

Review: 'Sonia Flew,' at S.J. Rep, elevates to powerful and touching heights

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All of the characters in "Sonia Flew" are weighed down by a heavy sense of loss.

Melinda Lopez's play charts the history of a middle-aged woman, Sonia (Ivonne Coll), who lives in snowbound Minneapolis. She marries and has two children, but her heart is always haunted by the life she left behind. Smuggled out of Cuba as a teenager, as the revolution turned into a brutal dictatorship, Sonia never saw her parents again, and she never forgave them for giving her up.

Richard Seer's sensitive staging of the family drama, in its regional debut at San Jose Repertory Theatre, captures the angst and grief of coming to terms with the past.

While the text has some structural flaws and Sonia's present is never as compelling as her past, "Flew" still artfully explores the choices made by one generation on behalf of another. The explosive chemistry between parent and child, poignantly rendered by a deft cast, gives this production its emotional resonance.

Robin Sanford Roberts' beguiling set evokes the limbo of Sonia's universe. The entire set is framed by a gauzy blue tapestry that's half sky, half sea. It's the view of her mind's eye when she made the fateful journey from Cuba to America. Inside that frame, we see the posh claustrophobia of a middle-class house in the Midwest.

It's a home that's about to be turned upside down by the news that Sonia's son Zak (Miles Gaston Villaneuva) wants to enlist in the Army. Unsettled by a post-9/11 panic, he wants to do something to make the world a better place. His grandfather Sam (Julian Lopez-Morillas) thinks he's doing the noble thing. His sister Jen (Tiffany Ellen Solano) thinks he's been brainwashed by the military-industrial complex.

All Sonia can think is how much she sacrificed for a life of peace and how horrifying it is to watch her son embrace a life of violence.

Lopez skillfully renders the sour banter of a long-married couple as the steely Sonia lays into her husband Daniel (Michael Santo) as well as the thoroughly irreverent patois of the two teenagers. But Zak's bombshell doesn't illuminate the family dynamic very well and the drama never quite ignites in the first act. It's only in Act Two, when we hear the secrets of Sonia's childhood, that the play becomes deeply compelling.

Back in Cuba, under the Castro regime, the stakes were perilously high. Society had turned into a police state where zealous shows of patriotism were mandatory and expressing divergent opinions was the kiss of death.

Sonia's father, Orfeo (Lopez-Morillas again), watches sadly as his fellow professors are dragged out of the classroom in chains. Her mother, Pilar (the sublime Kwana Martinez), bristles at having to bow and scrape to the local party honcho Tito (Santo) as he whips her daughter, the young Sonia (Solano), into a revolutionary fervor. Too young to know patriotism from fascism, she is eager to prove her loyalty by any means necessary.



(l to r) Daniel (Michael Santo), Jen (Tiffany Ellen Solano), Sonia (Ivonne Coll), Zak (Miles Gaston Villaneuva) and Sam (Julian Lopez-Morillas) enjoy pasteles and coffee in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of Sonia Flew. (Kevin Berne)

The family struggles to stay afloat as long as it can. Orfeo tries to toe the line, at least outwardly, in the hopes that the chaos cannot last. Pilar would rather die than submit to thugs and bullies. Their elderly maid Marta (a moving turn by Coll) knows that tragedy is in the cards.

It's in the heartbreaking scenes between Orfeo and Pilar, raging against each other in a world gone mad, that the play truly soars. The set's backdrop is now drenched in red, the color of sunsets and blood, as Sonia's parents make the only decision they can.

Martinez is formidable as Pilar, fear and desperation written on her face even as she tries for a gracious smile. Lopez-Morillas charts the course between cowardice and resignation as Orfeo realizes there is no way out.

Most significantly, it's in these scenes of post-revolutionary Cuba that the playwright finds the power of her voice. In the end, Sonia's past and present don't connect as palpably as they should, but the memories of Havana are incendiary enough to fly right into our hearts.

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"Sonia Flew"
by Melinda Lopez

Upshot: The poignant drama of a woman caught between her Cuban past and her American present

Through: June 6

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose

Running time: 2 hours 10 minutes (one intermission)

Tickets: 408-367-7255; www.sjrep.com.