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Lilia!

A one woman show

written and performed by **Libby Skala**

Pentameters Theatre

26 Oct - 13 Nov 2010



A review by **Bernie Whelan**
for **EXTRA! EXTRA!**



**Libby Skala as a child with
grandmother Lilia Skala**

This play is a tribute by Libby Skala to her grandmother. I am just old enough to remember Lilia Skala as 'The Countess', Eva Gabor's mother in the popular American sit-com *Green Acres* and as the manipulative head nun Sister Maria who wants to build a chapel, for which she won an Academy Award nomination alongside Sidney Poitier in *Lilies of the Field*. What I did not know about Lilia Skala was that she was Austria's first female architect and a successful actress in Max Reinhardt's theatre, or that she was playing a lead role in G. B. Shaw's politically controversial play *On The Rocks* in Munich during the 'Night of The Long Knives', as Hitler carried out military executions a few streets from where the play was being staged. So begins a remarkable biography, told in the voice of Lilia who speaks sometimes directly to the audience and sometimes to her granddaughter Libby, all brought to life by Libby Skala herself, migrating between two chairs to enact the developing relationship between Lilia and Libby with only the help of lighting designed by Phil Hunter and her own bewitching array of facial expressions, accents and mannerisms which quite captivated the small audience.

This is a story of personal triumph over adversity. As a wealthy Jewish mother of two young sons, Lilia Skala bribed a German guard with a gold cigarette case to release her husband from prison after Kristallnacht, he then fled the country. Two years later, she had to rely on her own wits again to escape with her children to the United States, where she worked in a zipper factory until she won her first role on Broadway. Her granddaughter Libby Skala reveals her on stage as a capricious and imperious woman, sometimes quite critical of her infant granddaughter, with more than a little of the Hollywood diva about her and a definite sense of patrician entitlement. However, it is

obvious that her legacy is fully appreciated, even when she gently mocks her grandmother's conservatism, we understand that Lilia's stoical attitude and unshakeable self-belief are the very attributes which helped her not just to survive the Holocaust as a Jewish refugee, but to live the American Dream.

With so much historical detail given, I couldn't help being curious about Lilia's response to the big events during her American career, which she doesn't mention, particularly as she is revealed to be such a wily operator. Although 'she' mentions her distaste at playing a woman who betrays her communist husband, she doesn't mention the witch-hunting of left-leaning actors during the years of McCarthyism, which divided Hollywood forever after. Neither does she say anything about the Civil Rights movement, although she was nominated for an Academy Award alongside Sidney Poitier, for *Lilies of the Field*, who won best actor (the first black actor to win an Oscar for a leading role)) at the height of conflict over race in 1968.

However, Libby Skala cannot be expected to include everything from such a multifarious life, and this is still a fascinating portrait of a self-motivated and determined woman with considerable acting talent who lived through a period of great turmoil in world history, had the odds stacked against her but who came out with longevity, success and style. One cannot help thinking of Gloria Swanson in *Sunset Boulevard* at the end of the play, when the almost centenarian Lilia asks her granddaughter to write a part for her as an escape from the rest home where she is bored and full of contempt for her lifeless fellow residents. 'It's not too late!' she insists. This kind of spirit is what the play celebrates and it is very impressive considering what Lilia has been through. She recalls, in one of the most moving scenes, how she wanted her husband to organise a family suicide in the basement of their home in Austria as many other Jewish families had done after the Anschluss, but her husband was 'too light-hearted' and 'wouldn't hear of it'. Then, characteristically, she brightens immediately with a 'Thank God!' Her faith and her belief that she had a gift to pass on sustained her through everything that followed.

The Pentameters is a tiny theatre above a Hampstead pub with nearly forty-two years of playing, thanks largely to the dedication of Leonie Scott-Matthews, who still welcomes visitors personally. It is an intensely intimate atmosphere, demanding total commitment from Libby Skala, which she generously gave to a very small house. I hope this show attracts the interest it deserves.

Pentameters Theatre, 28 Heath Street, London NW3 6TE

Tues - Sat 8pm, Sun 5pm Tickets: £12, £10 concs

Box Office: 020 7435 3648

<http://www.pentameters.co.uk/nowshowing.html>

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