

ONE-WOMAN SHOW REVIEW

# Jewish immigration in spotlight

BY KIM SURKAN

*Special to the Pioneer Press*

The minute Stephanie Satie entered an English-as-a-second-language classroom as a substitute teacher one evening in 1990, she knew she "had landed in a gold mine."

Her students, a group of predominantly Jewish immigrants from Iran, Armenia and the former Soviet Union, would become the real-life inspiration for the characters in her one-woman show "Refugees."

The regional premiere opened in the Twin Cities over the weekend in a performance sponsored by the Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company.

Satie plays 10 different people, seven women and three men, in this 90-minute solo performance.

"Refugees" is less a portrait of each individual in Satie's classroom than an investigation of the impact they had on her in understanding her own family history.

As an assimilated American whose grandparents also immigrated, the character Stephanie (a version of herself) begins to question the gaps, silences and shame in her family's denial of their refugee status.

The play is structured scene by scene as a series of classes,

**What:** "Refugees," written by Stephanie Satie and directed by Anita Khanzadian, presented by the Minnesota Jewish Theatre Company

**Where:** Sabes Jewish Community Center, 4330 S. Cedar Lake Road, St. Louis Park

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Wednesday and Thursday, 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Sunday

**Tickets:** \$18-\$15; call 651-647-4315

**Capsule:** "Refugees" is one woman's take on a diverse America.

with students telling stories of their lives in broken English and gradually interacting with each other as the play progresses.

Satie's Eastern European accents are the strongest, but the distinction between characters often relies on the reiteration of their names in the script or distinctive repetition of gestures or postures associated with each one.

Ranging in age from Farideh, an Iranian woman in her mid-20s, to Rima, a Latvian who is

almost 70, the characters narrate the difficult and sometimes even horrific circumstances that led them to leave their countries for the United States.

The men are the least developed, including Boris, a sexist and racist taxi driver from Uzbekistan; Darioush, the Iranian husband guilty of domestic abuse; and Mahmoud, the Iranian director of the language school who advises Stephanie not to meddle in the personal lives of students.

"Refugees" is an ambitious and even compelling portrayal of the complexity of the global community in which we live. Seen through the eyes of people driven from their homelands, the play contextualizes the strong emphasis on family, storytelling and tradition that we often observe in first-generation immigrants.

Satie's commitment to the preservation of each of these individual voices only slightly compromises the final product. As a solo performance, it's a show that would be tighter with one or two fewer characters.

Still, Satie's enthusiasm and love of these people shines through, making "Refugees" an enjoyable and timely commentary on an increasingly diverse America.

**Minneapolis Pioneer Press**

January 15, 2002