

# 'Refugees' Takes Lessons Far Beyond the Classroom

## THEATER BEAT

**"R**efugees" finds shelter at the Bitter Truth Theatre's intimate Sweet Lies stage in a well-crafted playlet masquerading as a solo performance piece.

With its rapid-fire dialogue and minimal reliance on exposition, Stephanie Satie's script about a class in English as a second language could just as easily be delivered by an ensemble. Parlaying Satie's experiences teaching English to adult immigrants who fled repressive regimes into a thoughtful meditation on cultural identity, the work sidesteps the static inertia that too often plagues the monologue genre.

Anita Khanzadian's brisk direction effectively showcases Satie's versatility as she leaps from one clearly delineated character to the next. Her portraits ring with weight and authority across a wide gamut of voices and personalities, from a timid, abused Iranian housewife to an opinionated cab driver from Uzbekistan.

As they tell their stories, humor collides with tragedy—a mail-order bride from Moscow who holds a degree in divination admits she hasn't found much demand for this particular skill, while another Iranian chronicles a harrowing tale about the arbitrary execution of her pregnant mother.

Equally poignant is the students' effect on Satie's alter ego, the ESL instructor who's forced to confront her long-ignored East European Jewish roots and their legacy of repression. Attempting to intervene in her students' problems lands the teacher in both administrative and psychological hot water, but the story steers clear of melodrama by keeping its dramatic ambitions firmly grounded in real-world limits and possibilities. While making an important distinction between fanciful wishes and achievable hopes, Satie's touching play practices what



RICK FRIESEN

Stephanie Satie performs in her one-woman drama "Refugees."

she preaches.

—PHILIP BRANDES

■ "Refugees," Sweet Lies Theatre at the Bitter Truth Theatre, 11050 Magnolia Blvd., North Hollywood. Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m. Ends July 19. \$10. (818) 755-7900. Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes.

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