rentals. Last year, when the rent on Ms. Berman's Mott Street one-bedroom, where she had lived for three years, rose to \$1,550 from \$1,350, she gave up her lease, beginning another bout of itinerancy, as she described it.

"It's all about money," Ms. Berman said cheerfully. "It's not like I have a penchant for the transient life."

According to Emily Morse, the director of artistic development at New Dramatists, "two major things have changed as far as this city is concerned: the real estate market and the fact that very little money is going directly to artists."

She continued: "You used to be able to work a 20-hour week, pay the rent on your tiny studio, and still write your plays. That's no longer possible."

New Dramatists, which Ms. Morse described as "part hotel, for people who are in transient positions in their lives," allows its artists-in-residence to stay in the Seventh Heaven rooms for three weeks at a time. They are always full.

Last year the Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University published a study of visual artists over age 62 in New York City. Most of them live on incomes under \$30,000 and nearly half live in rent-stabilized apartments or subsidized housing.

"The minute they move or die," said Joan Jeffri, the director of the center, "it's over for the younger artists, because they won't be able to afford to live here."

Ms. Jeffri was referring to the nature of rent-regulated housing, which in many cases can be brought to market rates when a tenant leaves. She sees New York "losing its creative capital," she added, "if housing is not made more affordable for artists."

And the grants that used to pick up the slack have either petered out or do not stretch far enough, Ms. Morse and Ms. Jeffri said.

Since the culture wars of the 1980s and '90s, which led to the National Endowment for the Arts ending its financial support of individual artists in most disciplines, "other more locally based organizations are trying to pick up the slack," Ms. Jeffri said. "This is particularly difficult in an economy like the one we're in now."

THE period in which "Hunting and Gathering" was hatched was more or less typical of Ms. Berman's turbulent New York experience.

In early 2000 she was living in a three-bedroom share in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, working as an assistant for the playwright Maria Irene Fornes and as the research editor of Paper magazine. She was making a little over \$1,000 a month. (She had just spent two years in a share in Park Slope, Brooklyn, renting from an Austrian dancer who watched TV all day and, she said, asked Ms. Berman's boyfriend out.) She won a \$20,000 playwright's grant, the Helen Merrill award, that year.

"I didn't leave my room for a week," Ms. Berman said. "I was so stunned. I'd never had money in my life."

Ms. Berman grew up in Detroit and Chicago. Her father, whom her mother divorced when she was 4, was a once-successful stockbroker and gambler, Ms. Berman said, who died of cancer when she was 9. Her mother, a prodigy pianist turned publicist, with movie star looks and a great sense of humor, was debilitated by severe diabetes.

Ms. Berman stretched her grant for a year. "I upgraded everything in my life," she said. "I took cabs, I ate sushi." She moved in with a friend, a theater director whose father owned a loft on West Broadway. The two women paid the maintenance; Ms. Berman's portion was \$600.

"It was the kind of loft the elevator opened into," she recalled dreamily. There was a sunken black bathtub the size of a small country. "It was an idyllic time. We had dinner parties, workshops and rehearsals there. I got an agent."

It was the last apartment her mother saw, "which is good," Ms. Berman said, "because it was beautiful."

Late in 2001 she was laid off from Paper, which lost much of its advertising in the wake of 9/11. The grant had run out. Her roommate found out she had leukemia; her parents moved into the loft so they could be near her. Ms. Berman moved into a friend's apartment on 103rd Street (he was away for a few months at a theater festival).

"I was right back uptown where I had started," said Ms. Berman, who came to New York at 18 to go to Barnard College. "I felt like my contract with Manhattan had come full circle."

Fast-forward a few apartments (including a share with Michael Chernus, who stars in "Hunting and Gathering," on East Seventh Street, which they decorated in bright colors — "Nouveau Sesame Street," Ms. Berman said). There was a great job teaching playwriting to "dead-end kids, that's what their principals had called them," Ms. Berman said, and there was her own playwriting as well. Her plays were workshopped or produced in cities like Chicago, New Haven, Los Angeles and London.

In 2004 she turned 35 and thought, "I'm too old to be living like this." She sold the film rights to her play "Smashing" to Natalie Portman, wrote Ms. Portman a screenplay and moved into her first solo apartment, the Mott Street one-bedroom. She bought furniture: an armoire, a kitchen table, "a rad shower curtain" with a Marimekko-like print, and bright green velvet floor pillows from Urban Outfitters. Ms. Berman felt happy and settled. She signed up for Netflix, had people over for tea.

Then, last October, the rent was increased, and Ms. Berman, who had been juggling five jobs at once to pay for her apartment — "it was absolutely worth it," she said, "but it was a lot of work" — gave up the lease. Two of her plays were scheduled to be produced in New York, and she thought she would find a share and save some money, and also investigate Los Angeles, where she had a few movies close to production. "I thought, I could get health insurance!"

Her mother, meanwhile, who had been "dying for a very long time" (one leg had been amputated a few years earlier), became more gravely ill. Ms. Berman underestimated what it would feel like to live with strangers in a share under these circumstances. After six weeks she bailed.

There were two weeks at a friend's grandmother's in France. A brief stay in Seventh Heaven, with trips to Detroit. When New Dramatists closed for the holidays, Ms. Berman stayed on a friend's couch on Spring Street. Rehearsals for "Hunting and Gathering" began on Dec. 18. Her mother died the next day. Then it was back to New Dramatists (there is no limit to the frequency of stays in an artist's seven-year residency, just to their duration), save for a week in February, when she flew to Detroit to clean out her mother's apartment.

"She saved everything!" Ms. Berman said. "My Girl Scout uniforms, my camp clothes. These stickers," she pointed to the "Charlie's Angels" stickers on her laptop. "Every letter I ever wrote or paper I took a crayon to."

There was also \$300 worth of Bobbi Brown cosmetics, bought by her mother two weeks before she died. "My inheritance!" Ms. Berman said proudly. "There wasn't any money but there were these really great creams."

In two weeks Ms. Berman will head to New Hampshire for six weeks at the MacDowell Colony. Another play of hers is being produced in New York in the spring; she is hoping to find a share in the city for a few months, then make her way to Los Angeles.

"A couple of years ago I had a psychic reading," she said. "She told me Los Angeles was a good place for me."

"Then I said, 'Where's my partner?' And she said, 'You're married to your work.'" Ms. Berman rolled her eyes.

Last week, at a talk-back after a performance of "Hunting and Gathering," an elderly man raised his hand.

"I really liked the play," he said. "But I don't understand any of it. When I got out of school I married and had three kids. I've lived in four apartments my entire life."

Ms. Berman said: "He was really confused. He just couldn't relate."

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