Lilia!

To the outside world, Lilia Skala was an acclaimed actress who won success on Broadway in Call Me Madam (as the Grand Duchess) in films with Lilies of the Field (the Mother Superior) and on television with ... well, Green Acres was among her many credits. To her family, she was a black sheep. A failure.

“She had two sons,” says her granddaughter, Libby Skala, “and both of them went on to careers in business. Practical careers, with steady paychecks. At the time my grandmother found out that she’d been nominated for an Academy Award for Lilies of the Field, she was making a dollar-fifty an hour working in the Lost and Found Department at City Center in New York.”

Although one of her sons offered to support her if she’d only give up acting, Lilia stuck to it and continued to work while well into her 90s. “She always played a version of herself,” says Libby, “which is what a great actor does. She was a very strong, compelling character who influenced me very much when I decided to go into acting.” And remained enough of an influence to inspire the younger actress to develop a one-woman show about her grandmother.

Lilia!, starring Libby Skala, opens tonight (Thursday) at the Arts Center of the Capital Region in Troy, fresh from recent successes in Toronto and at the Edinburgh Festival. What began as an acting-class exercise several years ago gradually took on full-length proportions; early last year, director Gabriel Barre got involved. “He directed The Wild Party for the Manhattan Theatre Club,” says Skala, “and was asked to bring something to the Cape Cod Theatre Project last summer. He saw my play and asked if he could help develop it for that event.”

Through Barre, Skala met producer Steven Ygansz, who is responsible for arranging the Troy performances. “He keeps telling me that I can take this show around and make a name for myself,” says Skala. “Who could resist that kind of praise?”

That’s not exactly the kind of encouragement Libby heard from Lilia at the outset of her acting career. “When I first got to New York, my grandmother would tell me to see this agent or that, and then she’d get all nervous about how I was going to present myself. ‘I’m the one who recommended you,’ she’d say [and here Libby goes into an uncanny impersonation, deep-voiced and German-accented], ‘and I don’t want you to make me look bad’.”

The elder Skala was born in Vienna, Austria, and became the first female architect in Austria as well as a star of Max Reinhardt’s theater group. She also made several appearances at the Josefstadt Theatre under the direction of Otto Preminger, before both fled Hitler’s regime. Skala began her life in New York working in a textile factory, then found success on Broadway and in television and film. These phases of her life, as well as her complicated relationship with her stagestruck granddaughter, are revealed and explored in the play.

“She was always very open with me about her experiences as an actress,” says Libby, “and the kind of struggle she endured. But she always believed that anything was possible. You just have to stick to it long enough.”

Lilia! opens tonight (Thursday, March 14) and will run through Saturday (March 16) in the Joseph Bruno Theatre at the Arts Center of the Capital Region (265 River St, Troy). Shows are at 8:30 PM and tickets are $18, $15 for groups, seniors and students. For reservations, call 872-0063.

—B.A. Nilsson