

Theater review: 'Sonia Flew'

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic
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Ivonne Coll is Sonia and Michael Santo is Daniel in Melinda Lopez's "Sonia Flew" at San Jose Repertory Theatre.



Sonia Flew: Drama. By Melinda Lopez. Directed by Richard Seer. With Ivonne Coll, Kwana Martinez, Julian López-Morillas, Michael Santo et al. Through June 6. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours, 15 minutes. \$21-\$74. (408) 367-7255. www.sjrep.com.

It has to be one of the hardest things a parent can do: send a child away for safety. It can't be easy on the child either. For the title character in Melinda Lopez's button-pushing drama "Sonia Flew," which opened Friday at San Jose Repertory Theatre, the child's trauma is mother to the parent's.

The extent to which Sonia has kept that trauma hidden from her husband and teenage children is one of the harder elements to swallow in the 2004 drama. The vitality of Lopez's dialogue, and the excellent performances in director Richard Seer's local premiere, go a long way toward overcoming a promising writer's conceptual missteps.

It's a kind of double kitchen sink drama, with the kitchens 40 years apart. The potent but inwardly fragile Sonia (Ivonne Coll) of the first act is a no-nonsense Cuban American career woman in Minneapolis with a smart, loving Jewish husband, Daniel (Michael Santo), and two articulate kids. It's December 2001, and the family is preparing for a Hanukkah-Christmas visit from Daniel's father (Julian López-Morillas).

Did you notice the date? Sonia hasn't been able to fly since 9/11. Worse, in the midst of the festivities, son Zak (Miles Gaston Villanueva) informs her that he's enlisted in the Marines. The intense parent-child separation flashbacks Sonia suffers play like somewhat hokey teasers for the second

act.

Then Robin Sanford Roberts' wonderfully white, finely furnished Minnesota home gives way to the tall palms and decor of Havana, with Cathleen Edwards' costumes taking us back to April 1961. A bright-eyed, naive Tiffany Ellen Solano is Sonia at 15, but the dramatic focus is more on her mother, Pilar (Kwana Martinez).

It's two years after the revolution in a moderately anti-Castro household. While Sonia's politically compromised professor father (López-Morillas) temporizes, the fiery Pilar and tough family maid (Coll) covertly arrange to fly Sonia to America. Oddly, given Lopez's depiction of a political crackdown, there's no hint of the tensions surrounding the Bay of Pigs invasion of, yes, April 1961.

Martinez, Solano and López-Morillas convey the pain of separating with an intensity reinforced by our foreknowledge that Sonia will never see her parents again. Coll and Santo drive the lesson home in a gentle, snow-fluttering epilogue.

But their intelligent bond makes it harder to understand why she's never told him her story, especially since his father was a child refugee from the Holocaust. Oh, and Zak has a not-unexpected bad experience at war. With all the topical buttons being pushed, "Sonia" can seem like a candidate for a TV movie of the week. Though Lopez's dense parent-teen arguments show great promise, "Sonia" doesn't fly.

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