

One-woman show portrays life of `Refugees'

By Frances Baum Nicholson, Correspondent

In my other life I am a teacher. Early on in that career, I realized that I was learning as much from my multicultural class as they were learning from me. The descriptions of their countries of origin, my need to be open to the differing cultural norms that came as a part of their foundational views, and, in too many cases, the long-term effects dealt them due to the horrific scenes they had escaped have changed my world view forever.

This is the essential message delivered in "Refugees," the one-woman show written and performed by Stephanie Satie, which begins Fremont Centre Theatre's string of one-person productions, "Stripped Bare."

In a series of conversations between "the teacher" and the adults in an English class, we discover the jolting struggles of those for whom the U.S. may mean safety from oppression, but a disquieting culture clash. Satie becomes all these characters and for two hours, we are convinced.

Indeed, it is the conviction of Satie's performance that makes the whole thing work. Under the direction of Anita Khanzadian, each distinct personality comes clear, even as classroom conversation bounces from person to person.

The Iranian woman struggling to give her children dignity as her husband strips hers, the deeply prejudiced Russian cab driver, the timid, elderly Latvian clinging to her dictionary, and all the rest come to vivid life in Satie's capable hands.

For some, the message of this play may be startling news: life for many refugees and immigrants here is harsh and unlovely. For others, it will shock as one learns the reasons why that unlovely life may still be a refuge from worse treatment in the land of an immigrant's birth. But what the point of this piece turns out to be, as much as anything else, is a celebration of the sense of identity of such people - an identity it can be a pity to lose in what is, essentially, a nation of immigrants.

"Refugees" is short, pithy and continuously interesting. Produced on a spare stage, it illustrates the power of the one-person show, which depends entirely on the passion of one actor and the power of words. Come away with a greater cultural understanding, or a confirmation of the struggles of those you know.