The Arts

[Theater]

Actress Stephanie Satie uncovers her Jewish identity in 'Refugees'

'Excavating the Past'

By Naomi Pfefferman, *Entertainment Editor*

Stephanie Satie's solo performance piece, "Refugees," began in the most unlikely of places: in her English-as-a-second-language class at the Los Angeles ORT Technical Institute, where Satie taught mostly Russian and Iranian Jewish women.

Her own family memories, or half-memories, were stirred by the stories the students recounted: Larissa, an expert practitioner of the divining rod, who had come to America from Moscow as a mail-order bride; Manushak, from Armenia, whose teen-age sister was a victim of the ancient practice of bridal kidnapping; and Farideh, who escaped from Iran alone after her mother was murdered by the state death squads.

Satie, fascinated, began jotting down the women's tales after class. "I thought: 'Someone has to give voice to these stories. Someone has to bear witness,'" the actress, a member of Theatre 40, says.

The result is Satie's new play, "Refugees," now showing at the Sweet Lies Theatre. Portraying her students and herself, Satie bears witness to their stories as well as her own.

At one telling moment in "Refugees," the students ask Satie where she is from. They ask if she is Jewish. Satie squirms in her response to the questions. She finally stammers that she is an American, and reluctantly admits that she is Jewish. The whole truth comes out later.

Her parents were themselves refugees, Satie says in a recent interview. They were born in Eastern Europe, but they always insisted that they were born here. They spurned anyone who spoke Yiddish.

"My mother's desire to be American was so great that if I made a grammatical mistake, she'd make the correction *and* quote the rule," Satie says. "My family didn't tell me anything about the past, and what they did say probably wasn't true."

Nevertheless, Satie thinks that she internalized her parents' fear of pogroms, of being the outsider in a non-Jewish culture. She was instructed not to act "too Jewish"; to keep a low profile in public. With her parents' blessing, she changed her last name from Lieberman to Satie (after the composer, Eric) when she earned her actor's equity card at the age of 16. Whenever anyone asked about her last name, Satie would say that she was French.

The dancer and actress studied at the Martha Graham conservatory and the Stella Adler School before making her way to Hollywood in 1985. She studied Russian at UCLA and spent several adventurous summers in the Soviet Union. Satie went on to land roles in theater and TV, including the recurring Jewish role of Ida Pfeiffer (Paul's mom) on "The Wonder Years." But, in her private life, she tried to appear non-Jewish. She dated only non-Jews and finally married a Christian man from Kansas.

A personal turning point came when Satie visited the "Too Jewish?" exhibit at UCLA's Armand Hammer Museum last year. "I was captivated, and I was cringing," she says. "When I spotted a friend, I worried, 'Will he think I'm Jewish if I'm here?' And then I thought, 'My God, haven't I

Teaching Jewish refugees at a Los Angeles ORT English-as-a-second-language class gave Stephanie Satie the inspiration to create her solo performance piece, "Refugees."
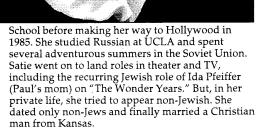
made peace with that already?'"

Working with Jewish refugees at ORT proved cathartic for Satie. On the first or second day of class, she was intrigued by the story of Lyuba, a former miner who described descending into the earth, wearing a lamp on her helmet to light the way.

For Satie, the image became a metaphor, as she feverishly began to "excavate" her own past. Because her mother had died without revealing anything, Satie "filled in the blanks" by reading first-person accounts of Jewish immigrant women such as Mary Antin. She scribbled "reams of notes and worked them into her Theater of Testimony play.

"I started to think of my family as having been 'stuck' between two worlds, just like the émigrés in my class," she says. "'Refugees' is a rebellious undoing of silence. My students told me their secrets, and I was able to tell them mine. They knew that their roots mattered, and they were not ashamed of who they were. It was such a relief...because all my life, I had felt I had had to reinvent myself so the 'horrible truth' wouldn't show."

"Refugees" runs on Saturdays, at 8 p.m., and Sundays, at 2 p.m., through July 19. For tickets, call (818) 755-7900. ■