

Artspace

A dance with Libby Skala



A TIME TO DANCE

Libby Skala's great aunt, Elizabeth Polk, was one of America's dance therapy pioneers.

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It could be said that the performing arts run in Libby Skala's blood. The actress and playwright comes from a family of artists; her grandmother is Oscar-nominated Lilia Skala. Libby Skala created a one-woman show entitled *Lilia!* in homage to her grandmother. *Lilia!* played across North America and Europe, earning rave reviews from critics and audiences alike. Now Skala is back with another solo piece, *A time to dance*, a tribute her great-aunt Elizabeth Polk (Lisl),

one of America's dance therapy pioneers. *A time to dance*, which consists of monologues and story-telling punctuated by short improvisatory solo dances, has already won the Best Solo Performer Award at the London Fringe Festival.

In a phone interview, Skala reflects on art, dance, faith and Lisl's career, interjecting hilarious impersonations of Lisl's nasal middle-European accent.

ChristianWeek: Tell me about Lisl.

Libby Skala: She was so impressive! After leaving Austria in 1938, she set up a dance studio in her basement in New York and taught the neighbourhood children. Then my grandmother,

Lilia, said to her: "Do you want to spend your life in a basement? Is that where God put you? In the basement?" So that's when she stumbled upon a school for the deaf on Lexington Avenue. She was sixty at the time. Then she taught at a school for children who were emotionally and physically disadvantaged.

Dance therapy must have been a relatively new concept at the time.

It wasn't even an official term! She always thought of herself more as a dance teacher than a therapist, even though she won the lifetime achievement award from the American Dance Therapy Association. She was just really driven to help kids figure out that they had feet and could move them. It was huge for their self-confidence. There's one story about a young boy from Queen's [University] who wanted so badly to learn how to do a back flip that she came in for an hour early every morning to help him. And once he perfected those back flips it was like he had reached his manhood. She danced with these kids until she was 90 years old.

Ninety years old?

Can you believe that? She decided to retire only when she couldn't show them the moves anymore. She went to the principal and said, "You are a good Jew, yes? You know that the patri-

archs did their best work at three score and 10. Well, I am four score and 10. It is time to quit." He had no idea she was that old.

What's it like for you as a dancer to portray another dancer's art in your show?

It's funny, my sister is a professional ballerina and I always thought of her as the dancer of the family, not me. I just let myself be inspired by my aunt's style, which was creative, interpretive dancing. I didn't try to literally recreate her art—I just drew from it, so the dancing in my show is all about freedom of movement and expression.

What is the relationship between one's outlook on life and their art? Does faith fit into the equation?

Absolutely. That's the case for me anyway. I think both of my shows are about expressing God's joy. Maybe that's why *A time to dance* is more about who Lisl was, the essence and joy that she gave off, rather than being a researched piece. I think audiences pick up on this.

A time to dance opens at Vancouver's Pacific Theatre on March 19th.

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