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"Refugees," a solo show, seems at first small and self-contained, but draws one immediately into its inter-continental scope. Stephanie Satie, the writer and performer, appears as the instructor for an English as a Second Language class. She speaks and gestures to the audience as if to the students, but thankfully avoids plunging into the trap of audience interaction (from which there is no escape). Immediately she turns the scene around and seamlessly slides into the characters of the students in the class. With pitch-perfect delivery, Satie transmogrifies into (among others) a Latvian, a Muscovite, two different Iranians, and a Uzbek taxi driver — who is a man, to boot. Not only that, but she then skips between these characters as they question, respond, and cajole each other in rapid-fire fashion.

Initially, the students introduce themselves as they struggle with the difference between the words "wish" "hope," which seems an unbearably hokey device. Yet Satie grounds each of the students in very real, concrete details, and doesn't let one dwell on the choice of subject matter. Quickly, the talk turns from hoping for jobs or spouses, to the stories of repression and violence that they have fled in their homelands. These are the stories not just of immigrants but of refugees.

Clearly, this material represents a distillation of the experiences that Satie experienced as an ESL teacher. She does not overplay the harrowing nature of the stories of institutionalized repression but invests the characters with quiet dignity as they recount their stories with the matter-of-factness of people who have seen too much and

ESL is other people

"Refugees" is an impressive one-woman performance about an English class in which each student has a dark story from the old country.

By TOM X. CHAO
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lived to tell about it. One such is the story of Farideh, an Iranian woman who saw her family killed and fled the country as the only girl in a truck full of young boys. Such stories are exactly what Americans need to hear right now to further an understanding of world politics rather than continue gazing into the collective navel lint of Adam Sandler movies and televised wrestling.

Gradually we see how the students' stories and confessions act on the teacher, and cause her to explore her own story. Here, Satie explores her own background as the child of Jewish immigrants who have, with overwhelming assimilationist tendencies, instilled her with unfortunate self-hatred. In the oft-maligned one-person-show formula, one would expect the floodgates of the self-indulgent confessional mode to open wide here, but Satie manages to make her points about coming to grips with the unhappy detritus of her family life without bogging down.

In terms of staging, the tiny stage at Arthur's Dress Shop contains only a few chairs and a table for this show. A colorful bifurcated world map dominates the set. This set piece provides a subtle touch as, if one looks closely, one sees it is not a map but a painting of a map, à la Jasper Johns, a sly commentary on the theatrical nature of this work.

A very few references betray the show's age, over four years; however, these do not detract. One might also wish that the title of the show (and the accompanying promotional photo) would do more to convey its complexity and depth. But it is a testament to Satie's ability to, that she managed to hold the audience's attention while fighting a mighty uphill battle against the confines of Arthur's Dress Shop, sweltering in the summer heat with two air conditioners blowing but achieving nothing but to drown out some of the dialogue. Despite all these obstacles, Satie has created a solid, mature, intelligent show.

AUGUST 14, 2002
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