

The Language of Life

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Actress-ESL teacher finds wealth of dramatic material in refugees' stories.

■ NOTES

BY ROBIN RAUZI
TIMES STAFF WRITER

There's this thing about theater-types: They see plays everywhere.

Actress Stephanie Satie was working at her "survival" job, teaching English as a second language to immigrants from the Middle East and Eastern Europe. She taught advanced students, the ones who needed conversational practice. In that classroom, while just trying to speak the language, Satie's students began to tell their personal stories.

Satie remembered one woman in particular, an emigre from Russia who had been a miner. She talked about her helmet with the light on it, about going down into the dark tunnels, about how much she loved and missed being a miner.

A light came on over Satie's head, too. Around her were not only students, but stories and characters. "The ground started shaking for me," Satie said.

She's shaped those stories into "Refugees," her solo play that opens Saturday at the Sweet Lies Theatre in North Hollywood.

In "Refugees," Satie is not only the teacher, but also the students in an ESL class. In rehearsal last week, she dropped easily into the Russian accent of Larissa, a woman who took out a personal ad to find a

husband who would be her passport to the United States. In Moscow, Larissa was a master of the divining rod—using a stick to divine information about invisible forces. "Unfortunately, there is not such a demand for my skill here," Satie said, in Larissa's deadpan voice.

Like Larissa, the characters in "Refugees" are inspired by real-life students, though many are composites of students from Satie's seven years as an ESL instructor. When she started to put the pieces together, she called Anita Khanzadian, a director she knew who had worked on other non-narrative solo shows, in addition to critically acclaimed work with Interact Theatre Company. At first, Satie didn't know if these wildly varied stories could be put together as a play.

"I sat down and listened to her do this wonderful material. I said it's doable. It's tough, but it's doable," said Khanzadian.

Rather than perform it as a series of monologues, they have structured "Refugees" like a class,

weaving the discussions and tales together. Real-life experiences such as Satie's always feed into your craft if you're an artist, Khanzadian said. "Here she does something responsible and grown-up, and she comes back with material."

Satie, a member of Theatre 40, is, in a small way, a refugee herself. She got a grant from the Cultural Affairs Department of the city of Los Angeles to perform "Refugees"—but it required that she perform the work in the city. Theatre 40 is in Beverly Hills.

So Satie trekked over the hill to North Hollywood, which, unless the secessionists have their way, is still part of the city of Los Angeles. In September, she will also present the work at Cal State Northridge.

■ "Refugees" at the Sweet Lies Theatre, behind the Bitter Truth Theatre, 11050 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood. Saturdays at 8 p.m.; Sundays at 2 p.m. Through July 19. \$10. (818) 755-7900.

DRAMATIC TEAM:

Director Anita Khanzadian, left, and actress Stephanie Satie collaborated to stage "Refugees."

IRFAN KHAN
Los Angeles Times

