

The Swedish diva comes to life:

# Olivia Stevens as Zarah Leander



Talented Swedish actress and singer Olivia Stevens plays Zarah Leander in her one-woman show *Pleasure & Peril*.

The story of Swedish diva Zarah Leander is not a story one tells with ease, besmirched as she was with Nazi-Germany. Maybe it takes a woman like Olivia Stevens to tell it – which she did in her show *Pleasure & Peril*, performed at Helen's in Chelsea. Like Leander, Stevens is Swedish-born. An actress and singer with an impressive resume, Stevens also happens to be the product of Russian Jewish immigrants to Sweden. That irony is of course not lost on her, in fact Stevens centers her show on her ambivalent feelings towards the star:

"Her songs blasted on the German radio while people died at Auschwitz and Belsen... Zarah's Swedish husband left Germany and went back home, but Zarah stayed in Berlin," she says in the show.

However Stevens wouldn't be an artist if she also didn't try to grasp Leander's willingness to work in the Third Reich.

"We all have moments when we make moral decisions in our lives," she says in the show. "What would I have done if I'd been in Zarah's shoes? Perhaps I, too, would have taken the chance?"

Interwoven with the story of Le-

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ander's ascent to stardom in Germany – and snippets from Stevens' own life – is Leander's string of songs, most of which have faded into oblivion. *Vill ni se en stjärna?*, *Café Zigane i Budapest*, and *Jag vill ha en gondol* were songs written for her by Ernst Rolf, with whom she began her career. During her German stint – when she had a contract with the German Film Production Company UFA – she sang femme fatale songs with a dark, deep masculine voice.

In Berlin, Leander met Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister.

"Goebbels said 'Zarah... isn't that a Jewish name?' To which she answered 'And Joseph? Is that also not a Jewish name?'"

Not knowing exactly how to approach Hitler at a dinner, Leander blurted out:

"Have you ever thought about

## Olivia Stevens as Zarah

By Eva Stenskär  
New York

doing something about your hair?"

At the start of her show, Stevens recounts a telephone conversation with her mother.

"Mom, it's a cabaret and everyone has already done Brecht, Dietrich and Lotte Lenya."

Ergo: Zarah Leander, the only one left to do. There's of course some truth to that, cabaret singers haven't usurped upon Leander. Why not? Probably because Leander never really attained super stardom. Hadn't Marlene Dietrich left for Hollywood, for example, odds are there wouldn't have been a German career for Leander. Competition was scarce.

"In her later years she performed with sunglasses on because her eyes couldn't take the spotlight," Stevens went on. "I thought that was an interesting metaphor: She got blinded by the dazzling lights of Berlin."

Leander was born in Karlstad one hundred years ago, in 1907, and died in Stockholm in 1981. Upon her return to Sweden in 1943 she did her utmost trying to get her Swedish career back on track. It can't have been easy. On the other hand, she never felt guilty about having associated with the Nazis during the war.

"I sleep well at night," she ap-



Born Zarah Stina Hedberg in Karlstad, Leander got her start in showbiz as an amateur while touring with a cabaret led by legendary entertainer and producer Ernst Rolf. She lived and worked in Germany from 1936-1943.

parently said. Only when I researched this article did I find out that ironically just like Stevens, Leander had Jewish grandparents. Olivia Stevens will perform her

Zarah Leander-piece at the Swedish Church on May 30.

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