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theatre



Libby Skala takes on the role of her actress grandmother page V

## My grandmother, the grand dame

Her inspirational, often challenging, relationship with Hollywood star Lilia Skala has inspired granddaughter Libby to literally step into her shoes, writes **Bridget Galton**

**L**ILIA Skala was Austria's first female architect. She fled to New York from Nazi-occupied Vienna and rose from penniless factory worker to Broadway star and Oscar-nominated actress.

Her remarkable life and indomitable personality is portrayed in a one-woman show by granddaughter Libby.

The California-based actress not only takes off her 90-something relative to a tee but also plays herself as a child and young woman – evoking an intimate 20-year relationship that cast her grandmother as mentor, teacher and role model.

It's an affectionate, quirky portrait of a woman who could be dogmatic, heavy-handed and dictatorial, but also generous, inspiring and hard-working.

"There were times when I didn't like her but I always adored and admired her," says Libby.

"She was such a character: this grand dame with a larger-than-life persona. Everything she said was a proclamation, echoed in capital letters. Others enter a room, but Lilia made an entrance. While writing and performing this, I really got to know her as a character, what it felt like to be in her shoes."

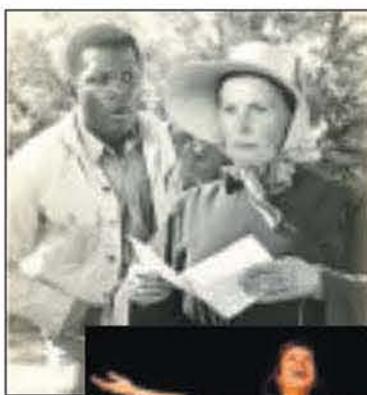
Libby started developing the play shortly after her grandmother died in 1996. She workshopped it in her acting class with the other students, dramatising real-life events culled from her own memories.

"It was difficult to know how to encapsulate 98 years of a person's life in just over an hour, whose point of view to take and what arc to tell. I started by writing down everything I remember she said to me, every dialogue, every pearl of wisdom, every story."

Born in Vienna in 1896, Lilia's Catholic mother and Jewish father encouraged her academic career but heaped disapproval on her acting ambitions.

After a brief career as an architect, she married the open-minded Louis Skala and at last felt free to pursue her chosen career.

She was soon appearing on Vienna's stages, touring the German-speaking world as a leading lady with Max Reinhardt's



Mentor ... Libby Skala, left, as a child with her grandmother Lilia, Sidney Poitier with Lilia in *Lilies Of The Field*, top, and, above, Libby in her one-woman show *Lilia!*

theatre. But the rise of the Nazis spelt danger for her Jewish husband and their two sons.

She fled Austria in 1939 and made her way to New York, where as a refugee, she could only get work in a zip factory. Frustrated and determined to better herself, she learned English, got an agent and, by 1941, was appearing in a Broadway show.

"It was called *Letters To Lucerne*, it ran for two weeks because it was set in Switzerland and was a call for international peace. Then the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and it closed because peace wasn't wanted any more."

Her long career included the original 1950 Broadway run of Irving Berlin's *Call Me Madam*, with Ethel Merman, regular TV appearances in the Alfred Hitchcock Hour, parts in the movies *Flashdance* and *House Of Games*, and an Oscar-nominated turn as the Mother Superior in 1963 movie *Lilies Of The Field* opposite Sidney Poitier.

"At nursery school, I would come home for my lunch and watch my grandmother on TV where she was a regular on a soap opera."

Libby's show traces the close, loving relationship that hit difficulties when as a teenager, she decided to pursue a stage career.

"From when I was a week old,

she wrote me letters and cards which I still have. I would call her if I did well at school and, later, we spoke at least once a week on the phone.

"But when I came to New York to be an actress, she was very active in giving me advice.

"She was an intense person with a fanatical work ethic and I found it exhausting to work with her. She once coached me for five hours without a break, always wanting to see me do things her way.

"All of that passion she had for acting she poured into me. Because she could no longer get the roles, she wanted to act vicariously through me. I started wondering whether I was doing it for her or for myself."

Although Libby enthuses that watching Lilia demonstrate how to perform these ingénue roles "she was the greatest actress I had ever seen", she eventually moved to Seattle to escape the pressure

from her dogmatic, overwhelming teacher.

She soon started performing in friends' plays and making her own way as an actress and writer.

Libby has toured the play in the US and beyond, including a well-received Edinburgh run in 2001. She believes the depiction of an older mentor encouraging the potential of a young relative resonates with audiences.

"She speaks to the audience with her belief that we all have talents which should be developed. We all have the potential for greatness and an obligation to engage and grow.

"With the obstacles she overcame in her own life, she's an example of someone very focused and determined, who stuck to her own sense of the gifts she was given."

□ *Lilia!* runs at *Pentameters Theatre* in Hampstead from October 26 to November 13.