

LiLiA! - Libby Skala On Her One Woman Show

06 October, 2010

 by: [Naima Khan](#)

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17 people

Libby Skala answers a few of our questions about her remarkable grandmother, LiLiA!



Lilia Skala, born 1896, was the first female architect in Austria, and she went on to be an inspiring Oscar-nominated actress for *Lilies of the Field* after immigrating to America. This October her granddaughter Libby Skala explores her relationship with her grandmother and all her eccentricities in her one woman show [LiLiA!](#) at [Pentameters Theatre](#).

Before she touches tarmac at Heathrow, Libby answers a few of our questions on what makes Lilia such a compelling character and how she went about writing a two-hander for one actor.

When was the last time you were in London? What are your three favourite things about the city?

Last time I was in London was a year ago in September and October. My three favourite things about the city: 1) The Old Globe Theatre. 2) The gorgeous variety of birds in Hyde Park. 3) The cabs that remind me of 1940s film noir.

Tell us a bit about how you started writing a show that requires one actor to do so much and how you got to grips with the periods of Lilia's life for which you weren't present.

I was doing a scene in which I played my grandmother Lilia in an improvisation workshop with Gary Austin, founder of The Groundlings Improv Theatre in Los Angeles. Afterwards, someone told Gary who my grandmother was – not just a compelling immigrant with an Austrian accent, but an Oscar-nominated actress.

Gary said to me, "You have to write a one-person show about her!" When I heard his suggestion, it was like the earth shifted. I adored quoting my grandmother to friends, so the idea of quoting her for a wider audience was heaven!

I said to Gary, "How do I encapsulate 98 years into 75 minutes? Who's perspective is this from? What aspect of her life do I focus on? How do I do this?"

He said, "If you knew the answers to those questions now, the end result would be a piece of dead meat. Go home. Write down everything you remember her saying to you, every dialogue, every story she ever told. We'll put the material up in the workshop and see what happens, which we did.

I interviewed Lilia's sister (my great-aunt) about the earlier parts of my grandmother's life, hoping to gain some insight. Instead, I discovered the woman she knew was an entirely different person than the one I knew. My dad had audio cassette recordings of my grandmother telling stories of her immigration experiences. Some of those stories are in the show.



What makes Lilia such a compelling character?

There was an extraordinary quality that animated her life which inspired me. There was an integrity, a compassion for others, a desire to give to the world, a striving for excellence and encouraging others to do so. I was in awe of how she defied limitation.

She was the one person in my life who made it abundantly clear that she was deeply invested in my development and success. I'm sure there were other people who cared, but they didn't communicate it as pointedly. From the time I was a week old she wrote me letters letting me know what a pleasure my existence gave to her and my parents. Hundreds of letters followed for the next 27 years. Needless to say, she was the most influential person in my life.

When you came to writing your character i.e. the character of Libby not Lilia, did you discover anything new about yourself?

Great question. I discovered, as I wrote my character, that I could defend my point of view. In real life, I never stood up to my grandmother or argued with her, though I didn't always agree with her. In the show, I articulate the thoughts I never spoke. For example, she demands my favourite sweater from me. When she did that in real life, I went upstairs and cried without her knowing, then came down and gave it to her willingly. In the show, I actively resist her demand.

The material I knew would be featured in the play were the exchanges that were the most baffling to me, i.e. her advice that I pinch my nose to decrease its size. Workshop audiences loved those scenes from the start.

[LiLiA! runs at Pentameters Theatre from October 26th until 13th November](#)



Guest

Libby i exult in all this for you keep sending reviews and news, and merde a la puissance treize for your london opeing

love

joanne joseph nyc

Thursday, October 07, 2010, 06:12:58 – Like – Reply



Dad

A terrific interview as always.

Thursday, October 07, 2010, 10:32:51 – Like – Reply



June and Lloyd

Libby, We feel included in your run in London even though we are still in the states. the interview is so warm and full of love and reminds me why I love this play. We can't wait to see it again.

Saturday, October 09, 2010, 15:00:36 – Like – Reply



Tony :

I loved this play. Thanks for this interview about it, with Libby. I have written a review of Lilia at: <http://wp.me/pKuDK-Hs>

Saturday, October 30, 2010, 18:15:13 – Like – Reply