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Habitats/Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and 134th Street

## An Actress Balances Art, Illness and a New Home



2-bedroom condo through Habitat for Humanity.

By PENELOPE GREEN

**O**NE sunny afternoon in late March, Wambui Bahati, a 54-year-old actress, inspirational speaker and dormant manic-depressive, sat cross-legged on her tomato red couch in her Habitat for Humanity condominium on West 134th Street and offered a hilarious aural snack, a few lines from her co-woman show. Called "Balancing Act," it is an unusual musical about mental illness, and it makes its creator seem a potent combination — part Nancy Wilson, part Joan Rivers.

The walls were purple, and Ms. Bahati was phosphorescent in a bright red tank top and bright red lipstick flecked with gold glitter. She extended first one elegant arm and then another, and sang a fragment of a jazzy show tune:

*I didn't know what to wear  
Waiting in line for welfare  
If I wear my Anne Klein  
I will surely be denied  
If I take my Coach bag  
They might think I'm trying to brag  
If I wear my Ferragamo shoes  
They won't believe I don't have food  
How did it get to this?*

How indeed? The byways Ms. Bahati has traveled as she careered off the mainstream, from a successful



Photographs by Steven Galt for The New York Times



Wambui Bahati and her daughter, Julie Blondina, in their sparsely decorated West 134th Street condominium apartment, with dried flowers on the dining table.

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decade or so as an actress — she attended New York University's School of the Arts, toured with productions of "The Wiz," "Godspell" and "Jesus Christ Superstar," married and had two daughters — into the disconnected, out-of-time bubble world of a woman with severe bipolar disorder are the subject of "Balancing Act."

Written in 1997, and performed initially on a 10-city tour for the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill-North Carolina, an advocacy group, the show effected Ms. Bahati's re-entry into the world she had drifted away from — and gave her the ticket to this bright two-bedroom home.

With its sponged purple walls, wicker furniture and batik fabric — "We were going for a beach-house effect," Ms. Bahati said — the apartment is a luminous setting for a happy woman. It's one of 10 units in a turn-of-the-century brick apartment house at Adam Clayton Powell Boulevard and 134th Street, where Habitat for Humanity has five additional properties, bought for \$1 apiece from the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development.

Ms. Bahati arrived after a series of coincidences. A Habitat member, having seen her perform in North Carolina, asked her to design a show about housing. Researching the group online, she came upon its application, filled it out on a lark and promptly forgot about it.

Habitat for Humanity asks that its applicants "be in overcrowded, substandard housing," said Lourdes Davila, director of the Family Partner Program, that they "pay over 50 percent of their income on rent — that's one in four families in New York City — and fall within 55 to 80 percent of the median income for Manhattan," or between about \$25,000 to \$40,000 for a family of two.

In March 2002, Ms. Bahati and her daughter, Julie Blondina, now 19, were living a few blocks away on 134th Street, renting a room from a relative. Ms. Blondina was (and is) studying to be a dancer and actress; Ms. Bahati was (and is) working on an armful of projects: a memoir, "You Don't Know Crazy"; a self-help book, "Loving Yourself Through the Madness"; and myriad speaking tours. When a family dropped out of a unit in the brick apartment house, the group called Ms. Bahati.

The building's renovation had long since been finished, so Ms. Blondina

and Ms. Bahati donated their time — Habitat for Humanity now requires 300 hours of "sweat equity" per adult to qualify for a home and the group's 30-year, no-interest mortgages — to sites all over the city.

Sites are typically open Thursdays through Sundays, and construction work, like a Yankees game, can be shut down if it rains. Ms. Blondina, a gentle young woman with a dancer's bearing, threw herself into the work, surprising Ms. Bahati with her stamina. "She's a wonderful dancer," Ms. Bahati said, "but she is delicate and very ladylike. But she was ready. I was so proud." The two finished their hours in four months, a record for the organization, Ms. Davila said. "Wambui," she said, "is a dynamo."

Born John Anne Washington in Greensboro, N.C., Ms. Bahati grew up in a city roiled by the civil rights movement — in a marvelous moment of "Balancing Act," Ms. Bahati proclaims her intention to march with her sister and Jesse Jackson. "Mama" responds sternly: "Before you start marching all over town for freedom, you better march in that kitchen and free those dishes."

Despite episodes of depression and disconnection during and after college — "I was walking and talking," Ms. Bahati said, "so nobody knew when I wasn't there" — she had a fruitful career.

**B**y the late 1980's, Ms. Bahati was divorced from her husband and living with her two daughters, Marie, then 7, and Julie, 4, in New York City. "There were issues in the marriage, and then I was the issue," she said. Wretched periods were capped by hospital stays, and Ms. Bahati quickly went from well off to welfare, as she put it.

"I took the girls and moved to North Carolina," she said. "I told them: 'We are going to be poor. We do not want to be poor in New York City.'" Back in Greensboro, Ms. Bahati tried to work; her mother took care of the girls, "and the girls took care of me," she said. Before long, they were sent to live with their father in New Jersey.

Hospitalized after a suicide attempt, she spent the day after the attempt running the hospital: doing hair and makeup for the patients, teaching dance classes, counseling the counselors. Ms. Bahati earned a diagnosis then: manic depression,

now called bipolar disorder.

"I hated my life," she said, "rotting in public housing, taking medications for my medications, and so I decide that I want to die. I've got the television on, 24/7, and in the background, getting on my very last nerve, is a Tony Robbins infomercial," she continued, sketching out the relentless pitch of the "personal power guru."

"The gall of him, I think, to take people's money and tell them he can fix their lives with some tapes — in four easy payments. I decide that before I go out, I'm going to prove this guy's a phony." But she soon changed her mind.

Ms. Bahati, who is an all or nothing sort of person, bought a set of tapes and began to listen. And a funny thing happened. "The main thing I heard from this guy," she said, "is this: 'Whatever they say you have, that's not who you are.'"

Ms. Bahati started feeling different. "I told the doctors that I'd like to go off all those medications," she said, "and when they stopped laughing, they told me I'd lose my disability support if I did." As it turned out, it was a risk worth taking.

She started writing, too. A therapist, "my first African-American female therapist," Ms. Bahati said, suggested an outlet for "Balancing Act" — the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Her mother was horrified: "Imagine, I'm going to sing songs about my illness," Ms. Bahati said. "She didn't know what to think." Ms. Bahati emerged from her cocoon with a new Swahili name: Wambui, which means "singer of songs," and Bahati, which means "my fortune is good."

She now pays \$530 a month for a \$110,000 mortgage and the common charges for her condominium. The apartment is as spare as a Swedish furniture ad, except for Ms. Bahati's bedroom.

She has a list as long as her arm to work through: Design Web sites (she has her own, [www.wambui.com](http://www.wambui.com)). Write those books. Get the Abdominizer off the floor so she can reach the closet and hang up her clothes. Build shelving. And cap it with a loft bed.

Luckily, she has a full set of tools. "One thing I learned from Habitat," she said, "is that the reason women have problems with construction is they don't have the right tools. Tools are really important." ■