

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 24, 1998

## LEGIT REVIEWS

### Refugees

*(Solo; The Sweet Lies Theatre  
at the Bitter Truth Theatre; 35 seats;  
\$10 top)*

Borderland Productions, in association with Sweet Lies Theatre, presents "Refugees," a play in one act, written and performed by Stephanie Satie, directed by Anita Khanzadian. Set design, Rick Friesen; lighting design, David Bilotti. Opened June 20, 1998; reviewed June 21; runs until July 20. Running time: 80 MINS.

By JULIO MARTINEZ

**F**ive years ago, actress-writer Stephanie Satie started teaching English as a second language to refugees and immigrants, predominantly Russian and Iranian Jews and Christian Armenians. Her experiences are the basis of a remarkably vivid theatrical collage of the lives of seven life-weary souls who have fled a common history of discrimination and violence but are not yet ready to trust this new land and culture. Assisted greatly by the insightful, economical staging of Anita Khanzadian, Satie, who is of Latvian Jewish heritage, flows seamlessly out of herself and her own troubled history into the colorful and detailed personas of Jilla and Farideh (both from Iran), Manushak (Armenia), Ninel (Ukraine), Rima (Latvia), Larissa (Russia) and Boris (Lizbeksistan).

A remarkable aspect of Satie's transformations is that she immediately inhabits her characters, displaying each person's individuality, varying intelligence, emotional levels, body language and subtly diverse speech mannerisms.

She's fluidly subtle when segueing between the two Iranian women — the painfully withdrawn, self-deprecating Jilla and the more aggressive, embittered

Farideh, whose family was destroyed during the Iran/Iraq war. Then, with bold, flashing eyes and a thrust of her hips, she becomes the sultry, Moscow-born Marissa, an avowed opportunist, who intends to marry her way into the "American dream."

Much more modest but unabashedly straight-forward is Ninel, who sneers at her former status as an economics engineer in Kiev but exhibits great pride in her current job scrubbing floors at McDonald's.

The throughline of Satie's chronicle is her pain-filled relationships with members of her own family, who endeavored to exorcise any trace of their Latvian heritage, inflicting upon their children a loathing of the self-imposed stigma of being refugees.

In the process of teaching these new immigrants, she experiences a hunger to know about the lives and cultures of these people and a deep regret that her past is forever lost to her. She also discovers, when attempting to intervene between Jilla and her abusive husband, the teacher cannot impose her own values and customs on her students but must allow them the space and time to find their own comfort zone as new Americans.

The most poignant moment of this one-woman theater piece comes at play's end when teacher and students share in their mutual celebration of VE Day, the end of World War II. As Satie gamely tries to match the dancing and vodka-swilling exploits of her students, she comes to realize that everyone in the class has enriched each other and that one of the greatest losses anyone can suffer is the loss of their cultural identity.