

## Lilia Skala (1896-1994) 🍷 Stage, Film, and Television Actor over Six Decades

National Register plaque dedication, Sunnyside Gardens, October 26, 2013

“What a wonderful and deserving honor to have bestowed on Lilia Skala, in appreciation of her remarkable accomplishments as an American film actor, whose revered gifts have inspired so many—myself among them. Lilia was a charming, immensely talented artist whose magnificence on film resonated a pure and seamless delivery of character. I was privileged to have worked beside her so many years ago on *Lilies of the Field*, and that experience gifted me with the opportunity to observe her craftsmanship up close and receive a level of brilliance in acting that can only be deemed a gift from the heavens. I was inspired by that gift and consider it a great loss that the world did not get to see her earlier in her creative life. She was indeed an absolute gem. Lilia's creative impact has left its indelible mark on the profession she loved.”

—Sir Sidney Poitier, on the dedication of this plaque,  
from a letter to Miss Skala's granddaughter Libby Skala



Above, a 1950s publicity shot, followed by two roles from that decade, “Papa Was A Sport” (live on Kraft Television Theatre) and *Call Me Madam* (on stage and film). “A first-rate character actress.” —*Variety*

### 🍷 Career summary, from over 150 roles on stage, film, television, and radio, 1928-1990

1928-1938: theater and film in Vienna and central Europe, including stage productions of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* directed by Max Reinhardt, and others by Otto Preminger.

1939-1957, while living in Sunnyside Gardens: Broadway stage from 1941 (notably *Call Me Madam*, original cast, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*, later on tour); local and regional theater from 1944; radio 1942-1955 (several Theatre Guild on the Air, Fireside Theatre); television from 1949, mostly live (including several Kraft Television Theatre and Robert Montgomery Presents, and Alcoa, Motorola, Omnibus, “The Goldbergs,” commercials); 1953 film of *Call Me Madam*; U.S. Army training films.

1958-1990: films including *Lilies of the Field* (Academy Award & Golden Globe nominations), *Ship of Fools*, *Caprice*, *Charly*, *Roseland* (Golden Globe nomination), *Heartland*, *Flashdance*, *Testament*, *House of Games*, *Men of Respect*; TV films, miniseries (notably *Eleanor and Franklin*, Emmy Award nomination), programs (including Alfred Hitchcock Presents, “Green Acres,” “Ironstones,” daytime soaps), and a commercial; Broadway stage to 1981, notably *Forty Carats* (also on tour); local and regional theater to 1989, including *The Threepenny Opera* in German and *Les Blancs*.

## • Sample notices, from two small parts on Broadway and her two largest roles on film

*Letters to Lucerne* (Broadway début, 1941): “Lilia Skala plays a servant with an aureate wholesomeness that ought to be useful in better parts” (Brooks Atkinson, *New York Times*).

*With a Silk Thread* (Broadway, 1950): “The night’s best performance is that of Lilia Skala as the housemaid and dresser. Her naturalness contrasted so favorably with that of the star and the featured players that she was applauded for her bit” (*Women’s Wear Daily*). “[She] brought the house down...with competence, honesty, and fervor. Miss Skala made a lot of sense. I wish the play had” (*New York Morning Telegram*).

*Lilies of the Field* (1963 film): “Your superb handling of the Mother Superior role was the highlight which really made the picture” (William E. Barrett, author of the novel *Lilies of the Field*, in a 1980 letter to Lilia Skala). “Miss Skala’s performance as the mother superior is radiant of softness and goodness underneath its tough Germanic hide” (Bosley Crowther, *New York Times*).

“I adored *Lilies of the Field*. I thought you were brilliant, exciting and wonderful. You are a beautiful, magnificent actress” (Joan Crawford, in a 1963 letter to Miss Skala prior to the Oscar nominations). Then, “I’m delighted beyond belief that you have been nominated for best supporting actress for the Academy Award. Of course, you certainly deserve it, and I’m pleased and proud that ‘we’ recognize your great talent!” (Joan Crawford, in a 1964 letter to Miss Skala).

“The Peabody,” from *Roseland* (1977 film): “[The] standout is Lilia Skala, playing an elderly German woman with the bearing of Bismarck” (*Variety*); “an irresistible grande-dame performance, a tour de force” (*Newsweek*); “a knockout... bravura performance, proving herself one of the screen’s most distinguished actresses. She is simply stunning. She reveals herself with an exquisite irony and undertone of humor, skirting the ludicrous and by-passing pathos to give a small life an eloquent touch of triumph. For her performance alone *Roseland* is worth seeing” (Judith Crist, *New York Post*).

“The way Skala plays it, old age becomes simultaneously valiant, hilarious and deeply poignant, because she never allows easy sentimentality to tarnish her iron conviction that life itself is an act of heroism for those who ‘hate sitting out.’ Miss Skala rides high... and if this brilliant, burnished-gold performance doesn’t bring her an Oscar nomination, they ought to stop giving the prize” (Bruce Williamson, *Playboy*).

“Magnificent! You did it! Everybody is enchanted by your exquisite performance. You are a beautiful artist” (Eugenie Leontovich, in a 1977 letter to Miss Skala).

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For their contributions to this dedication, we are grateful to Angela Baltaian, Bob Barnett, Sherrie Brooks, Frank Caropreso, Merry Chang, Robert Corridan/Artistic Masonry, Annie Dell’Aria, Cristina Diaz, Rayna & Esteban Erlich, Louie Franqui, Melissa Gajarsa & Matthew Abbott, Sharon Ghuman, Florence Gootar, Selvin Gootar, Nick Gulotta, Helen Johnson, Marie Joyce, Eric Lane, Naomi Lehman, Sheila Lewandowski, Marilyn Lutzker, Ronald S. Magliozzi, Claire Maher, Rev. Neil Margetson/Sunnyside Reformed Church, Steven May, Jodie McClintock, Jamie McShane, Christian Morell, Catherine O’Flaherty, Terri O’Hara, Jill & John O’Sullivan, Katie O’Sullivan, Quinn O’Sullivan, Arthur Pearson, Sir Sidney Poitier, Dennis Redmond, Herbert Reynolds, Liz Reynolds, Cody Reiter, Irma Rodriguez, Tony Rohling, Ron Simon, Matthew Schatz, Libby Skala, Martin Skala, Paul Speh, Sue Stepnik, Peter Straus, Rose Tibaldi, Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer, Manny Vazquez, Teresa Ward, Tom Whelan, Jeremy Wise.



Libby Skala performed *Lilia!*, her play inspired by Lilia Skala, this evening at 7 PM at the Sunnyside Reformed Church, 48-03 Skillman Avenue.

The Lilia Skala memorial plaque has been placed at 39-19 49th Street, Sunnyside Gardens, Queens. The Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance’s National Register Plaque Program is supported by the New York City Council, Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer. 🍷