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The play's the thing — even when it's in a New York living room


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Salimah Ebrahim and her partner have taken Artery to fifteen cities and plan global domination

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Not long after I got to New York a friend invited me to a play. It was an off-Broadway production, by all accounts and, from the street, the theatre looked suspiciously like a block of flats. We rang the bell for a place on the fifth floor and were buzzed up. Inside a young man in a white loin cloth was serving beer and wine at a small table. Off to our right was a cramped kitchen. Through a door was a long, narrow room, the sort of oddly shaped space that comes from dividing an old building into as many flats as possible. White sideboards lined the walls on either side and we were to sit on these with our drinks as a cast of scantily clad young men and women played out a saga of love and revenge drawn from Greek myth but set in ancient Indonesia. It was a hot night and the place had no air conditioning, so at times it felt like we were right there.

Later we saw another piece by the same company: a civil war drama. There was less nudity but I still have fond memories of sitting on my coat with my back against the skirting in a flat on the Lower East Side, watching Abraham Lincoln sail down the Potomac to meet General Ulysses Grant. Never mind theatre in the round, this was theatre in the living room. It made sense, too, in a city where the rents kept rising. When an artist friend was looking to put on her first show, my wife asked if she'd like to stage it in our flat. We were about to move out, so it was unusually tidy. All kinds of people arrived — artists, actors, writers, lots of young men in tartan shirts with excellent beards. For one heady evening we felt like patrons of the arts. Why don't we do this all the time, we wondered afterwards.

Well, there's now a website for that. "There is nothing like the intimacy of seeing a performance in someone's home," said Salimah Ebrahim, co-founder of Artery. The site aims to do for art and culture what Airbnb did for the travel industry by helping painters, musicians and performers to find people who would like to turn their living room, temporarily, into a theatre, or a gallery, or even an opera house.

They tested the idea in Toronto last year before opening in New York. One of these early shows featured an opera tenor in a bathroom. "He was in the shower," Ms Ebrahim, 35, says. "Behind very high shower curtains. He did scales and tuned up. He was fully in there having a shower."

Act two was in the bedroom: the tenor in a tux, his tie still undone, telling the story of the opera he was to perform that night. In the final act, as he sang Verdi in the living room, a woman leapt up from the audience. She was the surprise performer, a soprano. Other shows featured ballerinas, jazz quintets, classical recitals, Shakespearian speeches.

Vladic Ravich, 33, Artery's other founder, insisted that they did not all happen in Brooklyn hipster living rooms. "A guy who owns a bodega, he heard about it from some guy buying beer." The bodega owner decided to get in on the action. "He hosted one about seven or eight days later, a blues night."

The average show brings in between \$250 and \$350, Ms Ebrahim says. Artery takes 5 per cent and leaves it to the performer and host to decide how to split the rest. They are in 15 cities now and plotting world domination. Ms Ebrahim says they heard from a jazz musician in Edinburgh. Artery is yet to launch in Scotland "but she did notice there are hosts in Montreal and Toronto so she booked a ticket to Canada and did a tour. She made several thousand dollars. That kind of thing is happening all the time."

PS Salimah Ebrahim compares Artery's shows to the rent parties in Harlem during the 1920s and 1930s. The odd jazz recital in the living room helped to make ends meet. "Fats Domino got his career started playing in someone's house," she says. Now the rent is too damn high, to quote the campaign slogan of a recent mayoral candidate.

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