

Theater Review: 'Sonia Flew' an emotional powerhouse

by [Clinton Stark](#) (@clintonstark) on 05.15.10

Sonia Flew

★★★★★

San Jose Rep

Directed by Richard Seer

Starring Ivonne Coll, Julian Lopez-Morillas, Kwana Martinez, Michael Santo, Tiffany Ellen Solano, Miles Gaston Villaneuva

Written by Melinda Lopez

On the Web: www.sjrep.com

Sonia Flew adds an emotional exclamation mark to the end of the San Jose Rep's 2009/2010 season, and does so with such riveting performances and heartfelt drama, that it's impossible not to be moved.

Set alternatively against the backdrop of post-9/11 America and the Cuban Revolution, it elevates our consciousness. What does it mean to sacrifice? What role does patriotism play in the context of family?

Loni and I both had slightly watery eyes as the house lights went up after a rousing response from the audience. It's one of the moments when you wish you could discretely wipe away a tear or two, and then hopefully look composed by the time you run into anyone at the Rep's enjoyable opening night party.

Written by Melinda Lopez (the first recipient of the Charlotte Woolard Award, for "a promising new voice in American Theatre."), a former stage actor and now playwright, the material reveals a critical, compassionate voice that is willing to protest, to rebel, but is also sympathetic to the power of the family unit.

This is the first play I've seen with 9/11 references. Although only mentioned briefly in dialog, there's no escaping the ominous feeling of the tragedy. Confusion and anger hang in the air. Interestingly, Lopez gives us a fresh perspective, that of immigrant Sonia (Ivonne Coll and Tiffany Ellen Solano); a proud Cuban, now proud American.

The juxtaposition of two crises told at different times with rich cultural context is one of the play's many highlights. Told in flashback, the play starts in Minneapolis. All is well. Making dinner arrangements is the tallest order of the day.

The Towers are still burning, I saw them.

Soon, though, the family struggles to come to terms with their son Zak's (Miles Gaston Villaneuva) apparently sudden decision to enlist in the army. His mother Sonia (Ivonne Coll) is staunchly opposed while his Jewish father (Michael Santo) seems indifferent though supportive. Jen (Tiffany Ellen Solano), his younger sister, is not pleased either ("The few, the proud, the brainwashed!").



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

The only one who seems to understand Zak's desire to do the right thing and fight for his country is his supportive grandfather Sam (Julia Lopez-Morillas).

Each have their own way of making the world a better place, even though methods may differ. At times it reminded me of *Rabbit Hole*, which also explores family response to a crisis, albeit slightly different (the loss of a child).

Would I leave the window open?

In the second act, we learn about young Sonia's childhood and secret past in revolutionary Cuba in 1961. Her parents want to protect her from the Communist regime, yet at what cost? Actions here help explain Sonia's motivations some 30-years later and cast a new light on the relationship with her son. Operation Pedro Pan figures prominently in what happens next.

Living in oppression colors everyday decisions with political meaning: the beach or the rally? Sometimes all the kids want to do is *The Twist*.

Food unites the family several times; pastilles are enjoyed at the dinner table as the revolution takes a momentary back seat.

The acting is some of the best I've seen yet at the SJ Rep. All the actors play convincing dual roles. Ivone Colle is stellar as Sonia in the first act, and then again as an almost unrecognizable fragile older woman, Marta. She shreds lines with gusto and passion. It is an intense performance that electrifies, and anchors the entire production. The rest of the cast is also strong.

Equally effective is the set and lighting. Minneapolis is given a cool, modern vibe with clean lines framing a middle-class home. The trees here are the anti-thesis of TheatreWorks, yet stylish in their own Scandinavian way: no leaves! A set slides out on a riser to the edge of the stage, placing the action up-close and personal. Later, a dramatic jeep scene in Afghanistan utilizes pairs of headlights shining at the audience. The sound and lighting effects that follow are blistering. It is gut-check time.

But above all, it's the story that wins our hearts.

Devoid of cliches and simple conclusions, its multi-layered construction is so utterly convincing that we are deeply committed without realizing it until the end. Then a joyful tear or two. No doubt empathetic, but also celebratory; the human spirit can triumph, even across a generational divide and amidst violence and oppression.

When the snow finally falls it's not as Sonia first envisioned the moment, but it ignites the possibility that a second chance will bring hope and optimism for the future.

Sonia Flew

San Jose Repertory Theatre

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5 out of 5 stars

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Through June 6, 2010

www.sjrep.com



Zak (Miles Gaston Villanueva) and Nina (Kwana Martinez) are under enemy gun fire in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of Sonia Flew. Photo: Kevin Berne.



An emotionally strained Sonia (Ivonne Coll) leans on her husband Daniel (Michael Santo) for comfort in San Jose Repertory Theatre's production of Sonia Flew. Photo: Kevin Berne.

Noteworthy

- **You never know with artistic director Rick Lombardo.** It could be a mysterious cast on his hand. Or an Irish-inspired Mickey Rourke do. This time it was a Tony Bennett-like deep, gravely voice. He told me later he had flown from NY and must have picked up a virus on the way back to San Jose.
- **Flip critic 2.0.** The SJ Rep staff were roaming the lobby at the end of the show to capture crowd reaction that would be later shared on Facebook.
- **Cuban emigration.** Two Cuban children boarded a plane in 1960 unaccompanied by adults, landing later in Miami. The event would become known as Operation Pedro Pan.
- **Even NHL accommodates theater.** Thankfully the Boston/Philadelphia Game 7 didn't go to OT on opening night. Note: SJ Sharks game will take priority in the coming weeks!
- **Sonia Flew Study Guide.** Once again the Rep put together an informative and educational Study Guide. Topics include Playwright Melinda Lopez, The Republic of Cuba and the Revolution, Operation Pedro Pan, Radio Swan, Che Guevara, and more. Highly recommended reading.
- **Although the historical elements in the play are accurate,** Melinda Lopez said the characters are completely fictional... She said she made the discoveries about the characters as she was writing the play (for more, see the article in the Study Guide).
- **End of the '09/10 SJ Rep season:** This marks the end of Rick Lombardo's first complete season as artistic director. It's been a remarkable year of International themes, diverse culture, and rich historical story lines: *As You Like It* ([review](#)), *Groundswell* ([review](#)), *A Christmas Story* ([review](#)), *The Weir* ([review](#)), *Ain't Misbehavin'* ([review](#)), *Sonia Flew*.
- **Up next:** Blockbuster Summer Series 2010 featuring Ed Asner in *FDR*.
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