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Sonia Flew

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(Virginia Wimberly Theater

at the Boston Center for the Arts;

360 seats; \$ 50 top)

A Huntington Theater Company presentation of a play in two acts by Melinda Lopez. Directed by Nicholas Martin. Sets, Adam Stockhausen; costumes, Kristin Glans; lighting, Frances Aronson; sound, Drew Levy; casting, James Calleri; production stage manager, David H. Lurie; stage manager, Jane Siebels. Opened Oct. 15, 2004; reviewed Oct. 16. Runs through Nov. 28. Running time: 2 HOURS, 10 MIN.

Sonia, Marta Carmen Roman

Daniel, Tito Jeremiah Kissel

Zak, Jose Ivan Quintanilla

Jen, Young Sonia Amelia Alvarez

Sam, Orfeo Will LeBow

Nina, Pilar Zabryna Guevara

There are not just one but two kitchen sinks in the world preem production of "Sonia Flew," a talky and unfocused new drama that explores how politics divide, uproot and destroy families. Think Odets-obvious as the play jumps between two cultures and time periods --- 1961 Havana and 2001 Minneapolis --- observing the struggles of two matriarchs who would do anything to save their children from harm's way.

Local scribe Melinda Lopez attempts to make connections between one Cuban family's attempt to save their daughter by sending her to the U.S. to escape a totalitarian regime and another family's efforts to deal with a son's eagerness to prove his patriotism and avenge America. But the work is a melodramatic muddle with a questionable future beyond the hometown crowd.

The play, which inaugurates the Huntington Theater Company's second stage at the expanded Boston Center for the Arts, opens with the title character as a 55-year-old mother. As a 15-year-old Cuban girl, Sonia was part of the "Pedro Pan" movement backed by the Catholic Welfare Bureau in the early '60s.

This underground movement helped parents smuggle their children to the U.S.; those remaining in Cuba would face the possibility of being drafted by Castro for military service. (More than 14,000 children were brought to the U.S. and many, like Sonia, never saw their parents again.)

Sonia has kept her story, struggles and memories at bay and has devoted her life to assimilating into her new country, marrying a Jewish man, becoming a public defender and raising two children in the middle-class Wisconsin suburbs. But on Christmas Eve 2001 (the ecumenical family also celebrates Jewish traditions), her 18-year-old son Zak announces he is going to give up college, join the Marines and fight for his country.

The Jewish grandfather, who fled Europe only to return to fight in WWII, is proud; the ineffectual father --- a therapist, no less --- tries to be supportive; and his sister is well, you know, whatever. But for Sonia the news unleashes waves of anger, anxiety and, finally, her own repressed story, which comprises most of the second act.

With the actors doubling on Adam Stockhausen's smart set on the proscenium stage, we see the fast-changing and dangerous political landscape in Cuba through the eyes of one family: a fragile, loving mother, a professor father and a young girl whose passion is more for boys than for the people. Others include a neighbor who is suspected of being disloyal to the new government, another who's an accommodator and a teenage boy swept up in revolutionary spirit.

As it becomes clear that Sonia would be enlisted into the regime's service, her parents arrange for her escape. But Sonia sees her sudden exile as a family betrayal, one she vows never to forgive. Heartbreakingly, Sonia as teenager and adult seems unable to forgive either her families or herself.

The parallels of the two mothers desperately trying to keep their children safe from the whims of war is evident, but exactly what Lopez means to say is not. Director Nicholas Martin keeps the narrative moving and the histrionics in check, but he can't clarify an unfocused play on such abstract ideas as patriotism, assimilation and family duty.

Though it has promising source material in the Cuban children airlift, Lopez's parallel stories are too contrived to be credible. (We could also do without the multiple references to the "Peter Pan" story and J.M. Barrie's lost children, which don't need to be spelled out.) Other things don't ring true as well. Zak's enlistment fervor seems unlikely for such a well-educated and analytical family and thus comes across as a dramaturgical device. (Zak's crack about "towelheads" indicates his patriotism is crude and knee-jerk.)

Carmen Roman tries to make sense of adult Sonia's conflicting emotions, angst and personal history, but at times it seems like it's just too much to process. Will LeBow's Jewish grandfather is nicely low-key, and his portrayal as young Sonia's terrified father is most effective. Zabryna Guevara as Sonia's Cuban mother is thoughtful and touching. The kids in the cast tend to be callow, and Amelia Alvarez's young Sonia sounds more like a pouty contemporary mall gal than a young Spanish girl in mid-century Cuba.

Note: Originally ran in the October 20, 2004 Gotham edition.

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