

January 31, - February 6, 2008

Theater

Edited by David Cote
theater@timeoutny.com

STAYING POWER Berman hopes her latest comedy runs in place.

Pad behavior

Brooke Berman's *Hunting and Gathering* has a home—now what about the author? By David Cote

Playwrights often conduct research, but for Brooke Berman, generating material for her urban comedy of relocation, *Hunting and Gathering*, was as easy as changing apartments. One character, the thirtyish Ruth, drifts (spatially and romantically) through life and starts the play by ticking off addresses of 20 former abodes, from the East Village and San Francisco to Astoria and the Upper West Side. "MCC Theater commissioned me to write a ten-minute play about home," Berman, 38, explained over dinner across the street from 59E59, where her show will premiere, thanks to Primary Stages. "As a joke, I made a list of all the apartments where I'd lived."

On her tie-in blog (moregathering.blogspot.com), Berman helpfully annotates her pit stops (lesbian loft with open-door bathroom policy; share where her roommate tried to fuck her boyfriend; place that a friend called "La Casa Tres Girlies"). "I'm really interested in the question of want and desire," she says. "The whole notion of Western drama is that the character wants something. They either get it or they're thwarted. But what I think is harder is looking for home. I want a place that feels a certain way. I want to feel like I'm in my home, but I can't narrow it down to what it looks like."

The warm, effusive writer, whose laughter trills merrily, is referring to her characters, but also to herself. In a case of life imitating art, Berman is currently without a home, having been recently priced out of her one-bedroom on Mott Street.

This is not a new thing for her. Like many young New Yorkers, Berman

has couch surfed, tried sublets, house-sits and various roommate configurations since dropping out of Barnard College to study theater with Anne Bogart in the early '90s. After a series of adventures (traveling cross-country by van with a boyfriend before he decided to live in a parking lot; witnessing a beloved roommate fight leukemia; getting into a Queens sublet with an "open-relationship" dude), Berman found herself able to rent a place on her own: Natalie Portman bought the rights to Berman's witty 2003 literary comedy *Smashing*, and the playwright found the aforementioned domicile on Mott. (A sign of impending doom for the project: Lindsay Lohan's name was attached for two seconds.)

"The first morning in that apartment, I woke up and thought, I can't believe I've lived without this for so many years," Berman recalls wistfully. "I totally had a crush on my

apartment. I wanted to be home all the time. I would have people over for tea. I got Netflix. It was just a tiny, old-school one-bedroom, but it was mine." She recalls phoning her mother ecstatically after buying a shower curtain.

Space lust and transience are central motifs in the pithy but profound *Hunting and Gathering*, which centers on four characters whose lives and living spaces intersect in complicated ways. There's Ruth (Mamie Gummer), who had an affair with the married NYU professor Jesse (Jeremy Shamos); he's divorcing his wife and between homes. Jesse becomes ensnared by the predatory alpha student Bess (Keira Naughton), who helps him refurnish his life at Ikea. Meanwhile, the slacker Astor (Michael Chernus) pines after nomadic Ruth, offering her his bed; he takes the air mattress.

"The surfaces of her plays are so fluid and full of unbelievably true-sounding monologues and dialogues," observes Todd London, head of New Dramatists (of which Berman is a

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member). "But they're also layered with questions, like, 'What is the mythology of people who live from couch to couch in New York?'" So her plays are contemporary comedies of manners, but in fact they're these deep, metaphysical quest plays.

London is clearly a supporter of Berman's writing, but he's also in a way her landlord. As *Hunting and Gathering* heads toward opening night on Sunday 3, Berman is staying in one of New Dramatists' three residences ("monk-cell spare," London calls them), reserved for members in need of a crash pad. In March she'll head to the MacDowell Colony for a month, then hopes to find a new place in May.

Berman admits that in the past, being without a steady abode has been traumatic or scary, but that isn't the case now. "I feel like I'm coming at it from a place of choice. I know it'll be fine," she says. "A friend of mine said to me recently, 'This is just a period where you're a character in a novel having a really great adventure.' And I was like, 'Okay! But you can't keep telling me these things... because I will start to take you literally.'"

Hunting and Gathering is playing at Primary Stages. See Off Broadway.