

AMERICAN CHRONICLE

E.S.L. Teacher Performs "Refugees" in So. Pasadena

March 18, 2009

Jackie Houchin

— Theater review



"Refugees," playing at the Fremont Centre Theatre, is the first of three one-woman/one-act plays celebrating Women's History Month. ("Beneath Rippling Water" opens April 17, and "A Woman of Independent Means" plays Mother's Day Weekend.)

"Refugees" is based on the true story of a woman who taught an 'English as a Second Language' course in the 1990s to adult immigrants from Iran, Armenia, and other countries in the former Soviet Union.

Stephanie Satie is that teacher; and the remarkable play she both wrote and performs is a sampling of the stories she heard in her classroom over a period of five years.

"What do you wish?" the teacher asks each student in the Advanced Conversation class. "This is your last chance to speak before you are alone in the world."

This opener brings a variety of answers from the students: "an American husband for my daughter," "any job," "my mother and brothers to come here," "to be President of Iran," and from the outspoken Boris, "to be in a class with only Russian people."

Quickly the students emerge as individuals, confident, resigned, hopeful, shy, or bored, with goals to reach and problems to overcome. The teacher interacts with each one patiently and persistently.

A student asks a personal question, and the teacher confesses she knows more about them, than she does about her own family. "I'm... half Jewish," she admits reluctantly. And so begins a quest to discover her own heritage.

Later, after searching her past with its painful memories, the teacher stands and admits that she was once ashamed to be a refugee. "But now," she proclaims proudly, "because of you, I think it is wonderful!"

The play raises several cultural issues, such as the inequities between men and women. When a female student comes to class with a black eye, the teacher questions her. She finally admits her husband hit her, but defends him by saying it's "his right" to beat her.

The teacher tries to intervene, but after the hot-tempered husband visits the classroom, she is admonished by the school director to, "Teach only the curriculum. Respect their culture. You are not a social worker for the downtrodden."

Stephanie Satie, under the able direction of Anita Khanzadian, performs the dozen or so different characters in the play. Each time this amazing actress steps into a different personae, the audience is right there with her, believing. By adopting a different physical attitude, changing her voice, or adding a distinct gesture, we are totally convinced... even when the transitions from one to another happen quickly. The only prop Satie uses is a pair of sunglasses.

The play is thought provoking, touching, and at times humorous, with an unexpected and tantalizing touch of romance. The set is minimal because all the energy and visuals come from the performer and her "cast" of characters. The play is short – approximately 90 minutes – and runs without intermission.

Performances are Saturdays at 8:00 pm and Sundays at 3:00 pm, through April 5, 2009.

Admission for adults is \$25; for students/seniors, \$20

For reservations, call (866) 811-4111 or visit www.fremontcentretheatre.com

The Fremont Centre Theatre is located at 1000 Fremont Ave (at El Centro), in South Pasadena, CA 91030. There is plenty of free parking behind the theatre.