

Title: From Lwowska to Frau Lorre to Lovsky
Author: Steven P. Hill, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

Many expatriates from East and Central Europe went on to make significant contributions to performing arts in the West. Some attained celebrity status and/or great wealth. Some were much written about (moderate-length articles, thick books, in both the "serious" and "popular" veins.) Examples: Balanchine, Lugosi, Mikhail Chekhov. Other "expats" in the performing arts were less flamboyant, less in the public eye, but nonetheless did create an interesting body of work that today merits our consideration. Among these "unsung" performing artists was an actress variously known as Caecilie Lvovska (Lwowska), Frau (Peter) Lorre, and CELIA LOVSKY (in the English-speaking world).

Beginning as the daughter of Czech-Austrian opera composer Bretislav Lvovsky (1857-1910), young Caecilie (1897-1979) proved herself so adaptable as to go from music (Vienna) to stage acting (Berlin), to film acting (London), to the homebody wife of a major movie star, to a large body of television acting roles (New York and Los Angeles).

Lovsky's early German theatrical career yielded a far-reaching outcome. A promising young thespian on the Berlin stage, she became romantically attached to a young, unknown stage actor, whose big break came when the better-known Lovsky persuaded film-maker Fritz Lang that her Significant Other was the ideal candidate to play the lead role in "M" (1930, now regarded as a classic) -- with young Peter Lorre overnight becoming a big name in international cinema.

From highbrow dramatic stage actress in Berlin, the adaptable Lovsky moved with Lorre to London, where she shifted to a lowbrow movie role (as a Russian lady) in one of Hitchcock's "British suspense" melodramas. Picking up a new language, English, both Lorre and Lovsky thereafter tended to be cast in the roles of foreigners. (Much later, Lovsky was to achieve one of her most memorable acting performances after learning still another form of communication, sign language.)

Having arrived in Hollywood in the mid-1930s, Lovsky initially receded into the background as a stay-at-home housewife, while husband Lorre's career rose to the heights. But her adaptability then underwent another stern test. In 1945 Lorre divorced Lovsky (age 48) for a younger woman. Now middle-aged and alone in the US, Celia Lovsky remade herself once again, as a "character actress," in several films but mainly in the new medium of television, where she played "little old foreign ladies" in dozens upon dozens of television episodes, ranging from 30-min. black and white to 2 hours in color, from "Dragnet" to "Wagon Train." And this up to retirement at age 77. Among performers of Czech ancestry, Celia Lovsky proved to be one of the ultimate survivors. Lecture accompanied by 2 - 4 short video clips, as time permits: "M," "Man Who Knew Too Much," "Star Trek," "Man of a Thousand Faces."