

A Teacher Learns Life Lessons from Her Students: Stephanie Satie on "Refugees"

by Jana J. Monji

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What started as a job has blossomed into a life-changing event. Stephanie Satie admitted that when she took a job teaching English to non-native speakers in the 1990s, "It started as a survival job, but it was so fantastic from the first night. I was there subbing when all of these stories were unfolding."

The stories became the material for not one, but two different plays, "Refugees" (playing at the Fremont Centre Theatre until April 5) and "Coming to America," one-person shows that Satie performs nation-wide.

She explained, "I worked there for 7 years; it was a private school that was accredited. In the early nineties, there was a huge wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union and Iran." She had so many stories that the ones that didn't make it into "Refugees" were put in her other show, "Coming to America: transformations."

That show, she commented has "a much broader range, including a Cambodian dancer who teaches in Long Beach and survived the terror of Pol Pot." She also mentioned she heard of "a company of Iraqi dancers who couldn't perform, but rehearsed every morning, every single day of the week in their crumbling theater in Bagdad."

Before taking that survival job, she commented that "some of the stories I vaguely knew existed; some, I absolutely did not have a clue." But Satie also had few clues about her own family, something she talks about in "Refugees" which has been playing in South Pasadena at the Fremont Centre Theatre as part of the "Stripped Bare" series, a collection of solo shows. "I had a family who never talked about the past. My mother came here from Latvia when she was five. Her other sisters were older. They faced the huge persecution of Jews there, but talked in code about how our people suffered; how mama and papa were born in the old country, but we were born here."

Her shows came about because as an actor she "wanted to morph and try on other cultures and other accents. And at work, people were just pouring out their experiences. They actually told me these stories and they seemed so familiar. I had been studying Russian for a couple of years and went there before the collapse of the Soviet Union. I remember walking around and seeing women would walk in the street, side by side, kind of like tanks. You couldn't get by them. That was just like my mother and her sisters."

One thing that shocked her was the stories about kidnapped brides. One such person was in her class, but "didn't have the language skills of the character in the play"

Satie recalled, "I brought in that article about Hmong Chinese. Someone laid a chicken on the doorstep of the father and that gave him the right to have the daughter." As you can imagine that prompted further discussion. With her eyes opened, Satie said, "Suddenly I was always finding these articles about acts of oppression of women and that would trigger their stories. I remember I had a woman from Georgia; she had been a doctor. She was pretty young, in her thirties. Her husband didn't want her to come to school any more because she started to flex her wings too much and he was, at this point, driving a cab."

Satie found that this often occurred when "the husband was in business and with a rich social life, women who were so fluid and creative, try out new ways of re-making themselves. That created a conflict in their community." Yet as you can imagine, that was in itself "a kind of learning experience" for Satie as well. "You can't be best friend to so many people, I couldn't really offer them a way out of a culture that embraced them because I had nothing full time to offer them, just a friendship. A lot of people who took

my classes were incredible examples of resilience and bravery."

Satie heard stories from "young women in Iraq who were in the university when the revolution just erupted. They would sleep on the roof on a hot night and the shooting stars would be missiles. I'd get invited to their parties and would be privileged, getting an insider's look. We're

sometimes pissed off that the mall doesn't have our lipstick any more! We need a little balance here."

Yet Satie is careful to state that not all of her female students had bad marriages. "Several Persian women had wonderful marriages of equality and were open to new values and ways. To keep hold of old values and old ways of being, it doesn't work here. Both the men and the women had to be willing. Women are generally more willing to shed them; they are just more resilient. Their identity isn't so tied up with a role that they play at home. I do keep in touch with my former students. There is one woman... she re-financed my house. She's in real estate and she served her husband with divorce papers. Several of the Russians, I'm in touch with; we have lunch together... no one has been offended by the shows. I wrote them to honor and celebrate them. I was sort of blown away at how brave and resilient they were."

That was then, but this is no longer the 1990s. Does America still hold a promise for refugees? Satie believes it does. When I revived this, I wondered is it a period piece? Will it still have something to say? Frankly for the past eight years, I don't think coming to America was such a good deal but with the election of Obama, who we are, who we aspired to be is making a come back. It will be worth coming to America despite economic situation but that is global thing. Time and place, the local story contains the universal. The details may be a little different, but it applies everywhere. I've been doing "Refugees" a couple of times a year. I've been doing "Coming to America" more lately."

Satie also credits her director Anita Khanzadian for her shows. Khanzadian had grown up with stories of kidnapped brides who once touched were permanently soiled. When they worked together, Satie recalled, "We were trading personal stories and family stories; I don't know where I leave off and she begins." If Satie's show is a bit critical of her mother, she admitted, "I think in fairness, I didn't have grandparents. My grandmother died before I was born. My grandfather on my mother's side, he died when I was four. You get stories from your grandparents. I lacked that." She also noted that things were different when her mother's family immigrated. "They came at a time when they just closed the door." There still are different attitudes Satie commented citing Adrienne Rich who wrote about "leaving yourself behind when you go to a new country." Satie, who works teaching literature and writing part-time at CalState Northridge also thought of the Indian writer Bharati Mukherjee who wrote about "the arrogance of nostalgia, the danger of just thinking everything was better in the old country." Satie explained, "I kind of think you need a balance."

"Refugees," Fremont Centre Theatre, 1000 Fremont Ave. (at El Centro), South Pasadena. Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 3 p.m. \$20-\$25. Ends April 5.



Stephanie Satie in "Refugees." Photo by Rick Friesen.