

The Record ENTERTAINMENT

FAMILY ROLE

An actress plays her spectacular grandmother. E-5

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Grandma's amazing life was an ideal script

When actress Lilia Skala encouraged her granddaughter to follow in her footsteps, she couldn't have guessed what Libby Skala's prize stage role would be: Lilia Skala.

In the one-person show "Lilia!," Libby Skala plays her grandmother, relating the story of how she escaped from the Nazis in Austria, came to the United States, and ultimately was nominated for an Oscar and Golden Globe for her portrayal of the Mother Superior in 1964's "Lilies of the Field."



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"I personally found her life story extremely inspiring," Skala says. "I wouldn't be in show business if it wasn't for her."

After staging the show in London, Scotland, Canada, and several U.S. cities, she brings "Lilia!" to New York for a short run.

Growing up in Englewood, Skala remembers being aware that her grandmother wasn't like everyone else's.

"I remember coming home from school, even nursery school when I was 3, and she would be on television," Skala recalls. "She had a regular part in 'Search for Tomorrow,' so I was accustomed to seeing her on television on a daily basis. It seemed so normal to me. I remember I had friends who said, 'Is your grandmother a movie star?' And I thought, 'What does that mean?' Somehow my image of a movie star was blond and glamorous and 22."

As she grew older, she learned bits and pieces of her grandmother's amazing history: how Lilia Skala appeared in films in Austria, was a member of Max Reinhardt's celebrated repertory theater, and was a Bauhaus-influenced interior designer who was the first woman member of the Austrian Association of Engineers and Architects.

"She was the first female architect in Austria," Skala says.

And then the grim Nazi years: how her husband, Erik Skala, was arrested on Kristalnacht, placed in a Viennese detention center, and rescued by his



Sidney Poitier won an Oscar and Lilia Skala was nominated for one for "Lilies of the Field" in 1964. Above right, Skala and her granddaughter Libby, and Libby playing her grandmother.

wife at great risk to them both.

"She went to the prison and bribed the prison guards to let him go with a gold cigarette box," Skala says. "My grandfather decided to risk being shot and ran across the border that night. He escaped over the border, and she was left behind with two little boys, one of whom was my father."

Later, Lilia Skala and her sons escaped. They joined her husband in England, and the family immigrated to the United States, where Lilia started



getting roles on television and in Broadway productions such as "Call Me Madam." She worked through the Eighties in the films "Ship of Fools," "Charly," and "Flashdance," and in stage productions of "Cabaret" and "The Threepenny Opera."

Her shining hour, however, was as the nun who persuades itinerant handyman Sidney Poitier to help build a chapel in the desert for a flock of German-speaking nuns in "Lilies of the Field," which made history when Poitier took home the first best

actor Oscar ever bestowed on a black performer.

"The director of 'Lilies of the Field,' Ralph Nelson, had worked with her on TV and wanted her," Skala says. "The studio wanted a big star like Bette Davis. In the end, Nelson financed the film himself, so he could cast it the way he wanted."

Though Lilia Skala took home only \$1,000 for her work in that film – and never made royalties on it – she counted it her favorite movie role until the day she died (in December 1994).

"She felt it was the richest role," Skala says. "I asked her how she ended up giving such a wonderful performance. She said, 'I don't even remember memorizing the lines. They were just there.'"

When, as a teen, Skala showed signs of being bitten by the acting bug, Lilia Skala encouraged her – going so far as to sign her granddaughter up at New York's famed Neighborhood Playhouse. After graduating from Oberlin, Skala went on to appear regionally in plays like "Value of Names" and "Cinders," and in various film and TV productions. But it wasn't until Skala did an improvisation workshop in Seattle around 1995 that it occurred to her that her grandmother might be the role she was born to play.

"The teacher asked us to tell the class about someone we found interesting or compelling or fascinating," Skala recalls. "I spoke about my grandmother, and my teacher put me in a scenario where I played her."

The scene was so successful that her teacher encouraged her to expand it into a full-length, one-actor play. In "Lilia!," which began its stage life in 1999, Skala plays not only her grandmother but herself – since the play deals partly with the relationship between the two generations of Skalas.

"People really believe there are two different people on stage," Skala says. "That's the magic of theater."

"Lilia!" plays at the Sande Shurin Theater, 311 W. 43rd St. at Eighth Avenue, New York, 7 p.m. Thursdays through Sept. 12. Tickets are \$15. For more information, call (212) 252-4739.

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