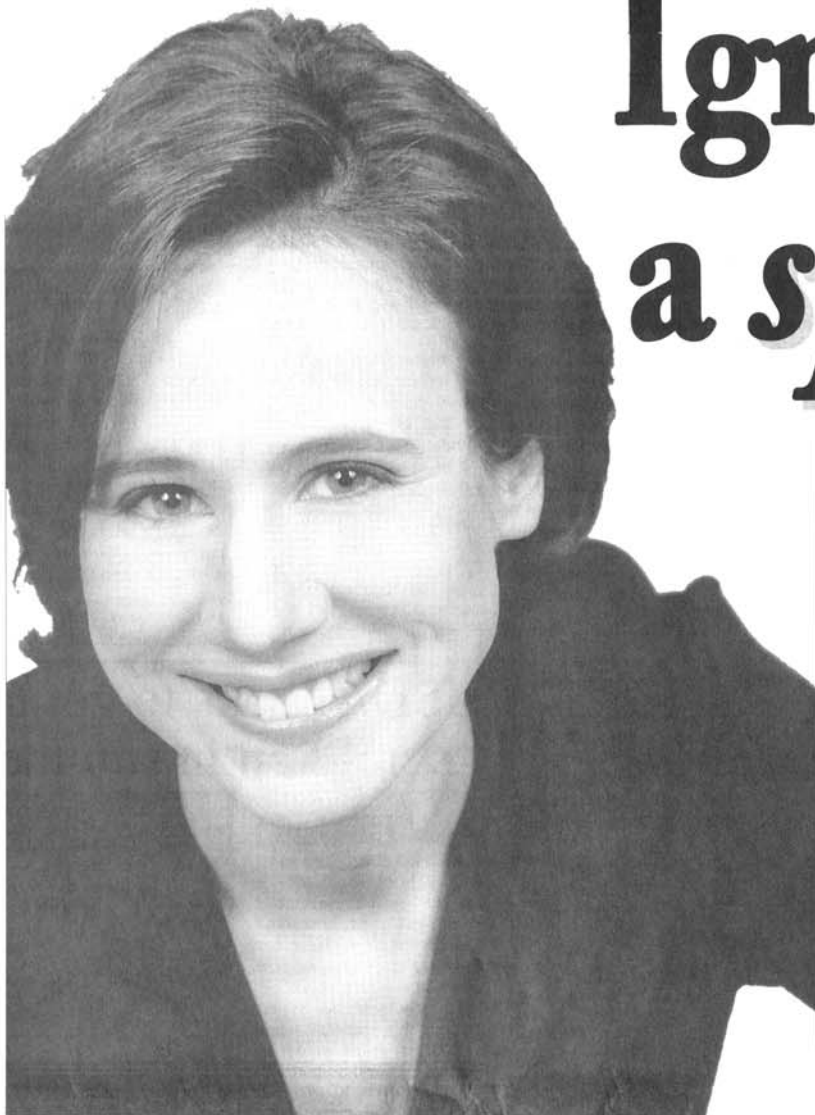


THEATER

Igniting a spark



LIBBY SKALA: The actress, left, portrays her grandmother, top, in a scene from the one-woman show "Lilia!"

Actress brings grandmother's triumphant story to life in one-woman show at GCC

By Scott DeSmit
sdesmit@batavianews.com

Actress Libby Skala never thinks of herself as being alone on stage when she is performing her one-woman play based on the life of her grandmother.

"I fully embody characters who are delightfully delicious for me to share," Skala said. "So long as there's one audience member, or even someone in the lighting booth, I'm not alone. I bring the audience on stage with me, though not physically."

Skala brings her talent to Stuart Steiner Theatre Friday for a performance of "Lilia!" based on the life of Skala's grandmother, Lilia Skala.

Lilia Skala was Austria's first female architect who went on to become an acclaimed actress with Max Reinhardt's theater and throughout the German-speaking

world. Skala fled to America when Hitler invaded her country.

A Quick Look

WHAT: "Lilia!" a one-woman show featuring actress Libby Skala.

WHERE: Genesee Center for the Arts at Genesee Community College, 1 College Rd., Batavia.

WHEN: 7 p.m. Friday.

TICKETS: \$10 for adults, \$8 for seniors, \$5 for students and GCC faculty and staff; and \$3 for GCC students with valid ID. Available at the box office, by calling (585) 343-0055 ext. 6814 or via email to boxoffice@genesee.edu.

She had no money and did not speak English but began life over as a zipper factory worker to support her family. She attended night school and within two years was working on Broadway.

Her career continued for five decades, culminating with Oscar-nominated Hollywood fame in "Lilies of the Field," in 1963, acting alongside Sidney Poitier.

Her granddaughter's play is based upon her life and the intimate relationship the two had for more than 20 years.

Skala has performed her play to sold-out houses throughout North America, at the London Fringe Festival and in Berlin and Dresden, Germany. Her second play, "A Time to Dance," has toured in North America. Skala also appeared in the movie, "Birth," with Nicole Kid-



FAMILY PHOTO: Libby Skala, right, is seen with her grandmother Lilia, who inspired Libby to become an actress.

man.

She answered a few questions Tuesday:

QUESTION: Is successfully having a one-person show based on your life experiences the ultimate dream for any performer?

ANSWER: It's the ultimate dream for me, and I'm sure others, too. Though I know wonderful actors who prefer working in an ensemble with the interplay and exchange between multiple actors, rather than working alone. So often, actors are drawn to experiencing the world through the eyes and life of someone other than themselves, rather than reliving their own life experiences.

In some ways, I don't think of "Lilia!" as being a show based on *my* life experiences, so much as my experience of this larger-than-life woman Lilia Skala, and *her* life experiences as she conveyed them to me. In performing the show, I take enormous pleasure in experiencing the world through her eyes, even though the audience is aware, on some level, that her perspective is filtered through mine, which makes it a multi-layered kaleidoscope.

Q: Tell us more about being onstage alone?

A: Even in a huge auditorium with one person in the back row, for me it's like standing on an empty football field with my friend a hundred yards away. I can talk to her across the field and as long as she's there, I'm not alone. If the house is full, in my mind, everyone comes on stage with me. I invite them into my story.

Q: How do you prepare for your performances?

A: I review the script beforehand, because the written text is tighter than anything I could ad lib. I also rehearse transitions between scenes to physically get a sense of the pace and flow. And before going onstage, I review what I call "foundation stones," which ground me in the principles of what theater, art, and my show are about — something much larger than myself.

Q: What can this audience expect? What do you aim for in each performance?

A: The audience can expect to meet a larger-than-life Grande Dame from a bygone era of rich Viennese culture and refinement, and to experience her story of overcoming personal, professional and political obstacles, as she mentors an earlier version of me. I aim to infuse each performance with the same inspiration she gave me - to ignite the spark within all of us which impels us to go up higher - to strive to surpass self-imposed limitations, to continue to evolve, grow, learn, and expand our perspective and contribution to the world.