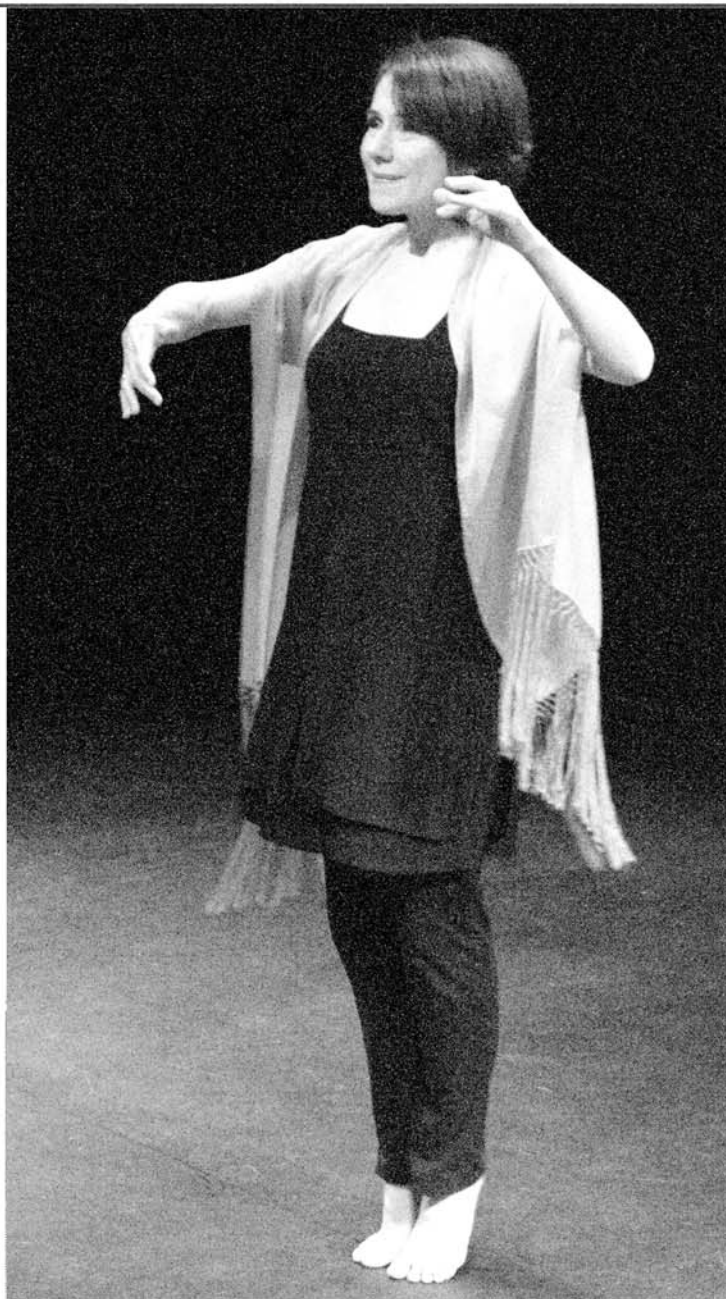


Jewish Standard

'The theatrical power of a charismatic performer'

Libby Skala in "A time to Dance." DAMON CALDERWOOD



MIRIAM RINN

Libby Skala seems to have built a career on the lives of her female relatives. She has toured for years with a solo play, "Lilia!" about her actress grandmother Lilia Skala.

Now, her new 70-minute dance/drama solo presentation "A Time to Dance," part of the New York International Fringe Festival, is dedicated to Lilia's younger sister Elizabeth, or Lisl. Skala won the "Best Solo Performer" Award at the 2007 London Fringe Theatre Festival, and "A Time to Dance" testifies to the theatrical power of a charismatic performer. There's nothing on the stage at the Lafayette Street Theatre besides Libby Skala — no props except a scarf, no set — yet this one actress's extraordinary charm and skill brings to vivid life her great-aunt, Lisl Polk, captivating the audience and drawing them into Polk's extraordinary life.

Lisl was born prematurely, as Skala tells it in an adorable German accent, and her parents rather impatiently waited for her to die, as several other prematurely born children had done before her. "She doesn't want to get attached to another little screaming thing," Lisl says of her mother. "So they continue to wait while I cry and I cry and I cry. But I won't die." Since Lisl obstinately refused to expire, her father went out and hired a sturdy peasant girl

to care for her, and this wonderful Marie became Lisl's great friend and protector.

Lisl grew up in pre-World War I Vienna, "the navel of the Austro-Hungarian empire," where her father made a fortune as the distributor of the new snap fasteners, the latest rage in women's notions. "Two little metal pieces fit together to hold fabric together like a button, a hook or an eye. They make a schnapping noise. Schnap. Schnap."

Skala's recital of these early years is filled with humor and the effervescence of a genetically coded cheerfulness. Lisl is blessed with a sunny temperament, and that turns every experience into a positive one. Even when she's shipped off to a strange family in Denmark as part of the starving-Austrian-children-relief-program, she lucks out and lands in a wealthy household with indoor plumbing. A stint at a TB sanatorium is recalled as a lovely rest and the prologue to a complete recovery.

Wearing a simple black dress and leggings and the aforementioned scarf, Skala flits gracefully about the stage, using music and movement to punctuate her story. Lisl's experiences with modern dance and ballet

are amusingly conveyed through gently satiric dance moves. The real Elizabeth Polk taught dance at every age level and in every setting. She performed as a concert dancer, then opened her own dance studio in Austria. In the United States, she taught dance and movement to children with different sorts of handicaps — emotional, cognitive, and physical. She co-founded the National Dance Teachers Guild and helped to develop the field of dance therapy.

Polk's father was a Jew, as was her husband. When World War II was imminent, she maneuvered to get out of Austria to the United States, largely because her husband insisted that they leave. His was not as optimistic a disposition as hers, and their life together was not blissful. But, as Skala makes laughingly clear, even this difficult situation had a happy ending.

For information, visit <http://ATimetoDance.homestead.com>. Tickets available at <http://www.FringeNYC.org>.