



Back in 1962, a low-budget film was shot in only fourteen days in the desert of Tucson. That film, "Lilies of the Field," which starred Sidney Poitier as the traveling handyman who helps build a chapel for a group of nuns led by Mother Maria (Lilia Skala), became a box-office success and won a Best Actor Oscar for Poitier and two nominations (Oscar and Golden Globe) for Skala.

It is Lilia Skala's remarkable life that is being brought to the stage by her granddaughter, Libby Skala, in a Desert Foothills Theater performance of "Lilia" on Saturday, January 10, 2009 at 7:30 PM at the Cactus Shadows Fine Arts Center. This one-woman show is a labor of love about a woman who rose from the ashes of destruction to build a new life in the United States after escaping war-torn Europe.

Lilia Skala was born into a life of privilege in Vienna and attained the distinction of becoming the first female architect in Austria before she launched her stage career. Brilliantly good at everything she attempted, Lilia also performed in famed director Max Reinhardt's stage troupe. The good times were not to last, though, after Hitler invaded Austria. Lilia's husband, who was Jewish, was arrested and placed in a Viennese detention center. Lilia went to the prison and bribed one of the prison guards with a gold cigarette box, and her husband was released. He managed to cross the border that evening, but had to leave Lilia and their two young sons behind. Lilia and the children were able to escape later and joined her husband in England. In 1939 the entire family immigrated to the United States.

Practically penniless, Lilia was forced to work at menial labor in New York's garment district. She was not to be deterred, though. She quickly learned English and within two short years had worked her way back to her acting career. During the 1940's and '50's she performed in many Broadway plays and then went on to act in many TV shows, such as the Guiding Light, Ironside, Search for Tomorrow, Green Acres, and McCloud. Lilia earned an Emmy nomination for her work in the miniseries, "Eleanor and Franklin." Her biggest role, however, and the one for which she is most recognized, is as Mother Maria in "Lilies of the Fields." Lilia died at the age of 98 on December 18, 1994 on Long Island, NY.

Now, the moving story of Lilia's life has been brought to audiences all over the world to overwhelming acclaim. Libby Skala, Lilia's granddaughter, wrote and performs this moving one-woman play as a tribute to her grandmother. Playing both herself and her grandmother, Libby weaves a tale of two spirits that are so alike that they are often at odds with each other, as often happens with two people who have a deep love for each other. Libby transforms herself from her 90-year old grandmother to herself as a young child, using the intimate conversations between them to reveal her grandmother's influence on her life.

Lilia was a proud woman, who used her own life experiences to aid her granddaughter in the trials of seeking fame in live



LIBBY SKALA PERFORMS "LILIA"

Writer Paula Theolocatos

theater. When asked about Lilia's reaction to Libby's declaration of becoming an actress, she responded: "She was thrilled, I think, because it meant that she would no longer be the only black sheep in the family. She never felt understood by her family. She was so fanatical about working and rehearsing and putting that first in her life and her family just didn't understand. So when I said I wanted to be an actor, she was very relieved that there was someone else who could understand her."

Libby Skala has received great reviews, both from the critics and the audiences, in London, Edinburgh, Vancouver, Toronto, New York, Los Angeles and Seattle. "People say they wish had known my grandmother, other people say it made them think about their grandparents," Libby has said. "I think it gives them insight into this woman, my grandmother, and her life and her struggles and her triumphs. I hope it inspires an audience to realize that despite the obstacles that my grandmother encountered in her life and her career, she overcame them and still went on to accomplish great things. Above all, I hope the show gives people hope."

There was another accomplished person in the family – Lilia's sister, Elizabeth Polk (Lisl), who was a well-known modern dancer. Libby has written a second show about her great aunt entitled "A Time to Dance," in which she uses improvised movement, creative dance and words to tell the story of Lisl's turbulent life in Vienna during two world wars and her life in New York, where she became a leading authority in dance therapy. Lisl lived to the ripe old age of 99. "A Time To Dance" will be performed on January 17, 2009 at 7:30 PM at the Cactus Fine Arts Center.

While she is visiting here, Libby Skala will also conduct a two-week, in-school residency with the Black Mountain Elementary School and the Desert Arroyo Middle School, both located in the Cave Creek Unified School District.

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