

Playwright's focus on family



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EYE ON THE ARTS

A Time to Dance story of Austrian dance pioneer

Two years ago, New York playwright/actor Libby Skala brought her acclaimed solo show *Lilia!* to Calgary.

The show — about Skala's actress grandmother Lilia Skala, who received an Oscar nomination for playing Mother Superior opposite Sidney Poitier in the 1963 film *Lilies of the Field* — was an audience favourite, according to Val Lieske.

Lieske — the artistic director of Fire Exit Theatre, which presented the production — discussed another show Skala had in the works with the playwright.

"I just loved the concept of it," Lieske recalls. She describes Skala as a performer "who completely embodies the character."

"The storytelling is just fantastic. It draws you in."

Now, Skala is back with the one-woman storytelling show they talked about two years ago. The highly praised *A Time to Dance* is about her great-aunt, Austrian modern dancer and award-winning dance therapy pioneer Elizabeth (Lisl) Polk.

Born in Vienna in 1902, Polk (the sister of Lilia Skala) arrived in New York with her Jewish husband in 1939. Happy-go-lucky, yet hard-working and resilient, she embarked on her new American life by working in a New York factory.

Then she began teaching dance classes from her basement to the neighbourhood children.

"My grandmother (her sister) — who was very grandiose and a much different type of person from Lisl — said to her, 'Do you want to spend your life in the basement?'" Skala says, mimicking her grandmother's deep-voiced and thickly accented English.

"Is that why you were put on Earth — to live and work in the basement?"

And with that, Polk makes up her mind "to do something for the betterment of society," Skala says.



Courtesy, Damon Calderwood

New York-based playwright/actor Libby Skala has brought her one-woman show entitled *A Time to Dance*, to Epcor Centre's Engineered Air Theatre. The show runs nightly at 7:30 with weekend matinees.

Soon after that, while walking down New York's Lexington Avenue, Polk sees a sign for the Lexington School for the Deaf.

Wondering whether deaf kids would be interested in dancing, she watches them in the playground and decides yes.

She goes into the school and introduces herself to the principal.

"And long story short, she talks herself into a job there, and begins her career as a dance therapist working with deaf children," Skala says.

That eventually leads to her working with developmentally disabled, emotionally disturbed, and physically handicapped kids in special schools throughout the New York area.

Is it true that Polk danced the Macarena in her 100th year?

Yes, laughs Skala, noting how much of the movement attached to that pop dance is in the arms and hands.

"She just had that inner rhythm and joy. To me, even sitting in a chair telling a story, she was the consummate dancer with her hand gestures."

Skala points out that her great-aunt taught in special-needs

schools "until she was 90."

"And nobody knew her age," Skala says. It seems that Polk was given to colouring her hair late in life — and Skala's father did her tax returns.

"She would have receipts for her hairdresser, and he would say, 'You can't use this as a tax deduction,'" Skala recalls.

"And she would say, 'Honey, I wouldn't be working if they knew how old I was.'"

On another occasion, Skala says, "She told me she had to stop teaching because she could no longer demonstrate the moves."

"And she got out of the chair and demonstrated the perfect pirouette that she could 'no longer demonstrate.'"

A Time to Dance, a partnership presentation with Corps Bara Dance Theatre, is prefaced by an original dance created by Calgary dancer, choreographer and educator, Kyrsten Blair.

The "really fun" music in the storytelling portion of the show represents the compilation that Polk prepared and marketed for therapeutic use in working with kids and the elderly, Skala says.

The stories are punctuated with

Skala's own dancing.

"I don't consider myself a dancer, but at the same time I think her (Lisl's) definition of dance was anybody who can move," Skala says.

"Dancing is about creative movement, joy in the expression of individuality, of life."

Libby Skala's *A Time to Dance* runs nightly at 7:30 p.m. (Saturday and Sunday matinees, 2 p.m.) at the Epcor Centre's Engineered Air Theatre. Tickets: call 403-640-4617.

Men Are Dogs. At least, that's the new show at Workshop Theatre these days.

It's a comedy about relationship challenges faced by participants in a women's single and divorced therapy group.

The group is led by an unorthodox female psychologist, who finds that some of her group members' issues are closer to home than she ever imagined.

The show runs to Oct. 1 at the Currie Barracks' Easterbrook Theatre. Tickets: call 403-216-0808.