



## MY NAME IS LOLA

by Lola Rozsa,  
as told to and written by Susie Sparks

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## Give Me a Song and a Stage

Throughout the '60s, my involvement with the American Woman's Club grew primarily through the singing group that produced shows for the old folks' homes. One time when we did an Easter routine, a sweet little old lady followed me around all afternoon trying to buy the Easter bonnet I'd concocted out of all the feathers and boas and flowers I'd expropriated from Mary Lil's dress-up trunk. But we got to do more interesting things too, and the group let me have a recital one time. I sang *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* in my most sultry voice and was so convincing, at least to myself, that I decided I'd audition for an upcoming theatre production of *Showboat*.

I didn't get the lead, they imported a professional for that role, but I was able to be a part of the supporting singers and the theatre bug bit me hard. The show played for a week. The rest of the cast, which included Mort van Ostrand, Jack Goth, and Les Kimber, were all volunteers, so I suspect we all thought our primary goal was to have fun, and we certainly did! I'd always loved to sing, but acting was pretty new to me and I discovered I enjoyed being on stage even more. One night, the director of the MAC 14 Theatre overheard me talking with some of the cast of *Showboat*, and he approached me with a proposition. He was casting roles for Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and said his actors were sorely short on Southern accents. Would I consider coming down to the theatre as dialogue coach?

The Musicians and Actors Club (MAC 14) had evolved from the theatre troop Betty Mitchell had originally assembled back in the '40s with her drama students in Room #14 at Western Canada High School. In 1964, they converted the old Isis movie theatre downtown on 1st Street West to a live stage theatre and started with a pretty ambitious line-up of plays. In their very first season, they produced eight plays, the next year ten, including *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. I was there almost before he'd finished propositioning me.

We spent a couple of hours learnin' to drop our g's and drawl lazy-Deep-South, and I went home thinking I'd be sure to buy tickets when the play opened. But the next morning I woke to a ringing telephone. Would I be interested in coming down to audition for the role of Big Mama?

You bet I would! Mort van Ostrand had been chosen for the role of Big Daddy and Arnie Dvorkin was to play Brick and, once they padded me up in a plump suit to look like a Southern matriarch, we were a pretty imposing cast. Mort really didn't have much of a presence in the play; he was supposed to be returning from the hospital where he'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness, so the play started with the rest of us talking about him and how his avaricious passel of heirs would divide up his estate. My first line was, "Brick! Brick! Big Daddy's home an' he's gonna git betta!" It was easy as shoofly pie.

The show played for two weeks and every performance was sold out. Mary Lil wanted to come see the play because she had been helping me memorize my lines (even though I wouldn't let her read the cuss words), but I thought it was little too risqué for a twelve-year-old. Jamie Portman wrote such a glowing review in the *Calgary Herald* that I told him I'd better retire at the top of my game. In 1968, MAC 14 became Theatre Calgary, and we finally had a truly professional theatre.

I still had lots of opportunity to keep singing. Grace Church had hired John Searchfield as choir director in 1958, and the very first thing he did was talk us into learning the Bach *Christmas Oratorio*.

No Calgary choir had tackled anything as big and difficult as this, but the choir had grown to sixty members so we were excited to try it. It was such a success that we jumped right in to learn Handel's *The Passion of Christ*, then the Bach cantata *Christ Lay in Death's Dark Prison*. Then we did a Festival Chorus presentation of Bach's *St. John's Passion* as well as an annual *Messiah* at Christmas time. We had fabulous soloists and John introduced us to wonderful new anthems too, so with the major choral concerts in addition to our Sunday services, we were really challenged musically. Often he had us up in the dusty old attic above the balcony doing echo effects. We were so good that Dr. Morley ordered special ceiling tiles in the sanctuary to improve the acoustics. All of us were so enthusiastic about the music that we became great friends and started having family picnics in addition to all our choir practices.

The music offerings at Grace Church kept expanding over the years to include two junior choirs and the teenage Gateway Singers as well as a hand bell choir. The junior choir was always a top competitor at the Kiwanis Music Festival, and in the mid-'60s the joint choirs staged a huge production of *Noah's Flood* where I think every child in the congregation took part dressed in some kind of animal costume.

Each Sunday morning, we arrived at church as the bells in the tower sang out a welcome, and when they finally succumbed to old age sometime during the '80s, all of us mourned their passing. From that time forward, we all complained about missing the bells, but the economy had again fallen on hard times and the repair of the bells wasn't high on the church's to-do list. I don't know why it took me so long to do something about that, but finally I decided *somebody* would have to step up and take action. And very kindly, in thanks for my offering, the church elders arranged for me to hear them as they rang for the first time in more than thirty years – on my ninety-second birthday.

Back in the '60s, as one of a captive audience up in the choir loft, I was beginning to understand Dr. Morley's sermons. Well, maybe

that's a stretch, but I did finally figure out that Dr. Morley was less a pastoral preacher and far more a social justice advocate who passionately believed that, if you could rally enough people behind the ideas taught through the lessons of Christianity, you could change the world. His PhD was in Constitutional Law and History so he undoubtedly knew where he wanted to lead the congregation. And he had certainly convinced members like Max Bell who offered Dr. Morley a bully pulpit through his newspaper, *The Albertan*.

There were more than a few Conservatives in the crowd who I'm sure listened to some of his sermons with a raised eyebrow, but they too were faithful in their attendance and very generous with their financial support. The Mannix family was loyal to Grace Church through several generations, and I'm pretty sure most of those American oilmen never voted for the Liberal Party, but that never stopped their support of the church. I suppose it was a given that eventually Frank Morley would toss his hat into the electoral ring, but when he and Mary left Grace Church after twenty very successful years, I had a feeling that down deep he was disappointed in all of us.

However, the great majority of congregants at Grace Church stayed on to welcome new ministers throughout the years and it has continued to thrive. For twenty-five wonderful years, I sang in the choir, but when I finally made the transition to a congregational pew in the sanctuary, I was thrilled to hear them from a new perspective.

It's a shame that Dr. Morley didn't live to see how it has evolved, because Grace Presbyterian has now become an inner-city church, and its congregation today is far more involved in issues concerning social justice than ever before. I'm also proud to say that Mary Lil has served as an elder of the church for the last fifteen years as well as chairing the music committee. I hope that my father, who never had a chance to meet her, and Dr. Morley, who baptized her, are both cheering her on.

Mary Lil was growing up quickly, so as she entered her teens, Ted and I were able to play golf together occasionally whenever I

could drag him away from his work. Rozsa Oils was unfortunately launched just as the economy slumped in the early '60s and those early years were incredibly tough. From '64 to '68, he never took a nickel in salary and he ran a one-man office in our basement where he was everything from bookkeeper to on-site geologist, so he was very, very busy. Somehow, though, we also both found time to spend on our ongoing development work with the Philharmonic, too.

But, as it always does, the slump in the economy had affected the arts community first, so it was a difficult start for the newly assembled professional orchestra and we had a number of conductors after Henry Plukker moved on. Haymo Taeuber took over in 1963, and, despite the economic uncertainty, by 1968, he had almost tripled the size of the audience. Following his tenure, José Iturbi, the noted pianist, became our conductor for one year, and then we had a series of guest conductors in hope that we would find a perfect fit. Maurice Handford really moved the orchestra along during his five years at the helm, providing stability and professionalism and bringing several players from England with him who are still members of the orchestra. Franz-Paul Decker and Arpad Joó had their terms at the helm, but I think my favourite during this period of time was Richard Hayman, who brought us a pops series straight from Boston.

Richard was the consummate showman. His jackets were louder than Don Cherry's, (although in far better taste), and he always carried two or three harmonicas in his pocket, which he'd play whether anyone requested him to or not. He was so engaging and effervescent in his pre-concert conversations with the audience that he started a whole new trend, which Calgarians have come to expect from all their conductors. He definitely took the stuffing out of the stuffed-shirt music and ushered in a whole new era of appreciation for all kinds of music from pops tunes to the classics.

Unfortunately, though, Richard's first love was always the Boston Pops Orchestra, and he couldn't be lured away except for occasional guest appearances, so our first priority was to find a first-rate

principal conductor who could fine-tune our excellent musicians. Second on that list was the search for development funds to make that possible.

Ted had joined the board of the Philharmonic and, in the mid-'60s, I served as president of the Women's League for a couple of years, so fundraising was our first order of business. Benny the Bookworm continued to work his magic, and our annual book sale proceeds had quadrupled by this point but we were getting pretty blasé about them. Book junkies were way too easy. Was there other low-hanging fruit out there waiting to be introduced to the Philharmonic? Of course there was. We just had to figure out what might draw them in.

*Everybody* loves music of some kind; the only trick is discovering which music appeals to which audience. We would make sure everyone could be included, even those who hated the thought of having to rent a tux. And since any social gathering could be tailored to fit its appropriate music, we hosted everything from the Symphony Balls to fashion shows, teas, a Grey Cup Warm-Up Party and a Boston Pops Party featuring Arthur Fiedler himself.

We hosted the Symphony Ball in 1966 at the Palliser Hotel complete with a fanfare of trumpets to welcome our distinguished guests, served them an all-French menu (followed, believe it or not, with cigarettes and coffee), danced them off their feet, and bid them adieu after picking the lucky winner of two Air Canada tickets to Vienna. I can't tell you what our guests paid for that evening. From this distance, not even I can believe it.

I *can* tell you the price for our Boston Pops Party featuring Arthur Fiedler conducting the Calgary Philharmonic at the Stampede Corral. Guests were seated at tables throughout the Corral so that a non-stop selection of European and domestic wines and hors d'oeuvres could be served throughout the concert. Tickets for those premium tables went for \$4.50 a head. Should you not be able to afford that, the cheap seats went for a buck and a half.

Still too hoity-toity for you? How about that Grey Cup Party? Dancing, drinking, dinner, games, and singing could be yours for \$2.50. *And* you were instructed to wear your hometown colours!

If you happened to be of the female persuasion, there were endless teas and fashion shows, which may not have raised as much money, but they made fast friends of women who had not had much prior exposure to classical music. And many of those women – and their husbands – signed on for life.

The Symphony Balls though, from that time on, were the signature events of the Women's League of the Philharmonic. Women especially loved getting dressed up at the holiday season, and very often these events sold out practically as soon as the tickets left the presses. I remember laughing decades later when the first invitations were issued for a No-Show Ball. The privilege of *not* having to get dressed up and *not* going to a fancy-schmancy hotel ballroom and *not* eating a gourmet dinner, and *not* dancing until the wee-small-hours-until-your-feet-are-destroyed-by-the-new-shoes-you-had-to-buy-for-the-occasion would cost you a whopping one hundred dollars. We may have danced them completely off their feet, but that didn't mean they quit giving. *Those* tickets sold faster than ever before!

In the summers, the work of the Women's League slowed down, but that didn't mean it was all-golf-all-the-time. Sometimes the women were called upon to produce the entertainment for the golfing season, and those of us at Canyon Meadows were in hot demand. We put on fashion shows and entertainment for parties, as well as song and dance routines. Gertrude Dimple, who I'd first met through the American Woman's Club, also joined Canyon Meadows and brought along her theatre talents. She wrote, produced, and choreographed a golf-related song and dance version of *My Fair Lady* that brought down the house. One time, at a show we put on at the Country Club, I was one of the Andrews Sisters along with two others, and I'm proud to say that our rendition of *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy* is still considered a classic by Country Club oldtimers.



But that didn't mean I wasn't playing golf, too. With Ted's coaching and the regular play I was getting on Ladies' Day, I had my handicap down to about eighteen and was winning the occasional ladies' long-ball competitions and feeling pretty comfortable playing social golf. I admit I never had much of a competitive streak, but Ted was an excellent teacher who from the beginning taught me the rules of golf as I'd get myself into trouble along the fairway. I hadn't really played any casual pick-up golf before, so learning the rules from the beginning seemed natural to me and, once I started helping out with the women's tournament golf, it came in handy if there were any disputes.

Ted, as I've mentioned before, was a stickler for precision, so I think he kind of enjoyed some of the rather arcane rules of golf, and eventually the men's committee invited him to give a seminar for anyone interested in officiating at the tournaments. I think he decided it would work better if we'd do these sessions together; he could be the straight man of the act and I could be the comic sidekick. As it turned out, we made quite a tag team.

Let's get one thing out of the way: there's no such thing as a gimmie, a mulligan, or a do-over. Nor is there any limit to the number of strokes it takes you to get into that cursed hole. However, if you're out there on a hot July afternoon playing social golf, you'd better know when to concede the hole and put your ball in your pocket so your friends will invite you back to try again another day. Still, there is *some* good news. Although you can't replace the club you smashed against that offending tree, should you be using your club as a cane, and it breaks, you *are* allowed to replace that one. Remember this rule; I guarantee the time will come when you'll need it.

Like I say, the Scots invented this game and I suspect that, as much as they pontificated about character-building, they really doubted that any of us could be trusted to compete in a game where there were no umpires to keep the players honest. Hence, *The Rules of Golf*, a tome only slightly less dense than *Finnegan's Wake* yet equally punishing to the despairing reader. However, once you fight

your way through all the verbiage, essentially all it says is that when your ball inevitably lands in water, behind a tree, in the rough, in quicksand, or within the coils of a poisonous snake, you can move it. But you can't move it any closer to the pin.

Despite their Calvinist streak, the Scots do concede that there are lucky breaks in life. If your ball bounces off a tree deep in the woods back onto the green, it's an act of God and thus quite acceptable in the *Rules of Golf*. Alas, it's also acceptable if your ball, smartly struck with your four iron, ricochets off the skull of your opponent and onto the green. Do this too often though and your friends may stop returning your phone calls, never mind the *Rules of Golf*.

We played golf, talked golf, organized golf tournaments, vacationed at tropical golf courses, and hung around with other golfers. Ted won a set of steak knives every year for playing the most rounds in the season. We had a *lot* of steak knives. Did our children play golf? Of course not. They were all completely uninterested. Ruth Ann still says she was permanently scarred by the time I decided to introduce her to golf and bought her an outfit that matched one of mine. (In retrospect, perhaps the orange polyester was an unfortunate choice.) Young Ted played football in high school, as did his friends, and aside from occasionally caddying for his father at the Oilmen's or the Doodlebug, he had no interest in playing the game at all until much later in life.

Only Mary Lil has happy memories of golf season. She likes to tell about the time Ted and I were away on late summer back-to-back golf tournaments. Since Ruth Ann hadn't left to go back to university, she had been charged with manning the home-front for her younger brother and sister for the two weeks we'd be away. I had stocked the larder with everything the kids would ever need or want but had forgotten to stop the egg delivery. Apparently this had become an issue because Ted wasn't around to eat his usual two-eggs-a-day breakfast.

The eggs were piling up and the kids figured they were going bad so Ruth Ann, priding herself on her household management skills,

decided that they'd use them up before we arrived home. Mary Lil says that for the week prior to our return, the daily menu consisted of scrambled eggs for breakfast, omelettes and egg salad sandwiches for lunch, quiche for dinner, angel food cake for dessert, and eggnogs for bedtime snacks. Good thing nobody knew about cholesterol in those days; child welfare would have been after me for sure.

Mary Lil always looked forward to summer because it meant that she could go to camp for the first month, and then to visit Ruth Ann wherever she and Reed were posted for the second month, so Ted and I could play as much golf as we wanted. However she then insists on telling my friends that since her birthday fell a few days after school started in the fall, smack dab in the middle of tournament season, she was always left at home alone to bake her own cake. Any kind but angel food cake.

How's that for a little zinger?