



Miles away, worlds apart: San Jose Rep's 'Sonia Flew' provides insight to tense U.S.-Cuba relations

May 14, 12:46 PM · [San Jose Theater Arts Examiner](#) · David John Chavez

It was the year 2000, and a darling little 6-year-old boy dominated every national headline.

The [Elian Gonzalez saga](#) had it all: Another historically fierce battle between the United States and Cuba, a boldly impassioned Cuban exile community united in their hatred for Dictator Fidel Castro, and an American public who just wanted to see that little boy with the father who wanted him home in Cuba.

It seems so simple on the surface - children are supposed to live with their parents. A Gallup News Service poll taken a few weeks before the April 22nd, 2000 raid said that seven of ten Americans favored returning Elian to his father immediately. But when the early morning hours arrived and more than 130 federal agents seized on the little house in Miami's Little Havana, all hell, political and otherwise, broke loose. In the exile community, a case made consistently through the national media is that a person, child or otherwise, who lands on American shores, is eligible for political asylum. Living with extended family, however distant that family is, in a free society should trump living with a parent in a Communist country.

Complicated stuff, to say the least.

San Jose Repertory Theatre is tackling the issues head-on with their newest and final production of their season. "*Sonia Flew*," opening Friday, May 14th, is a deep examination of another chapter in the strained U.S. and Cuba dynamic.

Forty years prior to the conclusion of the Elian saga, another covert operation took place. It is one that Fidel Castro [called, in June, 2009](#), "a diabolical clandestine operation."

"Operation Peter Pan" took place from 1960 to 1962, an operation that sent approximately 14,000 children to leave the communist politics of a Cuba taken over by Castro in 1959. Supported by the Miami Catholic Church community and led by [Monsignor Bryan Walsh](#), the operation brought these children to Miami and other locations in the

United States, with the belief that their parents would not be far behind. But with the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion in 1961 which led to the Cuban Missile Crisis, flights to and from the United States were grounded, leaving many of the children growing up in orphanages and foster homes. Many parents finally made the 90-mile journey to American soil more than five years later, but reconnection to children who grew up in an entirely new world was difficult for many.



Zak (Miles Gaston-Villanueva) tries to make his mother Sonia (Ivonne Coll) understand his critical decision in San Jose Rep's regional premiere of "Sonia Flew," playing through June 6th. Photo by Kevin Berne



Zak (Villanueva) and Nina (Kwana Martinez) are under enemy fire. Photo by Kevin Berne

In *"Sonia Flew,"* written by Boston-based playwright Melinda Lopez, Sonia is one of the Peter Pan children. Coming to the United States in 1961, her parents never made it, getting caught in the storm of the revolution. Forty years later, living in Minneapolis with her Jewish husband and two children, Sonia has built a life that honors two cultural traditions.

But then September 11th of 2001 came. And in response to the terrorist attacks that shook the world, her son decides three months later to drop out of college and join the army. Her feelings of abandonment come rushing back to the surface. Patriotism or family? Justice or sacrifice? Questions that are as difficult to answer as any.

The research of the entire situation was endlessly fascinating for director Richard Seer, who hadn't known much about the politics of Cuba before taking the project. And learning why parents would part ways with their children was an amazing discovery.



Daniel (Michael Santo), Jen (Tiffany Ellen Solano), Sonia (Coll), Zak (Villanueva), and Sam (Julian Lopez-Morillas) enjoy pasteles and coffee.
Photo by Kevin Berne

"In many ways, the Communist system itself is a kind of parent," said Seer. "Many believe freedom is more important. I want you to live in a society that is free, where you can flourish, and that's more important than being with your family."

Ivonne Coll, a decorated Puerto Rican actress who has seen her share of film, television and theatre roles, is enamored with the play, which continues her long lineage of playing Cuban characters. For Coll, playing dual roles, the play takes a deep, fascinating look inside Sonia's journey, and how she continues to struggle every day with her sense of abandonment.

"It's such a complex play and a

complex character," said Coll. "She feels the betrayal she felt on an unconscious level. She was not consulted, not told anything, and didn't even know she was leaving until that night. Sonia buries all that past, her parents never came after she arrived, and in a way, Sonia's mother committed suicide."

The play is very much not only a story of a country and its people, but a play about how generations bridge gaps. That can also be found in the design.

"The play is just wonderful the way it is written in two different worlds," said Coll. "The first part of show is pragmatic, contemporary, very Nordic, very cold. When we go to Cuba, it is filled with color. It's like two different plays in one."

The lack of communication, an intense issue that sits beneath the surface in her world, is also a critical piece of the storyline.

"The same difficulties are passed down from generation to generation," said Seer. "Forty years into the second act into Cuba, it's the same scene and the same conflict for a different generation. The play makes a very interesting statement that when we pass on love, we pass on dysfunction when we don't communicate."

There are amazing parallels between a critical stance in the play, which sometimes conflicts with the way we look at ourselves in society; should we eliminate our traditions and customs that are associated with our ethnic heritage? Or as Americans, do we blend into a homogeneous society? Is there room for both? "The great debate is that you're an American now, but the playwright is saying for Americans to embrace the heritage of their country of origin," said Seer. "The central character is putting herself back to her Cuban roots, and she has to embrace that to make her a more full, a more complete person in this society."

EXAMINE IT FOR YOURSELF

San Jose Repertory Theatre presents the regional premiere of "**Sonia Flew**"

Written by Melinda Lopez

Directed by Richard Seer

May 14th – June 6th

Approximate Running Time: 2 hours, with one 15 minute intermission.

San Jose Repertory Theatre is located at 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Tickets range from \$28 to \$62

For more information or to purchase tickets, call 408-367-7255 or visit the Rep online at www.sjrep.com

Email David John Chavez at dchavez04@att.net

Become a subscriber to David's theatre column by going to the top of the page and clicking "subscribe."

Follow David on twitter at twitter.com/davidjchavez

Become a fan of San Jose Theater Arts Examiner on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/sjrep).