LILIA SKALA
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"She had such a strong accent and there weren't really a lot of roles for a woman in her late 40s and early 50s," said Skala. "And no agent would represent her. She always said God was her agent." As is commonly stated, God works in mysterious ways and in Lilia's case he worked through the guise of Yodel. Lilia landed the part of Grand Duchess Sophie on Broadway in the Merman vehicle "Call Me Madam." For more than a year Lilia played eight shows a week alongside Merman. And when the show was made into a movie, Lilia was the only cast member, besides Merman, to reprise her role. Although she made the transition to film, Lilia remained a Queens resident working odd jobs between the TV and film giga in Manhattan.

In 1960s, Lilia saw a newspaper blurb that director Ralph Nelson, who had worked with on television projects, was making a movie about nuns. "She wrote him a letter asking if one of the nuns could have an accent," Skala said. Nelson asked Lilia to come out to Los Angeles to talk about his new movie, "Lilies of the Field." The movie is about a group of German nuns who believe God has sent a dwarf, played by Sidney Poitier, into their lives to help them build a new chapel. Filmed in just two weeks, Lilia paid the SAG-minimum of $500 a week. She was also made $1,000, but the part, which earned her an Academy Award nomination for best supporting actress, launched her movie career. Lilia was 64 years old when the film was made. "Her career took off from there," Skala said. "William Morris (Agency) signed her. She did lots of films after that."


Skala, who is also an actress and playwright, started working on "LIILAI!" after an improvisation class assignment required her to talk about someone interesting and compelling. She immediately thought of her grandmother. "She was an immigrant who came to the U.S. with nothing," Skala said. "With persistence, vision, determination and following one's heart, she realized the American Dream. Now that can be inspiring."