

Play tells Elmhurst grandmother's story

BY REBECCA MILZOFF

To Libby Skala, her grandmother Lilia was, in many ways, just like everyone else's. She was willing to do anything for her grandchildren ("Call me collect anytime you need!" she'd tell the young Libby) and she had her share of charming eccentricities, like dining on Dannon yogurt bars with a fork and knife in her Elmhurst home. But Lilia wasn't quite the rocking chair fixture to which so many children become accustomed.

Lilia was an actress — and not just any aspiring ingenue. An Austrian immigrant who fled Hitler with her Jewish husband, Lilia started out in city theater and soap operas, and went on to earn a Golden Globe, an Emmy, and ultimately an Academy Award nomination for her work.

"I think I was always aware she was in the limelight," said Libby, Lilia's granddaughter and a writer and actress who will present a one-time-only performance of "Lilia!," an autobiographical one-woman play about her grandmother, on Aug. 23 in Manhattan.

"When I was little," Skala recalls, "we'd watch her on this soap opera 'Search for Tomorrow' during lunchtime. She'd give us old costumes and make-up for our dress up box." But when friends asked Skala if her grandma was a "movie star," she didn't quite know what to say. "To me, a movie star was Ginger from Gilligan's Island!" Skala laughs. "You know, glamorous, dripping with jewels. To me, she was just a grandmother who happened to also be an actress."

Skala's close relationship with Lilia owed in great part to the visits she made to her grandmother's home in Elmhurst throughout her life. She fondly remembers taking the 7 train from Grand Central once she was old enough, picking up her grandmother's favorite sweets at Key Foods, and peering into Lilia's "baroque" cabinets filled with, "knick-knacks of every kind, china horses, mostly all things she brought over from Europe." When Libby entered middle school, she took an interest in her grandmother's profession and started taking acting classes at a neighborhood playhouse on the Upper East Side. "My grandmother was really instrumental in that," she says. "She took me up there, and I think she was really happy about it — like, 'Wow, another actor in the family! Finally I'm not the only black sheep!'"

To be sure, acting wasn't Lilia's father's idea of an appropriate pursuit for a young Austrian lady. After attending the most prestigious high school in Vienna, Lilia pursued a degree in architecture at the University of Dresden in Germany, since architecture schools in Austria in the early 1900s didn't yet accept women. Attracted to the creativity involved in the work, Lilia became Austria's first female architect, but, according to her grand-

daughter, "she quickly realized it wasn't the romantic thing she thought it might be." She decided to marry instead, and met Libby's grandfather, a Jewish man who accepted her penchant for acting. Soon enough, Lilia entered Max Reinhardt's renowned theater in Vienna.

The happy couple's story took a turn for the worse when news of Hitler's imminent arrival spread to Austria. Lilia and her sister, both married to Jewish men, decided to flee to the United States immediately. Libby remembers her grand-aunt's words when people asked her why she left, as a non-Jew. "She was incredulous," Libby exclaimed. "How could you ask such a thing?" she'd say. How could anyone stay, in a state with no freedom at all, where you have to wear a swastika?"

Once in the U.S., Lilia moved in to the apartment in Elmhurst where she would reside for 55 long years. "She so loved it," Libby said, "that even when it was run down—when she was mugged, when people broke into it—she wouldn't leave! When she found it in the early fifties, Elmhurst was lovely, and she felt like, 'God has given me this apartment, I cannot give it up!'" Lilia lived near the Elmhurst General Hospital, and Libby chuckles as she remembers hearing ambulance sirens every time she'd make the collect calls her grandmother so requested.

And it's just that Elmhurst apartment that figures strongly in Libby's play, which will be performed — perhaps appropriately so — on the Yankee Ferry in Tribeca, which served Ellis Island during the height of immigration. "There's no reference specifically made to local landmarks," Libby explains, "but in my mind, it's all happening in Queens." From phonecalls to Lilia's apartment, to the Shakespeare scenes



Libby Skala in "Lilia!" which plays for one night only in Tribeca.

she'd rehearse with her grandmother in her Elmhurst living room, Libby's early acting memories remain closely tied to Lilia and her longtime home.

In "Lilia!," Libby portrays her grandmother and relates the events of her life in largely chronological order, starting with the day of her Academy Award nomination for her role in "Lilies of the Field" in 1963, and harking back to her theater experiences in Austria. Despite her close relationship with Lilia, the role wasn't always a natural one for Libby. "It's definitely different from the writing and acting ends," the Upper West Side actress confesses. "It was a transition at first, when I started performing it, because I was judging what I was saying all the time and I wasn't focused on bringing the thing to life. When I finally let go of that, then it worked."

Now, Libby — an accomplished actress in her own right who recently appeared in the film "Birth" — feels completely at home in her grandmother's emotions, mannerisms, and yes, flamboyant Austrian accent. "She was a grande dame in the greatest sense," Libby laughs. "As her sister once said, 'When Lilia enters a room, she makes an entrance!'" And though Libby admits to a more writerly, introverted temperament, she relishes the opportunity to bring back to life her grandmother's spirit, talent, and incredible journey from Austria to Queens and beyond. "Her whole being is alive for me, so it feels familiar even though we're so different," she said. "I carry her around in my heart."

"Lilia!" is written and performed by Libby Skala, to be presented Aug. 23 at 8 p.m., at Yankee Ferry at Pier 25 at North Moore Street in Tribeca. The phone number is 212-253-4236. Tickets are \$20 at the door.