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weekend edition

west

theatre

Libby Skala enchants in the one-woman show *Lilia!* about her Austrian-born architect-actress grandmother

## True life grandma story warm and honest

### Lilia!

At Pacific Theatre until Oct. 7  
Tickets: 604-731-5518

Reviewed by Jo Ledingham

VIDEO OUTLETS ARE GOING TO WONDER what's going on. Why is everyone suddenly trying to rent *Lilies of the Field*? It's all because of Libby Skala who pays tribute to her grandmother Lilia Skala—Oscar-nominated for her role in that film—on the Pacific Theatre stage.

*Lilia!* is not merely a tribute. It's a thoughtful piece of history—political, theatrical and personal—and a loving exploration of the relationship between grandchild and grandmother.

Born in Vienna, Lilia Skala had a mind of her own. She wanted to be an architect, but the university in Vienna didn't accept women into the program. So she went to Dresden, got the degree, became the first Austrian woman architect and then promptly decided she'd rather be an actress. That was the beginning of a five-decade career on stage.

Married to a Jew, Lilia, her husband and their two little boys fled Austria during the Second World War and ended up penniless in New York City where Lilia, speaking no English, worked in a zipper factory. Amazingly, she was on Broadway within two years.

Libby Skala plays both her grandmother and herself across



Libby Skala turns in a beautiful, graceful performance as her grandmother in the well-crafted drama *Lilia!*

the years in this 85-minute solo performance. We see little Libby being chastised by Lilia for sucking her thumb but praised for the little clay lion she makes for "Grandmother." But grandmama is not all unselfish, unconditional love as we see when she talks adolescent Libby out of her favourite sweater because, according to Lilia, it makes Libby look pale and, besides, "it will look so good on me." Modest and humble Lilia is not.

Later we see Lilia coaching Libby, now an aspiring actor herself, in the role of Viola in *Twelfth Night*. "I will be the thoughts," says Lilia. "You will be the action." Slowly Libby sees the motivation behind the lines and Shakespeare comes to life.

Finally we see Lilia, old and living in a care facility, still urging Libby on. "Write a part for me. It's not too late."

Written and performed by Libby Skala, *Lilia!* began in an acting

workshop but has now been seen on stages from London to New York. Skala is a beautiful, graceful performer with a merry, mischievous style. Simply staged—several faded Persian-style carpets and two armchairs—and beautifully lit by Graham Bedwell, *Lilia!* is intensely focussed on the performer.

What is unspoken is as interesting as what is spoken in this play. Lilia believed she had a God-given gift and it was her responsibility to improve upon it, to share it "with the world." Grandiose thoughts, but what of those two little boys? Little is made of the collateral damage over the course of her career. And what was husband Eric—whom she admits she "liked" but did not "love"—doing all this time? "I have never been in love in my life," she says proudly. "Thank God I was never in love." A huge risk-taker on some fronts, it appears Lilia was not brave on others. There is an undercurrent of great sadness, great selfishness in this play that Libby Skala merely suggests.

It's interesting seeing *Lilia!* on the heels of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. Lilia Skala and *The Seagull*'s Irina Arkadina have much in common: talented, self-centred, beautiful and charismatic. In complete contradiction, however, is the effect they have on those who love them: Konstantin kills himself but Libby Skala goes on to become a star. In spite of what you might think of the character of Lilia, Libby Skala is an enchanting performer and the show a well-crafted gem.