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FREE

**PALLID
'PRIMARY
COLORS'**
HOBERMAN p85

**A WEDDING
TOO RADICAL
FOR
THE 'TIMES'**
CARR p81

**THE
WOOSTER
GROUP'S
'EMPEROR
JONES'**
FEINGOLD p137

**THE
CITY'S 10
WORST
LANDLORDS**

BY J.A. LOBBIA &
JENNIFER GONNEMAN p32



STEVE CROMAN

MANHATTAN

One of the first things Steve Croman did after purchasing a row of buildings on Mott Street last year was to crash the tenants' association meeting. The wiry, unshaven landlord showed up with a wide smile and plenty of promises. He even brought his wife, Harriet, and his dog, a Jack Russell terrier named Eddie. Schmoozing with his new tenants, Croman assured them he had no drastic plans for their building.

It wasn't long before the tenants realized that this was a lie. What Croman really wanted was for all of them to move out.

Croman may be only 31 years old, but he has already

Street, where he lives with his 16-year-old son. Vieira says Croman tried to get him to leave by offering him \$5000, then \$15,000. When Vieira refused, Croman cranked up the pressure.

According to Vieira, his landlord has called him more than 30 times over the last few months to pester him about moving. Croman has even showed up at the choreographer's office to try to persuade him in person. Vieira is often away on tour and sometimes has friends-house-sit. Now Croman is using this against him, trying to evict Vieira by claiming he sublet the apartment.

Croman's smarmy, duplicitous style can be even more unnerving than his persistence. "He calls you like you're his best friend," says Vieira. "[He asks,] 'How are you? How's your health?'" When *The New York Times* gave DanceBrazil a glowing review last fall, Croman phoned Vieira to offer his congratulations—and to exhort him to move out. About Croman's behavior, Vieira says, "It's disturbed me to the point

to leave with an offer of \$5000, but the tenant refused to go, then filed a harassment complaint with a state agency. Now Huang is the last resident left on his floor. "I don't feel it's right of him to ask me to leave," Huang says through a Cantonese translator. "My wife picked up cans on the street to pay the initial cost of moving in."

Croman has not given up on the Huangs, however. He has brought eviction proceedings against them, claiming they have too many people living in the apartment. And the Huangs' teenage daughter, Stephanie, says Croman badgers her every time he bumps into her on the street. "Why aren't you guys moving? Your apartment is so small—it's not fit for you," the landlord says to her. "Why don't you translate for

10 worst landlords



Up-and-coming downtown Manhattan landlord Steve Croman, 31, is pressuring longtime tenants to leave, then replacing them with residents who can pay much steeper rents.

earned a reputation among his tenants as an aggressive landlord. Over the last two years, he snatched up buildings on Mott and Mulberry Streets. Croman then launched a full-scale campaign to drive tenants from their rent-regulated homes.

Boutiques, art galleries, and pricey restaurants have popped up recently in and among the 100-year-old tenements lining Little Italy and the northern parts of Chinatown—neighborhoods that are beginning to earn the trendy moniker NoLiTa. But where Croman is concerned, this tale of gentrification has a dark side.

After Croman renovates his empty apartments, the rents skyrocket. Along the way, this brash young landlord is helping to redefine the face of these neighborhoods: pushing out struggling artists and immigrants to make way for investment bankers and corporate lawyers. And Croman is proving that a landlord need not turn his building into a crack den or physically assault his tenants in order to turn their lives upside down. Croman declined to comment, saying he was too busy to be interviewed for this story.

One of the landlord's targets is Jelon Vieira, the artistic director of DanceBrazil, a respected Afro-Brazilian dance company. Vieira, 45, pays \$700 a month for a two-bedroom apartment at 252 Mott

where I can't really concentrate on my work."

Vieira grows exasperated when asked what he thinks about the effect of his landlord's behavior. "This is about kicking the poor people out of Manhattan—the blacks, the Hispanics," Vieira claims. "Croman talks to you—if you have an accent or are black or Hispanic—as if you're stupid. One day he came to me and said, you have to move out because I'm saying so; the judge has ordered it." (Vieira says Croman's court action against him is still unresolved.)

Croman's tenants who do not speak English may be the most vulnerable to his manipulative tactics. Virtually all of the residents in Croman's building at 234 Mott Street are immigrants from China or Hong Kong. Some keep shrines to Buddha in their apartments, while others hang oranges next to their doors for good luck. Since Croman took over the 21-unit building in 1996, tenants say, he has emptied about one-third of the apartments.

Chao Chang Huang, 50, moved into the building with his three children and wife in 1987. A former restaurant worker who now suffers from kidney failure, Huang pays \$534.91 a month for an apartment with two tiny bedrooms. Croman tried to entice Huang

me and tell your parents I'm willing to pay?"

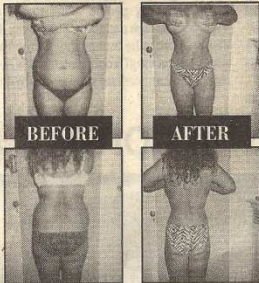
A walk through the Huangs' building offers glimpses of rotting floorboards, a poorly lit hallway, collapsing ceilings, and trash strewn outside the basement. Last summer, a housing inspector cited the building for 135 violations. Croman made some repairs after the tenants' association brought him to court. But the residents continue to complain of sporadic heat and irregular cold and hot water. For three months, the Huangs had only hot water, leading Stephanie to wonder if Croman was purposely letting the problem linger in order to drive out her family. "I'm not sure if they're playing a game or something," she says.

For those who continue to hold out, life becomes even more difficult. Just ask Bill Obrecht. "He invited me into his offices and asked me what did I want to leave this apartment," says Obrecht, 46, whose building at 280 Mulberry Street was taken over by Croman in 1997. "I said, half-jokingly, \$100,000. And he said, 'I'm going to have you evicted because your apartment is worth more to me empty than with you in it.'"

Obrecht has been battling Croman in court ever since. A music teacher at Pratt Institute, Obrecht moved [Cont. on p50]

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10 worst landlords

[STEVE CROMAN Continued from p49]
into a small one-bedroom apartment in this 33-unit building in 1979. He pays \$300 in rent, but says he has so far spent \$9500 in attorney fees trying to stave off Croman's eviction efforts. Croman has accused Obrecht of running a sound-studio business out of the apartment, but the tenant says he uses his music equipment solely for his own work. Obrecht has already spent countless hours trekking to housing court, waiting in lines, filing court papers, and meeting with his attorney. The composer devoted so much time to this drudge work that, he says, "it felt like it was my job."

As if this legal fight were not exhausting enough, then the drilling started. In less than six months, Obrecht says, his landlord has emptied 28 of the building's 32 units. As Obrecht's neighbors left, Croman began gutting their abandoned apartments. The pounding of sledgehammers, heavy clouds of dust, and vibrating walls drove out a few more

tenants. Obrecht began to feel like he was living in a war zone. One day he looked up above his shower and discovered a huge hole. "You could see the ceiling bulging and you could hear them working with their sledgehammers upstairs," Obrecht says. "And sure enough, it came down."

The interior of Obrecht's building used to look like a classic tenement—part of Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* was filmed there—but since Croman has remodeled, it more closely resembles an airport hotel. A new batch of tenants has already moved into the renovated apartments, paying \$2200 for a two-bedroom and \$1600 for a one-bedroom. Yuppies have replaced struggling artists, and Obrecht has spied neighbors sipping Scotch in the hallway.

Despite all he has endured, Obrecht still does not want to leave. "I'm hoping this will be over soon and he'll just give up," says the musician, sounding more resigned than optimistic. "I'm tired of fighting."

J.U.S.T.I.C.E. ORGANIZATION QUEENS



Critics charge that the J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Organization is illegally warehousing welfare recipients.

Bobby Thompson was thrilled when he heard about the J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Organization. Single rooms for \$215 a month? The deal sounded too good to be true. And, in fact, it was.

Thompson was homeless when he sought help from the J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Organization, which manages houses in and around Far Rockaway, Queens. An official from the group showed Thompson a room for one, then drove him to see his caseworker in Manhattan so he could arrange to have public assistance pay his rent. But when the official took Thompson back to his new house, he was given a room with several other men and three sets of bunk beds.

When Thompson realized he had to share a room, he refused to hand over the check the city had given him. Thompson says the J.U.S.T.I.C.E. official who had driven him around the city then stranded him in Far Rockaway. "They know you're homeless and you ain't got no place to go," Thompson, 30, says about the group's tactics. "If I'd given them [the money], I'd have had no choice but to stay."

The woman behind this scheme is Cynthia Bryant, a 43-year-old pastor, who started the J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Organization in 1980. Based in Jamaica, Queens, the group incorporated in 1990 as a nonprofit. Its acronym stands for Justice, Unity, and Strength To Improve Community Economics. But local officials and homeless advocates insist the economics the

group is really interested in improving are its own. Bryant could not be reached for comment, but she did present a stack of laudatory letters from former tenants.

The J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Organization is not technically a landlord, though it functions as one. It leases one- and two-family houses from private owners, then rents space to homeless people. That may sound like a noble effort, but, in fact, according to critics the group is preying on the city's most vulnerable citizens by illegally warehousing them in its overcrowded homes.

The city's Department of Buildings has already slapped the group with several violations for illegal occupancy and a \$1000 fine that is still unpaid after several months. Meanwhile, the money is streaming in. Tenants' rent comes from the city's Department of Social Services, which issues \$107.50 shelter allowance checks every other week made out to both the homeowner and tenant. The J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Organization also receives additional payments from a patchwork of sources. It collects \$35-a-month utilities payments as well as broker fees, according to tenants. In addition, residents say they are expected to fork over money for furniture, even though their rooms are often already furnished.

Prospective tenants usually find their way to the J.U.S.T.I.C.E. Organization through word of mouth from shelters or drug rehabilitation programs. In its literature, the nonprofit claims