



Speakers' series focuses on Women's History Month. **Malibu Life, B1**

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One-woman show celebrates Women's History Month, salutes immigrant experience

"Refugees" by Stephanie Satie, explores the immigrant experience through the eyes of women.

By **Melonic Magruder**
Special to *The Malibu Times*

The Malibu Public Library's 12th annual celebration of Women's History Month will kick off this Saturday with a performance of Stephanie Satie's one-woman show, "Refugees."

Satie, a guest during the library's 2008 Women's History Month Speaker Series, wrote "Refugees" based on her experiences teaching ESL (English as a second language) to incoming refugees during the local boom period for Russian and Iranian immigration in the early 1990s.

The experience, Satie said, brought her as much insight into her own immigrant background as into the lives of the foreign cultures she was teaching.

"I'm a first-generation American," Satie said. "My mom's family was from Latvia, and I never got to hear my grandparents' stories when I was young. So growing up, I saw a lot of my mother's beliefs as idiosyncratic behavior. But after meeting these Russian women in my classes, I got it. It's about a cultural imprint."

Satie, a slender, dark-haired actress who has received a Drama-Logue award for local stage work and has played recurring roles on a host of television shows, started out studying under two of the artistic giants of the 20th century—Martha Graham and Stella Adler. When some of her ESL students arrived with the conviction that America was culturally lacking, she used works of these mas-

ters to gently educate them in the complexities of American customs.

"These were very well-educated people who arrived on our shores," Satie explained. "They had read America's great writers, like Faulkner, they were committed to learning, and they were intellectually sharp. So it was a source of humiliation to the immigrant men who ended up having to deliver pizzas to make a living."

Satie's performing instinct was tapped after hearing her students open up about their lives. While Iranian immigrants who arrived after the Shah was deposed in 1979 generally felt that their American experience was, at most, temporary, the majority of her other students arrived grateful and eager for the opportunity to start new lives and apply for new citizenship.

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Women, in particular, seemed able to adapt to the demands of a bewildering new culture, determined to make better lives and identities for their children.

"Many of my students arrived with very repressive ideas of gender politics and cultural norms," Satie said. "Men supposedly were smarter than women. Divorce was off their radar. They were appalled at the street violence in America, but would abuse their own wives at night. You didn't neuter your pets. Only homeless people recycled. One man took the car keys away from his wife because he didn't want her learning new skills that might allow

her to work outside the home."

Gradually, Satie began to hear a narrative in her students' voices and gathered their stories into a dramatic construct. She tapped another first-generation Armenian friend to help shape her play into a viable one-woman show. The resulting piece has toured extensively, was recognized by Amnesty International and won an award at the Edinburgh International Festival.

Anita Khanzadian is a New York-based director and a teacher who has worked internationally on pieces by such diverse playwrights as Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard. She and Satie met in the same theater company in New York and connected immediately on the immigrant themes Satie was writing about. Satie asked her to direct "Refugees."

"In Syracuse, where I grew

up, there was a small, but active, Armenian community," Khanzadian said from New York, where she is directing a play. "So I was brought up with a strong sense of pride in my background. Stephanie, not so much. What was wonderful in the course of developing this play is that Stephanie began to discover her own culture and to perceive it in a positive light, which tied the whole thing together. I made her put that aspect of discovery into the play."

Khanzadian also acknowledged that assimilation seemed much harder for male refugees than females.

"In places like Russia and Persia, men have very defined roles as head of the household," Khanzadian said. "I think women arrived here surprised to find that it's not so definable. Those roles can be reversed and that's threaten-

ing to men who have only known one way. Women are survivors. I've always said that if I were ever lost in the woods and could only have one person with me to help, it would be my mother."

Kathy Sullivan, director of adult programs for the Malibu Public Library, said that funding cuts have forced her to scale back the offerings for this year's Women's History Month.

"I knew that if I could only have one really special thing, it would be Stephanie's show," Sullivan said. "It speaks not only to who we are as women, but who we are as a nation of immigrants."

"Refugees" by Stephanie Satie will be presented Saturday, March 6, 3 p.m., at the Malibu Public Library, 23519 Civic Center Way. Admission is free. More information can be obtained by calling 310.456.6438.