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'Lilia!' tells an incredible story

Playwright pays homage to her grandmother in one-woman show

BY TED HOLTEEN

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

I can't speak to the quality of the one-woman play "Lilia!" I haven't seen it.

But if the hour I spent speaking with the show's playwright and star, Libby Skala, is any indication, I don't want to miss a minute.

Skala's play is a celebration of the life of her grandmother, Lilia Skala. And what a life it was.

Libby Skala will perform the play Sunday at James Ranch.

"She was so personally inspiring to me," Skala said of Lilia from her Brooklyn, N.Y., home earlier this week. "A year after she died in 1994, I was doing an improv workshop in Seattle, and Gary Austin (of the famed Groundlings improv troupe) came. He told us to talk about someone fascinating, and who's more interesting to talk about than my grandmother?"

That query is a stumper. Born in 1896 in Austria, Lilia became the first female architect in that nation's history after leaving home to study in Dresden, Germany.

But even that is a side note in the career of this remarkable woman. Her true desire

IF YOU GO



Libby Skala

"Lilia!", a play by Libby Skala, will be performed at 2 p.m. Sunday at the Terraces at James Ranch, 33846 U.S. Highway 550 north.

Advance tickets cost \$20 for adults and \$18 for students, available at James Ranch Market or online at www.LiliaThePlay.com. Tickets at the door cost \$22 in cash or by check. A limited number of chairs will be provided.

Bringing a blanket or chair is recommended.

For more information visit www.LiliaThePlay.com or call 676-1023.

was to be an actress. Such a profession was beneath the station of her upper-middle-class Vienna upbringing, so she solicited a handwriting expert to help her find a suitable husband who would allow her the freedom she wanted. She found such a man and spent 11 years touring the playhouses of Europe.

By the late 1930s, the Nazis had begun to show the party's true colors. Married to a Jewish man, Lilia and her nascent family



Courtesy of Libby Skala

Lilia Skala was nominated for a Best Supporting Actress nomination as Mother Maria in "Lilies of the Field." Sidney Poitier won Best Actor for his role as Homer Smith.

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'Lilia!': Austrian came to America in 1939 with \$2.50

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(including Libby's then-3-year-old father) fled Austria in 1939 for the United States.

As was customary under the Nazis, nearly all of the family's possessions and money was confiscated. They landed in Queens, N.Y., speaking not a word of English. Lilia took a job in a zipper factory but never abandoned her dream of acting.

"She was 43 years old, a grown woman, didn't know English, and they could only bring \$2.50 out of Austria," Libby Skala said. "She went from having an upper-middle-class life in Vienna to coming here with nothing.

"Show business is so tough to break into, especially when you're not 18, but she was so convinced (that acting) was her past that she was tireless in her pursuit (to continue acting) and didn't give up."

Lilia had one friend in America, a dancer named Illa who had emigrated earlier. (In an interesting side note, Illa was married to John Banner, the actor who would go on to play Sgt. Schultz in "Hogan's Heroes" two decades later.) Illa had an American agent and arranged a meeting for Lilia.

In 1941, she received a telegram while working at her factory machine; she was back in show biz with a role in the Broadway show "Letters to Lucerne."

"She got on Broadway on her first audition, but it was several



Courtesy of Libby Skala

Libby Skala, left, wrote "Lilia!" to honor the remarkable life of her grandmother.

years before she'd get back," Libby said.

The show was about girls and women in Switzerland striving for world peace, but when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor two weeks later, the government shut the show down because of its

anti-war message.

Lilia spent the next several years selling mutual funds, waiting tables and working in a dress store. Her next turn of fortune came in 1951 when she was cast in Irving Berlin's "Call Me Madam," and she reprised her role as the

Grand Duchess in the film version that marked her movie debut.

But it was another decade before Lilia would cement her place in history, and it came again from her personal resolve.

In 1962, Lilia got word that director Ralph Nelson was shooting a film version of "Lilies of the Field." As a 60-something woman with an accent, agents weren't flocking to Lilia at the time. She wrote a letter to Nelson inquiring if one of the nuns in the film "might have an accent." Nelson invited Lilia to come to Hollywood, and her friends scraped together the airfare to send her.

She met with Nelson, and by the time she left his office, he'd offered her the lead role opposite Sidney Poitier. Poitier won a Best Actor Oscar for the role, and Lilia was nominated for Supporting Actress, losing out to Margaret Rutherford for "The V.I.P.s."

There's still more, including Lilia's role in "Green Acres" and her show biz swan song in 1983 with an appearance in "Flashdance." Libby Skala does all she can to tell her grandmother's story in "Lilia!", but it's a daunting challenge.

"How do you encapsulate 98 years of life into an hour and a half?" Libby said.

It should be well worth the time to watch her try.

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