



A wonderful ensemble cast helps SJ Rep's 'Sonia Flew' reach the sky

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Sonia needs to get organized. It's Christmastime and Hannukah time, and there are two sets of traditions to uphold. Dreidels. Menorahs. 7-Up salads. Grampa's coming for a visit, and everything needs to be ready.

There is nothing particularly compelling about the opening moments of San Jose Rep's "*Sonia Flew*," the final production of their season. Simple action. A cold and drab set, heavy on whites, with slight hints of color hovering over the proceedings. Speeches that move in small bursts, many people talking, no one saying anything.

But this is exactly the point, and the structure of playwright Melinda Lopez' dialogue. The coldness of the opening moments lends itself to the drama, with the audience slowly climbing to the apex of a rollercoaster. But when that coaster zips down, it takes the audience on a thrilling ride.

Zak has something to tell his mother. Father already knows. Sister already knows. There is a clear reason that he won't broach the subject with mother just yet. Like many looking to respond to the September 11th terrorist attacks, Zak is joining the military, three months after 9/11, while bodies are still being counted and hot metal still smolders. There is no easy way to tell her. When he does, he will not get the approval he seeks. It is because of the secret she possesses. A secret that she will not share with anyone. The pain is still too raw, the images still burn within her soul.

It is pain that completely throws the craftily balanced world that Sonia inhabits out of whack. She insults those around her. She lashes out. She will not light the candles that represent the mother as the giver of life. If someone wants lit candles, they can light their own damn candles.

Sonia is a child of Operation Peter Pan, the mission created by Miami's Catholic Church establishment. During the years from 1960 – 1962, 14,000 children, often as few as six or seven at a time, made the journey from Cuba to the United States without their parents in order to escape the new Communist Cuba, led by a young Fidel Castro. In many cases, what should have been a one or two-year separation turned into a five-year or more separation. In Sonia's case, her separation was forever. Her inability to forgive lasted forever too.

It is this critical piece of exposition that sends the play into overdrive, creating all of the drama, and making the action onstage mesmerizing. The acting in the first act is at its best when the play takes on an ensemble tone, with everyone playing their needs, driving their desires at the same time. The first act staging by Richard Seer mostly hits the mark. With the exception of a few moments of awkward blocking, the staging connected very well stylistically to the set. Actors mostly played to each other in straight lines, the entire set giving way to a linear unified vision, well-crafted by Seer and well-executed inside of Robin Sanford Roberts set.

"*Sonia Flew*" is a tale of two acts, separate parts which are needed to make one whole. The first act takes place in the cold and soulless dining room in Minnesota, the second in the colorful, tropical Cuba. One act tells the modern tale of Sonia and her family, the second act gives the background as to how we got here.

The challenge in the acting is to play two completely different roles in both acts, in addition to very specific dialect work. Miles Gaston Villanueva's turn at Zak was full of passion and energy, a young man ready for the ultimate sacrifice if it comes his way. Tiffany Ellen Solano hit her stride in Act II as young Sonia, where her discovery that her life as she knew it would end in a matter of moments, was moving. And Kwana Martinez positively shone as Sonia's mother Pilar, who



Sonia (Ivonne Coll) is consoled by her husband Daniel (Michael Santo) after an anxiety attack in San Jose Rep's production of "Sonia Flew," playing through June 6th. Photo by Kevin Berne

allowed each new piece of information to lend itself to the dreaded payoff, which, for Pilar, was the only option. But make no mistake, this play was placed in the hands of the great Ivonne Coll, and to paraphrase the play's title, Ivonne flew. It is special to watch a true artist at work. Coll is an actor who does what all great actors do – build her character from the inside out. Her body is her instrument, with every gentle nuance giving new insight into her character. Whether it was her subtle stage right work at the end of act one, which reached its zenith in beautiful harmony with a dazzling lighting and sound effect, to her uncanny ability to listen to everything and react organically, to her humorous, yet painful turn as the loving and prophetic matriarch Marta, Coll is a maestro, throwing every intention into her body and soul and raising the stakes at every turn.

"*Sonia Flew*," while not perfect, is perfectly intriguing. It begs the question, how much do painful secrets we keep within ourselves tear us apart? How much do we punish ourselves when we cannot forgive others?

The answers may lie on the surface. In *Sonia Flew*, they probably lie buried beneath lots of beautiful, yet ugly, cold white snow, which burns our hand whenever we try to dig through.

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

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