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Re-living the life of Lilia

Lilia Skala never met a barrier she couldn't budge.

Prevented on gender grounds from studying architecture in her native Germany, she went next door and gained a degree in Austria. She was then determined to flout propriety by becoming an actress, a career quickly pre-empted in the late '30s by the rise of the Nazis and her subsequent flight with her Jewish husband and two small sons.

As a refugee in the United States, her first job selling zippers fizzled because she couldn't speak English. ("I was not educated to be an immigrant," she said.) Demoted to making the zippers in a New York sweatshop, she determined to conquer the language but not her accent and, at 47, resumed her acting with a series of Broadway roles.

In 1963 she won Academy Award and Golden Globe nominations for her performance as a tough nun in the movie *Lilies of the Field* opposite Sidney Poitier; fans of rerun TV might also recognize her name from occasional appearances as Eva Gabor's mother in the *Green Gables* series; she can also be spotted in the movie *Flashdance*.

She died, aged 98, in 1994. Such a life of off- and on-stage drama did not escape actress, playwright and granddaughter Libby Skala, who wrote and stars in the one-woman show *Lilia*. Treated generously by critics in six years of touring, the show puts the spotlight more on Lilia's personal rather than professional life and has drawn raves for Libby's performance.

Lilia opens Friday (with a preview tonight) and runs until Oct. 7 at the tiny (126-seat) but impressive Pacific Theatre, 1420 West 12th Ave (at Hemlock). Tickets are \$16-\$32 at 604-731-5518. Visit www.pacifictheatre.org for more information.

- Graeme McRanor, 24 hours

