



Photo by Stefan Cohen

The Thomashefskys



Boris Thomashefsky

THE THOMASHEFSKYS

Hosted by
Michael Tilson Thomas



Bessie Thomashefsky

The Thomashefskys premiered at Carnegie Hall in April 2005. With words and music brought to life for the first time in a century, the production has been playing to sold out houses.

The story's lead characters are Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky, grandparents of Michael Tilson Thomas. Bessie and Boris emigrated to the United States from Eastern Europe in the 1880s and, while still in their teens, began to play major roles in the development of American Yiddish theatre. For Jewish immigrants of the late 19th and early 20th Century who settled on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, the Yiddish theatre was central to their lives. It replaced touchstones of Eastern European life - the village marketplace, the temple, the rabbi - and provided a stage for the new ideas that were shaping the psychological, emotional, moral and educational transition to a new, American way of life.

In *The Thomashefskys*, Michael Tilson Thomas serves as guide through the lives and repertoire of his grandparents. His grandfather died before he was born, but his grandmother lived until he was seventeen. His close relationship with her and many of her colleagues is a source of much of the material in the performance.

"My grandparents became mega-stars," says Tilson Thomas, "and found themselves smack in the public eye. They were subject to adulation and relentless scrutiny. Legions of crazed fans were obsessed with every detail of their work and their lives. It was a far cry from the simple Jewish family life in the Ukrainian villages of their origins. In the old country, there was already an answer to every question. Now, in a new land of total freedom, new unimagined questions were waiting around every glittering corner.

"They wanted to use their theatre to explore these new questions and serve as a forum to search for possible answers. I marvel at what they attempted and how well they succeeded, from the classics to *avant garde* dramas, to original productions based on current events and contemporary Jewish life."

At the height of their influence they owned theatres in and out of New York, published their own magazine, "The Yiddish Stage," wrote columns in the popular Yiddish newspapers of the day, sponsored and encouraged new generations of young artists, brought uncountable numbers of Yiddish artists to the United States, tirelessly raised funds for progressive social causes and, through it all, were adventurous trend setters. The end of unrestricted immigration and changing tastes of the first-born American generation caused the diminishing of their world. Nevertheless, in 1939 the *New York Times* reported that 30,000

people lined the streets of the Lower East Side on the occasion of Boris' funeral. Bessie lived on until the early 1960's and, from her Hollywood Hotel, wryly witnessed the rises and falls of show business legends.

Tilson Thomas shares the stage with a 30-piece orchestra and four principal performers who bring the repertoire and words of Bessie and Boris to life. All the material is authentic — researched and reconstructed by The Thomashefsky Project over the past eight years. The Project was founded in July 1998 in order to rescue the story of the Thomashefskys and early American Yiddish theatre's contribution to American cultural life. Through its work, many disintegrating scores have been located and preserved to recreate as true a version of the original works as is possible.

These reclaimed musical treasures present audiences with a musical sound that few have heard, integrating aspects of Eastern European klezmer and cantorial modes with American tones and rhythms. With time these components became more integrated and more American, as Eastern European Jewish composers became more engrossed in their new surroundings, greatly influencing composers like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin.

A range of musical numbers performed in the show reflect this new, increasingly American, musical sound. Film clips and projections of archival photographs, posters and other memorabilia enhance the telling of this uniquely American tale.

The Thomashefskys

Hosted by **Michael Tilson Thomas**

Directed by **Patricia Birch**

Starring **Judy Blazer**

Starring **Neal Benari**

And featuring

Ronit Widmann-Levy and **Eugene Brancoveanu**

Script by **Michael Tilson Thomas**

Produced in association with **The Thomashefsky Project,**
Linda Steinberg, Executive Director and Media Designer

Kirk Bookman, Production Supervisor and Lighting Designer

Naomi Zapata, Associate Production Manager

Thomas Edler, Media Coordinator

Deanna Hull, Music Coordinator

Joshua Robison, Executive Producer

Representation:

Columbia Artists Management LLC

Tim Fox



JUST LIKE BUBBIE: Michael Tilson Thomas accompanies Judy Blazer as Bessie Thomashefsky at Disney Hall.

Michael Tilson Thomas re-creates his grandparents' world with 'Thomashefskys.'

KENNETH TURAN
FILM CRITIC

To say that Michael Tilson Thomas, the celebrated conductor and music director of the San Francisco Symphony, comes from a Yiddish theater family is like saying Caroline Kennedy has a background in politics. That's not the half of it.

Though you wouldn't guess it from his patrician-sounding name, which obscures it as deftly as Joseph Conrad hid Józef Korzeniowski, Tilson Thomas is the grandson of Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, the patriarch and matriarch of American Yiddish theater, figures of towering talent and ambition with ego and temperament to match.

On Thursday night at Walt Disney Concert Hall, Tilson Thomas paid a warm and nostalgic tribute to his grandparents with "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater." In a three-hour show (to be repeated tonight at 8), he turned the Disney stage into an intimate cabaret, complete with a small Los Angeles Philharmonic orchestra and random tables and chairs, to tell the story of "two kids from Nowhere in the Ukraine" who ended up as celebrities beyond their wildest dreams.

After all, the young Boris, who began as a cantorial boy soprano in the Ukraine, couldn't have foreseen a career that turned him into America's first Yiddish theater matinee idol, a man who boasted not only his own theater, his own newspaper and his own publishing house, but also his own army. When he did "A Yiddish Hamlet," the credits read,

MUSIC REVIEW

A Yiddish tribute. What's not to like?

"translated and improved by Boris Thomashefsky," and when he died in 1939, 30,000 mourners filled the streets of New York.

Boris' wife, Bessie, especially after she left her womanizing husband, was no slouch herself. She not only became a major star in shows written especially for her, such as 1912's "Chantshe in America," she also became a trendsetter and role model for generations of female Jewish performers. Often she would look at her disbelieving grandson and proclaim sadly, "You don't know who I am."

That grandson takes enthusiastically to the role of storyteller and celebrator. With a polished manner that reflects the evening's previous incarnations across the country, Tilson Thomas performs a number of functions, mixing theatrical and family history and even singing a rousing version of a 1910 tribute to his grandfather, "Who Do You Suppose Married My Sister? Thomashefsky," written by the same pair who penned "Shine On, Harvest Moon."

Tilson Thomas also serves as a kind of master of ceremonies for the evening, introducing the numerous songs from his grandparents' repertory as well as the singers who perform them. Perhaps because the Thomashefskys were such larger-than-life individuals, it takes two energetic actors and singers apiece (Judy Blazer and Tamara Wapinsky for Bessie, Neal Benari and Eugene Brancoveanu for Boris) to do their work justice.

The cultural archaeology Tilson Thomas has done to prepare for this show is its most impressive accomplishment. He has dug up and orchestrated songs and overtures that haven't had a forum like this for decades, things such as a love duet from 1892's "Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem" and the always popular "March of the Jewish Suffragettes" from 1915's "Chantshe," and brought them alive on-

stage.

These songs come complete with subtitles projected on a large screen and with context provided by Tilson Thomas; his explanation of the tricky title of his grandparents' biggest hit, "Dos Pintele Yid," is especially good. And the actual performances of his grandparents he has discovered — a recording of Bessie doing her celebrated "Minka on the Telephone" routine and Boris luminous in a brief clip from the 1935 film "Bar Mitzvah" — are priceless.

The most charming parts of the evening are Tilson Thomas' personal memories of Bessie (Boris died before he was born), complete with family snapshots. With a grandmother famous for her trouser roles, it was perhaps fated that the first black tie and tails Tilson Thomas ever wore were hers. More unexpected were her last

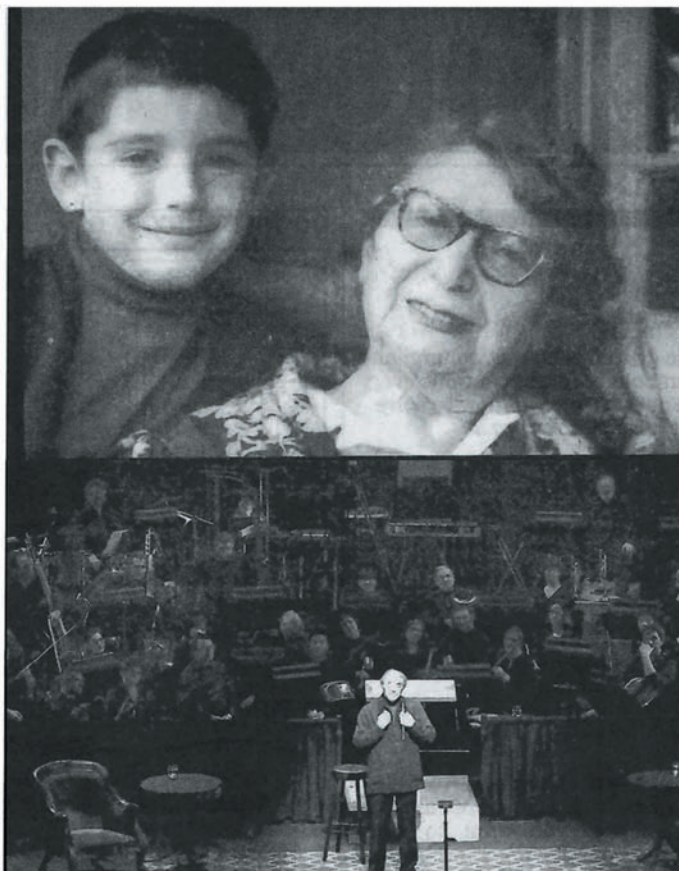
words to her grandson: "Never, never sign a release."

Tilson Thomas encouraged audience participation Thursday, particularly rhythmic clapping, and the opening-night audience (which included cabaret veteran Joel Grey) ate it up, kvelling at his opening "Nu, vos macht a Yid?" (How is a Jew doing?) and other uses of Yiddish. The crowd was clearly up for a shared experience, and that is what it got.

If there is anything to kvetch about in "The Thomashefskys" (and what would the Yiddish theater be without people complaining?), it's that although the excellent notes in the Disney Hall program are quite serious, the evening goes heavier than it needs to on schmaltz and Eastern European accents that risk trivializing the material for comic effect. A middle ground would have been nice.

But as Bette Davis, definitely not a Yiddish theater veteran, said in "Now, Voyager," "Don't let's ask for the moon. We have the stars." And how.

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THEN AND NOW: Tilson Thomas stands beneath a projection of a photo of himself with his grandmother.

Chicago Tribune

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Grandson's work celebrates icons of Yiddish theater

Multimedia show highlights couple's contribution to arts

By Howard Reich
TRIBUNE CRITIC

Before Hollywood, before Broadway, before the Borscht Belt and the Catskills, two words transformed the performing arts in America: Yiddish theater.

Loud, raucous, emotionally charged, funny, tragic and steeped in song, Yiddish theater flourished on the Lower East Side of Manhattan at the turn of the previous century, even as it took root in major American cities such as Chicago, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

Swathed in opulent costumes and speaking in thickly Eastern European cadences, its actors gave America some of the first performances of avant-garde plays by Henrik Ibsen and Oscar Wilde—in Yiddish. They brought the cantorial melodies and klezmer songs of the Old Country to the American stage, inspiring the Jewish-tinged music of George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and scores more. They became Hollywood's biggest stars, from Edward G. Robinson to Walter Matthau to Paul Muni. They dared to take on the most pressing subjects of the day, from women's rights to the ominous rise of Adolf Hitler.

And in the heyday of the Yiddish theater—from the late 1880s to the late 1920s—no two figures did more to launch and nourish the genre than Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. Like the Yiddish theater itself, the Thomashefskys are virtually forgotten by today's popular culture, but they will enjoy an unusual, belated encore this week, at Symphony Center.

Heir to a dynasty

Their grandson, the versatile American conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, will lead the Chicago premiere of "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater," Sunday and Tuesday at Symphony Center. Through musical performances, semi-staged scenes and historic film and audio clips, "The Thomashefskys" will trace the tempestuous lives of a couple Tilson Thomas calls the Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor of the Yiddish stage, even as the show traces the rise and fall of the idiom itself.

The Thomashefskys "were providing a very elaborate kind of entertainment, which was trying to give people who were living a fairly grim life, working in sweatshops or whatever, a place where they could go and escape," says Tilson Thomas, 63.

Indeed, life in the tenements of the Lower East Side, where thousands of Jewish immigrants began to converge at the end of the 19th Century, was brutally difficult. Low wages, ghastly work conditions and severely overcrowded apartments made life hellish, though still dramatically better than the pogroms and other persecutions the Jews had left behind in Europe.

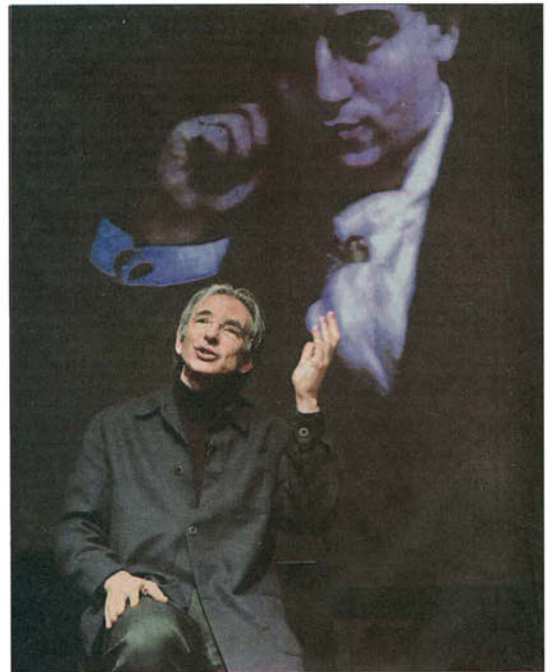
After watching shows such as "Der griner milyoner" ("The Green Millionaire") or "Dos pintelev yid" ("A Little Spark of Jewishness"), theatergoers "could go back to their workplace and sing their songs and have a fuel to keep their hope going," adds Tilson Thomas.

Empire builders

The Thomashefskys emerged as marquee stars of the genre—as well as builders of an empire that operated theaters across the country—not only because of their performing gifts but also because their story was the same as that of their audience. Born in a shtetl in Ukraine, Boris Thomashefsky came to the United States as a teen and produced the first production of Yiddish theater in this country in New York, in 1881. He was 15 and on his way to becoming a matinee idol.

But the process was difficult at first, for Thomashefsky was building on a tradition that was new even in Europe and had virtually no support in the States. He traveled to Chicago in 1885, laying the groundwork for Yiddish theater here, then met another Jewish émigré, Bessie Baumfeld, on the road in Baltimore, around 1888, when she was 14. The next year, he returned to Chicago with his new wife and his Yiddish troupe.

"I will never forget that happy time," Thomashefsky wrote in his autobiography. "When we got together in later years, we would often reminisce about those happy days in Chicago. Our actors considered themselves lucky—each one had a light, clean room and ate and drank of the best."



Michael Tilson Thomas performs during a recent rehearsal for "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater."

"For the first time in my career as a Yiddish actress," she wrote in her memoirs, "I saw an audience before me that made me instinctively feel that I had to have respect for them, respect for my art, and respect for myself as a Yiddish theatrical performer."

Buoyed by their popular and critical acclaim in Chicago, the Thomashefskys ventured to New York and embarked on a career of immense productivity. Hundreds of productions, thousands of performances unfolded under their direction.

Relevant, reactive theater

The long list of the Thomashefsky's repertoire included Yiddish versions of "Parsifal," "Uncle Tom's Cabin" (transformed to czarist Russia), Wilde's "Salome" and Shakespeare's "Hamlet," the latter advertised as "adapted and improved upon." No one would confuse these concoctions with the originals—they were rewritten and re-imagined to address the concerns of the immigrant audience.

"The whole theater was very reactive ... more like 'Saturday Night Live' or 'The Daily Show,'" says Tilson Thomas.

The combination of controversial subjects, Yiddish vernacular and an urgently plaintive music proved gripping for its constituency.

"The joy that theatergoers had when they went to see actors on stage, speaking in Yiddish, literally about their plight, or of a similar plight, was so emotional for them that there would be public outbursts," says Zalmen Mlotek, artistic director of the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, in New York.

"We could translate it today to what happens at U2 or a Madonna concert, where there's a mosh pit of thousands of young teenagers going crazy."

Cultural pride

For these people and this culture, the Yiddish theater was much more than an evening's entertainment. It was a place to convene, to exchange information, to bask in cultural pride.

Alas, neither the Yiddish theater, nor the Thomashefskys' marriage, was destined to last. Boris Thomashefsky philandered one time too many for Bessie to tolerate, and they separated around 1911, after which Bessie Thomashefsky created a rival theater of her own and staged boldly feminist productions. When Boris Thomashefsky died, in 1939, an estimated 30,000 people crowded the streets of the Lower East Side for the funeral.

By then, the Yiddish theater had long since faded, Jews having moved uptown and otherwise assimilated, leaving the Lower East Side for new waves of immigrants from other places.

Bessie Thomashefsky moved to California to join her children in the late 1930s, eventually singing her songs and re-enacting her repertoire for Michael Tilson Thomas, who never met his iconic grandfather.

Retrieving a legacy

Following the 1992 death of Tilson Thomas' father, the conductor in 1998 formed the Thomashefsky Project, a non-profit organization that would retrieve and catalog what remained of the family's cultural legacy. Linda Steinberg, executive director, scoured the family's papers, as well as material at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York and the New York Public Library, where Boris Thomashefsky's library had been donated.

She was startled to discover approximately 500 plays, as well as more than 1,000 pages of memoirs by both Thomashefskys, all of

'I will never forget that happy time. When we got together in later years, we would often reminisce about those happy days in Chicago.'

—Boris Thomashefsky, in his autobiography

which needed to be translated from the Yiddish. "The music was a huge challenge," says Steinberg. "It's hard to find a whole score. ... 'You didn't know how many instruments, where it would pause, what the tempo would be—that came from Michael's memory. Without him, it couldn't be done.'"

Says Mlotek, of the National Yiddish Theatre, "The beauty of the Thomashefsky Project is not only that you hear the grandson speaking about the grandfather, but you hear this world-class musician interpreting this material. ... 'And I find that thrilling.'"

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"The Thomashefskys" plays at 3 p.m. Sunday and 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Symphony Center, 220 S. Michigan Ave.; \$35-\$95; 312-294-3000.



Courtesy of the Thomashefsky Project / Michael Tilson Thomas Collection

Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky

Creating 'The Thomashefskys'

Because Michael Tilson Thomas and colleague Linda Steinberg both believed that only a live show could convey the sense and texture of Yiddish theater, they and a team of scholars spent years constructing "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater." Essentially, the show traces the evolution of this pivotal but ephemeral art. American culture itself was changed by the innovations of Yiddish theater.

"There's a certain point in time when you can't distinguish between early [Irving] Berlin and early [George] Gershwin from a number being done in Yiddish shows," says Tilson Thomas, citing two pioneers of the Broadway and film musical.

"These guys heard all these [Yiddish] numbers. There's an obvious connection there."

It appears likely that Tilson Thomas, music director of the San Francisco Symphony, will be performing "The Thomashefskys" around the world for the rest of his performing life. Yet the material that he, Steinberg and their colleagues have unearthed cries out for more permanent status. Steinberg envisions a documentary film and a book. An academic center for the study and performance of the Thomashefskys' oeuvre seems natural.

—Howard Reich

A maestro revives an era, with his grandparents as his guide

By **Steven Winn**
CHRONICLE ARTS
AND CULTURE CRITIC

The aim of the Yiddish theater, according to Michael Tilson Thomas, was “the entertainment, education and elevation” of its audience. The resourcefully churning engine that made those lofty goals possible was improvisation. If the music gave out before an actor made an entrance, Thomas confides early on in “The Thomashefskys,” his delectable tribute to this bygone art form and way of life, the orchestra was expected to “fake something charming.”

Thomas doesn’t have to fake anything to make this capacious evening at Davies Hall entertain, educate and elevate on its own buoyant terms. In telling the story of his own famous grandparents, the actor/managers Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, Thomas fits music, theatricality, narration, vintage images and personal reminiscence together in an altogether charming fashion.

The result is at once historically textured, immediate and deeply personal. You won’t only know a lot more about Yiddish theater by the end of “The Thomashefskys.” You’ll know, and feel, more about Thomas as a man and an artist as well. Performances continue through the weekend.

and one-liners and come away happily well-fed. Thomas, who first mounted his grand Thomashefsky salon in 2005 and has trimmed and reshaped it this time around, is a first-rate host and raconteur. His rhythm, delivery, and enthusiasm for his subject, and stock-house of Yiddish words and expressions are fully tapped. He sings a number, too, capering around the stage in a stiff-legged dance as he tears into “Who Do You Suppose Married My Sister?” (1910). The answer: Thomashefsky, the star with the “bankroll big enough to choke a cow.”

“Oy, such a maestro,” remarks Judy Blazer, who plays and sings the role of Bessie.



STEFAN COHEN

Michael Tilson Thomas recounts stories of his famous grandparents during “The Thomashefskys.”

But Thomas is up to much more than paging through his family show-business scrapbook. Even at its silliest and most cravenly commercial — “Shakespeare Translated and Improved by Boris Thomashefsky!” — the Yiddish theater Thomas evokes captures the aspiration, heartache, social upheaval and vitality of immigrant Jewish life in late 19th and early 20th century America. That canvas is stretched across the narrative frame of “two kids from nowhere in the Ukraine” who met up in Baltimore and went on to “live out their fantasies.”

Thomas’ well-told tale begins with his own boyhood memories of his grandmother Bessie. He knew her when she was in her 80s and living in Los Angeles in the 1950s; she was a glamorous and compelling figure with her cigarette holder, bangle bracelets, ripe accent and treasure trove of stories. As the show spools back in time, the characters come to life onstage and in the photographs, film clips and super-title song translations projected on a screen above the orchestra.

Blazer is the headliner as Bessie, a pint-size whirligig of energy and charisma. She sells a flimsy little folksong about an old coat as if it were a Wagnerian aria, bolts through a demanding medley about the “greenhorn” shows that flourished for a while and wraps her voice around Bessie’s choice Yiddishisms. Neal Benari sings

less as Boris, but he effectively projects the older man’s erotic magnanimity, vanity and dravago.

Eugene Brancoveanu shines as the younger Boris. A love song he sings in the second act, Joseph Rumshinsky’s “The Way Men Love,” offers a shimmering, Schubert-tinged moment of Yiddish theater music at its most poignant. Ronit Widmann-Levy plays the younger Bessie.

It some of the music runs together into a generic blur of wailing clarinets, growling trombones and slide-whistle special effects, its open-hearted eagerness to please is undeniably winning. In the “Bar Mitzvah March” from “Dos pintelete yid” (1909), a comic duet for piccolo and bass sets the stage for an infectious celebration of new life that sweeps you along. It’s like “The Music Man” 50 years before its time, on an Ashkenazi slant.

Everything is put in the service of good storytelling. And that finally, may be the most telling aspect of this Thomashefsky tribute. In reviving the schemes and contrivances, alliances and betrayals of actors from a century ago, Thomas and his collaborators do what the Yiddish theater artists always meant to do. They make you forget your troubles for an evening, plunge into another world and feel your own more fully in the end.

E-mail Steven Winn at swinn@sfchronicle.com.

THE CRITICS

**Michael Tilson Thomas/
The Thomashefskys**

Zankel Hall, New York
MARTIN BERNHEIMER ·

Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor of the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, is an innovative artist who often resembles a wunderkind even at 60, an enlightened interpreter of Beethoven, Mahler and Stravinsky. He also happens to be a fine pianist and a composer honoured in some respectable quarters.

His penchant for flash, especially in early years, earned him the nickname "Tinsel Thomas". Now he looms gracefully in a grateful new guise: professional grandson. He plays the part marvellously.

The vehicle was a little extravaganza, *The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of Life in the Yiddish Theater*. This labour of love revealed the spiffy maestro as a brilliant raconteur and enlightened historian in an extended tribute to his grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. They were



Tilson Thomas (l), with grandmother and father Thomashefsky Project

pioneers in a powerful musico-dramatic phenomenon, grown from the Russian-immigrant experience in turn-of-the-century Manhattan. performed always lustily, it would seem – in an astonishing range of vehicles, lofty, sociopolitical and/or vulgar. They created inimitable versions of Chekhov, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Parsifal*. She added Salome and Minke di Dinstmoyd (Minke the Maid). His specialities included Hamlet (*Der Yisheve Bokher* "translated and improved upon by Boris Thomashefsky") and the "Jewish Yankee Doodle". Their impact can be measured, perhaps, by one statistic: 30,000 mourners turned out for Boris's funeral on the Lower East Side in 1939.

Patricia Birch has staged the Thomas/Thomashefsky show with welcome restraint, adroitly balancing slide-and-film projections with jazzy-funky music and stylish song-dance-and-speak routines. Tilson Thomas leads a nifty 17-piece band with Mozartean bravado. The inspired cast is led by Judy Blazer, warm and wry as Bessie, with Shuler Hensley big and bold as Boris in his prime and Eugene Brancoveanu mellifluous as his youthful alter ego. Ronit Widmann-Levy preens amusingly as an almost-operatic diva. Stellar embellishment arrives in monologues by Judy Kaye and Debra Winger.

Fiddler-Shmiddler. This one really raises the roof.

★★★★★
Tel +1 212 247 7800

Yiddish Theater Lives in the Care of One Who Knows

By ANNE MIDGETTE

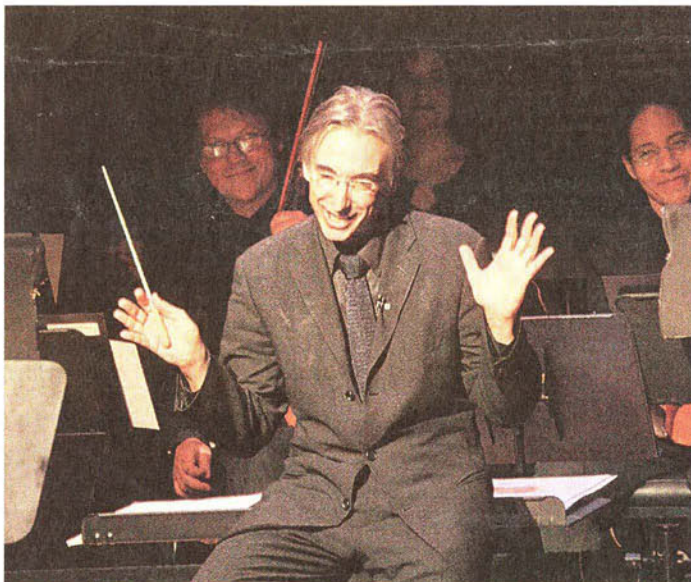
Listening to people reminisce about their families can be either amusing or excruciating. Fortunately, the conductor Michael Tilson Thomas is a great raconteur.

Mr. Thomas offered a three-hour examination of the life of his grandparents at Zankel Hall on Saturday. (The show was repeated on Sunday.) To his credit, it was mostly entertaining, mostly compelling and thoroughly professional.

He had great material to work with. His grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, were superstars of the Yiddish theater in America at the end of the 19th century and well into the 20th, playing everything from super-romantic operettas to slapstick comedy to a Yiddish version of "Hamlet" ("translated and improved" by Boris).

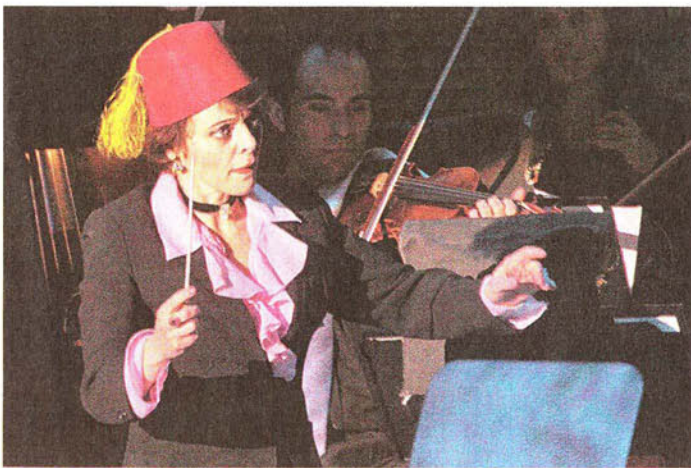
"The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater" is an excellent use of its medium: a well-researched documentary presented as live theater. A book couldn't have captured the Thomashefskys' music (like "Biznes Befor Plezhur," from "Der Yidisher Yankee Doodle" of 1905). A film could have included the recordings of the Thomashefskys themselves — he with a really striking singing voice, she in a humorous spoken monologue — but it couldn't have communicated the spark of live performance.

There were lots of sparks here, and lots of near-sparks: in such a long evening there is bound to be a lot of everything. The performance was a scrapbook with projections of photographs, live actors personifying the Thomashefskys and reading from their memoirs (Bessie wrote several), and star turns from Debra Winger (reading one of Bessie's weekly advice columns on beauty in a Yiddish paper) and Judy Kaye (singing a song about Boris by the



Photographs by Judith Schlieper for The New York Times

Above, Michael Tilson Thomas as host of "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater," based on his grandparents. Below, Judy Blazer as Bessie, his grandmother and a onetime star.



The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life In the Yiddish Theater

Zankel Hall

composers of "Shine On, Harvest Moon").

Judy Blazer stood out as Bessie Thomashefsky, combining petite prettiness and earthy spunk. Shuler Hensley got across Boris's hamminess, but less of the sex appeal that had women fighting over his cast-off top hats. Eugene Brancoveanu, an opera singer with a warm presence to match his warm baritone, was a perfect, shameless ham. A highlight was his performance with Ronit Widmann-Levy, a soprano, of one of Boris's first hits, "Aleksander, Der Kroyn Prints fun Yerusholaim" from 1892: the two singers swooned and mooned and emoted, and Mr. Brancoveanu finally literally swept Ms. Widmann-Levy off her feet.

Maybe it takes a long evening to get across the full flavor of this now-forgotten era. It certainly takes a narrator with the aplomb of Mr. Thomas, who was the star of the show not only because he conducted and narrated the whole thing, but because he managed to bridge the historical and the personal, conveying a lot of information and passing on memories that didn't ever quite descend into the realm of the maudlin. It's no mean feat to be able to bring down the house by telling your favorite family anecdotes, and to move your audience without embarrassing it when you talk about your grandmother's death.

In the best family tradition, the show will go on the road. Nipping and tucking half an hour off its running time wouldn't be difficult, and would only help to improve a very professional piece of work.

Tilson Thomas does his grandparents proud

The Thomashefskys, Yiddish theater legends, share the stage again.

By MARK SWED
Times Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — The death of Yiddish has long been foretold by Hebrew-centric Jewish scholars, much as the impending demise of the orchestra has helped keep some journalists-cum-undertakers in business. In either case, it's a ridiculously easy call. All things die, including languages and arts institutions. Let's not be hasty, though.

Wednesday night at Davies Symphony Hall here, Yiddish was alive. The San Francisco Symphony was alive. And they came together for "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater," which a spokesperson for the orchestra described as the hottest ticket of the season. "Nightline" recently devoted 20 minutes to the project. The concert was sold out a month ago.

The program was a special evening that Michael Tilson Thomas, the orchestra's music director, put together to remember his colorful grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, two of the biggest stars of Yiddish theater in New York a century ago. They were characters, bigger than life, and the evening proved to be three hours of pure

pleasure. But something bigger was in the air.

Tilson Thomas made his Thomashefsky show, created for Carnegie Hall earlier this year, the centerpiece of a larger San Francisco Symphony June festival. "Of Thee I Sing: Yiddish Theater, Broadway and the American Voice," which ends tonight, brought out the Yiddish accent in such quintessentially American composers as Copland, Gershwin and Bernstein.

Beyond telling delightful tales of the Thomashefskys and presenting a forgotten world and its music vibrantly re-created by a group of versatile performers, the conductor had an important message to convey Wednesday night: If he is one of the most far-reaching and innovative personalities in classical music today, and one of our deepest interpreters, that may have a little something to do with tradition. The old and the new are not so far apart as you might think.

Only a small part of the Thomashefsky evening was about Tilson Thomas. Who, after all, could compete with Boris? He was a great singer and great producer, with great sexual charm and a wide streak of self-

destruction. "What more do you need," his grandson asked, "to be a legend?"

Tilson Thomas didn't know Boris. He died in 1939, five years before Tilson Thomas was born. But he did know Bessie, who was the prototype for Fanny Brice and Barbra Streisand. She was a glamorous trendsetter styled by Max Factor, a pioneering feminist, a *femme fatale* (her Yiddish "Salome" included the "Dance of the Seven *Shmattes*").

In her old age, she hung out with Ava Gardner and the like at the Hollywood Roosevelt during the week and visited the Thomas family in the San Fernando Valley on weekends. "Your parents," she told Tilson Thomas, who was a child prodigy, "are very nice, but conventional. They are not like us." She had a flair for "trouser" roles. Her grandson's first set of tails had been hers.

The program, directed by Patricia Birch, was an ambitious and agreeable mishmash, which meant it suited its material. Tilson Thomas offered reminiscences and conducted a small orchestra. Lively music was dredged up, some of it unheard for a hundred years. Much of it was hysterically funny, including

[See Concert, Page E19]



KRISTEN LOKEN *San Francisco Symphony*
BORIS AND BESSIE: *Michael Tilson Thomas recounts tales of his grandparents at Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco.*

Thomashefsky salute

[Concert, from Page E18]

an antic Bar Mitzvah March from "Dos Pintele Yid" (A Little Spark of Jewishness) and "Biznes Befor Plezhur" from "Der Yidisher Yankee Doodle." Some things you just had to imagine, such as Boris' Yiddish Parsifal or his "Hasidic" Hamlet — Shakespeare, he advertised, "translated and improved."

Judy Blazer was a dazzling Bessie, chewing scenery. Eugene Brancoveanu could only approximate the larger-than-life Boris, but you got the idea. The singers Shuler Hensley and Ronit Widmann-Levy brought additional flair to the show. Projections of photographs and the one extant film of Boris (age 75 and still commanding) were seamlessly integrated into the rest.

But what made the biggest impression was simply how pow-

erful theater was to the teeming life and culture of New York's Lower East Side. It was always wildly seat-of-your-pants. Fake something charming, Boris would tell his fellow actors, until Mrs. Thomashefsky exits the stage.

Yet for all its silliness, the Yiddish stage took on social issues too controversial for the tame Broadway of the times — women's rights, birth control, assimilation, class struggle. This was theater high and low all at the same delirious time. It was comic and tragic. And so were the Thomashefskys. Bessie ultimately walked out on the philanthropic Boris and became his competitor. He became a sad caricature of himself in his later years, though he remained so beloved that when he died, 30,000 fans followed his coffin through

the streets. The Thomashefskys had impact.

Debra Winger made a special appearance to read from a newspaper column that Bessie wrote

about keeping your neck youthful looking. Judy Kaye stepped in for a high-stepping version of "Who Do you Suppose Married My Sister? Thomashefsky" by the same songwriting team who wrote "Shine on Harvest Moon."

Tilson Thomas ended with Bessie's recipe for strudel: Wash your face, put on a clean apron and then go into the kitchen and make the strudel. And that, he said, is what he does when he conducts Mahler. He washes his face, puts on a clean shirt and goes out and makes strudel.

It's great strudel, and it doesn't come from nowhere.

Michael Tilson Thomas invites you to meet his grandparents – the amazing Thomashefskys



Bessie Thomashefsky in a scene from 1920's "Jenny Loyft far Meyor" (Jenny Runs for Mayor), one of many plays produced by the Thomashefskys. Photos courtesy the Thomashefsky Project

By Anastasia Tsioulcas
SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

NEW YORK — Near the beginning of "The Producers," Max Bialystock boasts, "I was a protege of the great Boris Thomashefsky."

George and Ira Gershwin knew Boris, wife Bessie and their children well, and they affectionately mention Boris in a couple of their songs. At the height of their popularity, Boris and Bessie entertained hundreds of thousands in an empire that stretched from New York's Lower East Side to Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and beyond. When Boris died at age 70 in 1939, some 30,000 mourners lined the streets. The couple's work provided the underpinning for Broadway and for the golden age of American songwriting on Tin Pan Alley.

These days, however, the question more often than not is: "Thoma-who?"

To answer that query, enter San Francisco Symphony Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas — who happens to be Boris and Bessie's grandson. Thomas is eager for his ancestors' nearly lost history to be better known and appreciated; to that end, he and director Patricia Birch are bringing "The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Jewish Theatre" to Davies Symphony Hall on June 29. The sold-out show is part of the two-week *Of Thee I Sing*: Yiddish Theater, Broadway, and the American Voice series, which opens Thursday with Gershwin's "Of Thee I Sing" and "Let 'Em Eat Cake" at Davies.

Boris and Bessie's rags-to-riches ascendance is a

Of Thee I Sing: Yiddish Theater, Broadway, and the American Voice: Thursday through July 1, Davies Symphony Hall, San Francisco.

Of Thee I Sing and Let 'Em Eat Cake: 8 p.m. Thursday, Friday, Saturday. Tickets: \$35-\$107.

The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater: Open rehearsal, 10 a.m. June 29. Tickets: \$30-\$50.

Copland and Bernstein: 8 p.m. June 30. Tickets: \$15 to \$74.

Michael Feinstein: 8 p.m. July 1. Tickets: \$15-\$65.

For tickets, call (415) 864-6000 or visit sfsymphony.org.



Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky "were like the Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor of their time."

MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS,
music director, San Francisco Symphony

quintessentially American tale. Born in the Kiev province of Ukraine, Boris, the son of a cantor, was armed with an astonishing voice, debonair looks, innate business savvy and more than a dash of chutzpah — he became a beloved actor and theater impresario while still an adolescent. In 1881, when he was 12 years old, Boris was the first to bring a Yiddish troupe over from Europe to tour the United States.

Bessie, who also emigrated from Ukraine, posed no less a formidable presence: At age 14, with just

one year of formal education courtesy of a one-room schoolhouse in Baltimore, she ran away from home to become an actress, marrying Boris four years later. Eventually splitting up with Boris, Bessie found a new identity as the head of her own business empire, emerging as a professional — and personal — rival of her former husband. She died in 1962 at age 89; as a boy, Thomas would spend weekends with her, listening to her old songs and reminiscences.

Working together and separately, the Thomashefskys were a tornado-level force for the Lower East Side, on and off the stage. Not only were they richly celebrated actors, producers and theater owners, but

they sponsored the immigration of other Jewish artists, held fund-raisers for various progressive causes, owned a music publishing company, had their own magazine and wrote newspaper columns. Eventually, each also published autobiographies that were serialized in competing Yiddish-language newspapers. "They were like the Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor of their time," Thomas says with a laugh.

The live show, which had its world premiere in April at Carnegie Hall's Zankel Hall in New York, is like the pages of a scrapbook sprung to vivid life. Framed by projections of family photos, production stills, copies of scores and sheet music, period posters and other artifacts, Thomas warmly tells engaging stories about his family that are cunningly interspersed with readings from the couple's published work and from their autobiographies, vintage recordings of the duo and a host of monologues and

► THOMASHEFSKYS: Page E4

Yiddish theater had effect on U.S. culture

► THOMASHEFSKYS

From Page E1

songs from Thomashefsky plays and musicals, zestfully delivered by such veteran actors as Judy Kaye, Debra Winger, Judy Blazer and Shuler Hensley, as well as two younger performers, the Israeli soprano Ronit Widmann-Levy and the Romanian baritone Eugene Brancoveanu. (The event has already proved so popular that the San Francisco Symphony is opening the dress rehearsal to the public on the morning of the show.)

The evening offers a taste of American Yiddish theater in its earliest days, from sentimental songs like "Shabes, yontef un rosh khoydesh" (Sabbath, Holiday, and New Month) from 1880's "Shulamis" to the brassy, Americana-flavored exuberance of "Vatsh yor step" (no translation needed, really) from the 1923 production "Berele Tramp."

The performance is in some

Richly celebrated actors, producers and theater owners, the Thomashefskys helped other Jewish artists immigrate.

ways a culmination of "The Thomashefsky Project," an effort Thomas launched in 1998 to illuminate his grandparents' enormous, if still largely unknown, contributions to American cultural life. With Linda Steinberg, the former executive director of the Jewish Museum San Francisco at the helm, the project's team has quietly rescued from obscurity an important legacy by collating, cataloguing and translating an enormous amount of archival material.

Thomas argues convincingly that his grandparents' works aren't quaint period pieces. "Many of the plays that they did would be very controversial, even today," Thomas contends. "Take the play 'Minka di dinstmoyd,' which Bessie did in 1917. It deals with birth control, the position of women in society and ultimately the class struggle between people of different origins. It's as if in 'Pygmalion' or 'My Fair Lady' Henry Higgins had books on birth control in his library, and in the course of the show Eliza Doolittle becomes a total radical who seeks to undo all the assumptions of Henry Higgins' life.

"What they did in the theater was very much a reflection of social and political events, of things that were happening and things that they made happen or helped to make happen," Thomas says. "They used the theater as a force of cultural transformation. Reversals of fortune, capital versus labor, the pomposity and hypocrisy of people of different social classes, Zionism, women's rights and all kinds of other burning issues of the day — these were all represented in the plays."

Because the Thomashefskys performed mostly in Yiddish for Jewish audiences, they flew far below the mainstream radar, and were therefore free to explore all kinds of daring topics. "There was no censorship," Thomas says. "That's how Bessie could give the first American performance of 'Salome,' for example."

The couple also was fond of adaptations. "They moved the action of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' to the land of the tsars," Steinberg says. "And as Michael says in the show, Boris advertised a version of 'Hamlet' that he had 'adapted and improved upon!'"

The Yiddish theater was a pivotal institution for this generation

of Jewish immigrants. "It really replaced the synagogue, the school and the social hall," Steinberg says.

The Yiddish theater was a pivotal institution for this generation of Jewish immigrants. "It really replaced the synagogue, the school and the social hall," Steinberg says.

Moreover, says Thomas, the Thomashefskys' work casts long shadows that indelibly shaped American theater and culture for decades to come. "So many things that came after Boris and Bessie," he says, "Broadway, the Follies, vaudeville, the Gershwin musicals, the Marx Brothers comedies and, later, 'Death of a Salesman' and 'Inherit the Wind' and even right up through 'West Side Story' — follow the assumptions about to what purposes the theater should be used that very much go back to the days of the Yiddish theater, and I have to say particularly my grandparents' theater."

What Thomas and Steinberg hope to demonstrate is not just the Thomashefskys' extraordinary legacy to American theater history. They also want audiences to see how this couple of shtetl emigres transformed not just themselves, but their audiences, into Americans. The Thomashefskys provided entertainment and intellectual stimulation, but also subtly taught their audiences about American culture and values as well as the societal and political possibilities that their new home offered.

"I really believe that early Yiddish theater helped people become American," Steinberg says. "And the Thomashefskys are maybe even more of an American tale than a Jewish story."

The Miami Herald

THE FOREMOST DAILY NEWSPAPER OF FLORIDA

MIAMI HERALD REVIEW

January 16, 2007

Yiddish theatre gets a mini-revival on Miami Beach

By LAWRENCE A. JOHNSON
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Local audiences usually encounter Michael Tilson Thomas in his formal role as artistic director of the New World Symphony leading the orchestra in music of Beethoven, Mahler or Tchaikovsky.

So, it's definitely a novel and somewhat strange sight to experience the conductor as Broadway belter as was the case last weekend at the Lincoln Theatre. Singing and high-kicking with his long, gangly legs, Tilson Thomas uninhibitedly threw off an energetic performance of the Bayes/Norworth ode, *Who Do You Suppose Married my Sister?* Thomashefsky.

No need to call a crisis intervention team. The event was part of a fascinating, compelling and hugely entertaining piece exploring the history of the Yiddish theater in America, as represented by Tilson Thomas's grandparents, the Thomashefskys.

Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky were mega-stars of the Yiddish stage, their fame reaching its height in the early 20th century. Centered in New York, their theatrical vehicles achieved great success among the recent Jewish migrants of the Lower East Side with such long-forgotten works as *Koldanya*, *Alexander Crown Prince of Jerusalem*, *Khantshe in America*, *Minke the Maid* and *The Green Schlemiel*.

In addition to his brief spotlight

turn as vocalist, Tilson Thomas acted as conductor and narrator, hosting a fluent, scrupulously prepared mix of personal reminiscence and theatrical history, joined by a quartet of actor-singers, led by Judy Blazer as Bessie.

Tilson Thomas has presented his Thomashefsky project previously in New York and San Francisco and the show is now a well-honed, deftly paced 2-hour. The Thomashefskys' separate lives, their romance, marriage and eventual breakup are charted with dramatic monologues, musical excerpts, and a ceaseless flow of projected visuals. Preciousness is mostly avoided -- Boris' falsetto moment representing his early acclaim in female roles doesn't wear well -- and schmaltz kept at bay, with the personal, touching and bittersweet in proportion.

Humor, of course, was the *raison d'être* of the Yiddish theater and much of the performance was witty and often hilarious -- as with the tale of Boris' not-very-faithful attempts to present a populist Jewish version of *Hamlet* ("My father! Oy! Oy! Oy!").

Music from feted composers of the Yiddish stage like Joseph Runshinsky, Abraham Goldfaden, Louis Freidzell and the inimitably named Giacomo Minkowski, displayed a bracing, pungent collision of new and old worlds. Snappy Sousa-like marches and the burgeoning Broadway idiom of Irving Berlin and George Gershwin rub shoulders with febrile klezmer

strains and the somber cantorial sound of the synagogue.

Under Tilson Thomas' direction the New World players took enthusiastically to their charge as Lower East Side pit band, backing the singers with great vitality and serving up brash and brassy performances of such esoterica as the *March of the Jewish Suffragettes*.

With a small set and tables and chairs, the actors put across the romance of the brilliant, libidinous Boris and the proud and independent Bessie. Judy Blazer handled the dialogue and vocalism with fine vivacity and a light musical theater touch. A ringer for Boris, Neal Benari conveyed a balanced portrait of the great actor, charismatic in his braggadocio and self-destructive in his pathological womanizing. Ronit Widmann-Levy and Eugene Brancoveanu also contributed worthy vocal support.

The visual counterpoint of projected archival photos, music sheets and theater programs added immensely to the production's success. Perhaps most touching was a brief, ancient clip of Boris' only film, which gave some idea of his subtle dramatic skills as he rose above the melodramatic material. Great credit to director Patricia Birch for making the performance move so fluidly and with minimal glitches.

Hope running out

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The Jewish News Weekly
April 1-7, 2005

Lower East Side story

Tilson Thomas honors his Yiddish theater grandparents

dan pine
staff writer

The San Fernando Valley of the 1950s was a smog-choked flatland dotted with orange groves and squat apartment buildings.

But for one Jewish boy, the North Hollywood apartment of his grandmother Bessie was a window onto a vanished world: the world of the Yiddish theater.

Bessie Thomashefsky was a turn-of-the-century superstar. Along with her husband Boris Thomashefsky, the Jewish immigrants were the Richard Burton and Liz Taylor of the Lower East Side, pioneers of a tradition that evolved into the Broadway musical.

In her little apartment five decades after her heyday, Bessie would sing the old Yiddish songs while the boy's father, Ted, or his uncle Harry accompanied on the piano. The boy absorbed it all, taking note of the nuances, cadences and wry inflections of the music.

Fifty years later, his attentiveness paid off. Today, as a tribute to his grandparents, San Francisco Symphony's music director, Michael Tilson Thomas, 60, is set to debut "Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theatre" at New York's Carnegie Hall this month, with the San Francisco premiere set for June 29.

It's the official coming-out party of the Thomashefsky Project, launched by Tilson Thomas in 1998.

The concert features a cast of seven and the 17-piece People's Theater orchestra, with such special guests as Jewish actress Debra Winger, who will read a beauty column from a Yiddish newspaper, and Judy Kaye, who sings the vintage "Who Do You Suppose Went and Married My Sister? Thomashefsky."

But for most of the show, Tilson Thomas' memories remain front and center.

Blending personal recollections with multimedia images and live performance of songs sung in Yiddish and English, "Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theatre" restores the theatrical couple to their rightful place as

Bessie Thomashefsky in one of her "trouser roles" in "Der Griner Bokher" (The Greenhorn Boy), first presented in 1905.



Engagement photo of Boris Thomashefsky and Bessie Kaufman, 1888.



progenitors of a groundbreaking art form.

"It's totally taken over my life," says Tilson Thomas of the premiere, "partially because it's turning out to be a much bigger topic than I ever imagined. I was talking to [Broadway producer] Hal Prince about it and he said to me: 'It's not a show. It's a miniseries.'"

That suits the cast of "Thomashefskys" just fine. Ronit Widmann-Levy, the Israeli-born soprano who sings the songs of the young Bessie, calls the music "captivating, warm, beautiful and very user-friendly. It's not simple music, but so well composed. The texts are about love, waiting for love and looking for love, but not in the least bit schmaltzy."

Director Patricia Birch plans to keep things simple. "The material speaks for itself," she says, "and I don't want to cover it up. The central point of it is Michael, the orchestra and the music. It all comes down to him."

Tony Award-winning actor-singer Shuler Hensley, who sings and reads selections from Boris Thomashefsky's autobiography, says of the music: "The possibilities are limitless. It's part of New York history, not just Jewish history. The music is so outstanding and was lost for so long."

Indeed, some of that music languished for decades, hidden among Bessie Thomashefsky's personal effects. When Tilson Thomas first conceived the project years ago, he began sifting through her memorabilia, from old props and costumes to scripts, full scores and crumbling fragments of music.

He knew he had a treasure on his hands.

"This all goes back to my childhood," he says. "My father over many years wanted to do some kind of evening about the Yiddish theater and Boris and Bessie. I was always delighted by the music and stories, but I didn't appreciate it as a kid."

In 1998 he officially launched a foundation, called the Thomashefsky Project and appointed Linda Steinberg, former executive director of the Jewish Museum San Francisco, as project vice president and executive director.

Their goals extended far beyond a single evening's entertainment. They were determined to research the dusty archives of Yiddish theater, and to collect and curate Thomashefsky artifacts wherever they could find them.

To date they have discovered more than 1,000 items.



Bessie Thomashefsky in "Jenny Loyft far Mayor" (Jenny Runs for Mayor), first presented in 1920.

"Some of the material was in my family's collection," says Tilson Thomas. "Some was from the YIVO Institute of Jewish Research and the New York Public Library. We've had great cooperation."

Scholars involved with the Thomashefsky Project have been impressed with the materials. "Without a doubt, among the most important producers of popular Yiddish culture in North America were the Thomashefskys," says Steven Zipperstein, Stanford history professor and member of the project's academic advisory committee. "The material that Michael Tilson Thomas has in his possession chronicles some of the most critical moments in the production, dissemination and the reception of Yiddish

culture in the last century."

While the scholarship has been impeccable, organizers say audiences at the upcoming concerts will be as entertained as any Broadway crowd. The music, painstakingly reconstructed by Tilson Thomas, reflects an orchestral sound not heard in New York since dapper Jimmy Walker was mayor.

"The oldest of the repertoire is about 120 years old," says the conductor. "The latest from around 1920. The process I followed took me back to the original materials, even the orchestrations from musicians in the pit. When you look at the parts, you have some idea of what was done, but the musicians played around a lot with those numbers. So I had to invent musical business that in an earlier era may have been improvised."

They may not be familiar names, but featured composers like Joseph Rumshinsky, though mostly self-taught, reached tremendous artistic heights, according to Tilson Thomas. "The first time you hear it," he says, "you feel as if you've known it your whole life."

One of the show's songs, "Mirele's Romance" from Abraham Goldfaden's "Koldunye" (or "The Sorceress," the first Yiddish theater production in America), strikes singer Widmann-Levy as especially lovely. "It has high spiraling notes that hang in the air, and every word has love and pain entangled."

That's a pithy description of the amazing lives of Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. Both came to America from Ukrainian villages before the turn of the 20th century. In 1882, while still in his teens, Boris starred in his first American theatrical production. While on tour in Baltimore he met 14-year-old Bessie, and soon they were twin icons of the stage.

They very quickly began creating a Yiddish theater scene for New York's burgeoning Jewish immigrant population hungry for entertainment. They brought to America the finest Jewish composers, playwrights and performers, greatly enriching the artistic scene of old New York. It was as if the talented pair took to heart an old adage of free enterprise: Find a need and fill it.

To great acclaim, they staged original dramas, comedies, their own Yiddish translations of Ibsen and Shakespeare (some advertised as "improvements on the original), and, above all, music. So pliant was his voice, sometimes Boris would play women's roles. Bessie, too, was known for doing "trouser roles," women playing young men.

Boris (who died in 1939) proved one of the most flamboyant figures in New York society. Like a Jewish William Randolph Hearst, he amassed a fortune but spent it. The couple and their three children lived in a Brooklyn mansion with servants and fancy cars at their disposal. Boris was also a notorious womanizer, which led to his 1911



Michael Tilson Thomas with grandmother Bessie Thomashefsky and father Ted in the 1950s.

separation from Bessie, though they never divorced.

Bessie went on to become something of a proto-feminist, running her own businesses and opening her own theater (the Bessie Thomashefsky People's Theater in the Bowery).

"She was a real pioneer in understanding how independent and

enterprising a woman could be," says Tilson Thomas. "As a manager of her own company, as someone commissioning new work. For her entire life she had a very realistic sense of what she thought was dignified or appropriate.

Bessie Thomashefsky moved to California in the late 1930s to be with her children and grandchildren. She died in 1962.

But by then her influence had been felt far and wide, even if the Thomashefsky name had largely faded from memory.

"You can hear the increasing Americanization of the music," says Steinberg. "Some of it sounds like Jerome Kern. It served as a bridge and enriched the musical fabric."

Adds Tilson Thomas: "The real purpose [of Yiddish theater] was to create an entertainment around controversial social issues. It was a reflection of the concerns of Yiddishkeit, which of course had very much to do with social transformation. When you look at plays like 'Death of a Salesman,' 'Inherit the Wind' or even 'West Side Story,' these are all very entertaining evenings with underlying social messages. That's very much the tradition of the Yiddish theater."

After the initial performances, the project team will evaluate the program and determine the next step. Options under consideration include a documentary, a CD and a touring exhibit.

"We're hoping people will think this is important and will want to support it and build on it," says Steinberg. "It's a question of what is Jewish.

What we're talking about here is real Jewish values being handed down — and Michael Tilson Thomas as a living embodiment of that and his ability to articulate it. He is the conduit. He is the real treasure."

While Tilson Thomas' admirers would second that emotion, the maestro himself views the project more as a celebration of his grandparents and of the Jewish genius in general.

"You have a people bottled up," he says, "the Jews of the shtets and ghettos, with their world of Torah Talmud and their level of self-discipline, study and criticism. Then suddenly they release all that immense energy and methodology to examine these other areas, and you have an amazing explosion of creativity." ■

Linda Steinberg and Michael Tilson Thomas look at a trophy given to Bessie Thomashefsky in 1921 by the Republic Theatre in San Francisco.



Ronit Widmann-Levy



Shuler Hensley



NEW YORK STAGE THE THOMASHEFSKY PROJECT

As the music director of the San Francisco Symphony for the past ten years, Michael Tilson Thomas hasn't done too badly for himself. His grandparents, though, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky—they were really something. They had “hyperstardom,” says Tilson Thomas. “I always say it was the equivalent of, like, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, as far as the New York Jewish community went.” The two Eastern European immigrants pioneered the American Yiddish theater, producing and performing original plays and musicals and Yiddish adaptations of Shakespeare, Ibsen, Wagner, and Oscar Wilde. When the couple eventually separated, Bessie bucked convention and founded her own theater company on the Bowery.

Bessie's grandson the maestro has spent the past seven years spearheading the Thomashefsky Project, which has unearthed about 1,000 documents (posters, scripts, scores, and the like) relating to his grandparents' careers. Some of the material will be brought back to the stage for the first time in more than 100 years this weekend, in “The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in Yiddish Theater” at Carnegie Hall. Broadway veterans Shuler Hensley and Judy Blazer will embody Boris and Bessie, performing and reading from their memoirs. Though the project might at first appear to be another bit of easy nostalgia for a dead art form, Tilson Thomas says he's

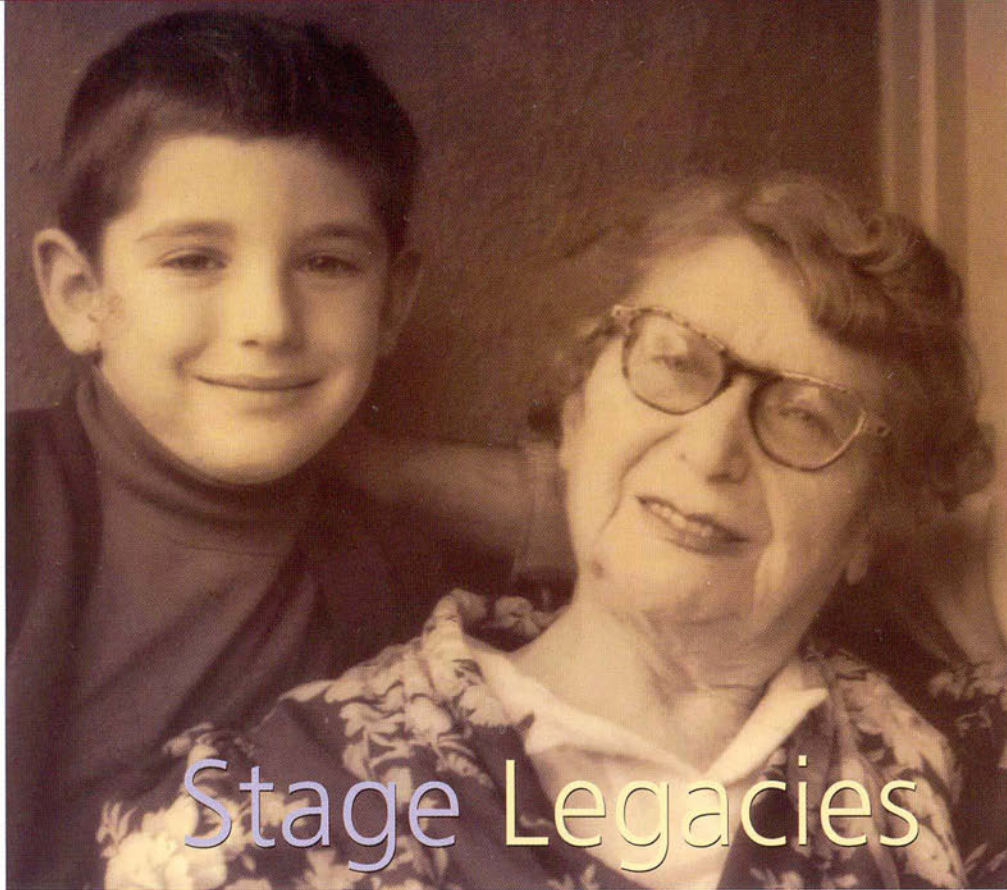


hoping to help rescue the sociopolitical bite it once had. “The Yiddish theater in most people's minds is kind of an anecdote,” says Tilson Thomas. “But the audience was very reactive, giving their advice, expressing approval or disapproval. The theater was being used to be a real forum of ideas. There's a whole avant-garde, experimental side—the public has lost a sense of that, and also how serious it was.”

ALICIA ZUCKERMAN

APRIL 2005

Feature Story



COLLECTION OF MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

Stage Legacies

Michael Tilson Thomas celebrates his famous grandparents, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, in two performances at Zankel Hall this month.

BY NAHMA SANDROW

Michael Tilson Thomas, circa 1950, with his grandmother, Bessie Thomashefsky

How would you feel about spending a night going through someone else's family albums? It depends on the family, of course. In the case of conductor Michael Tilson Thomas, grandmother and grandfather are the legendary stars Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, and the extended family history amounts to a look at the glory years of the American Yiddish theater.

Tilson Thomas and The Thomashefsky Project will salute this history on April 16 and 17 with *The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater*, a performance in Zankel Hall that is part of the conductor's *Perspectives* concerts this season.

Boris Thomashefsky made his first stage appearance as a boy soprano in 1882, the first year of the mass immigration of Yiddish-speaking Jews from Eastern Europe. It was the very first American performance of Yiddish theater, which, at the time, was a brand-new genre in Europe as well. In fact,

Stage Legacies

Boris, newly arrived in America, performed in Yiddish theater before he'd ever had a chance to see it! But the form exploded here, and by the early 20th century, there were 14 theaters devoted to Yiddish plays in the New York metropolitan area alone, with others in cities across the continent. There were also touring companies, cabarets, music halls, and amateur groups, as well as sheet music, phonograph records, and, eventually, a tiny film industry—all commented on by a lively Yiddish press, and sometimes by the English-language press as well.

The Yiddish public adored its theater. In America, especially, Yiddish theater was more than art. For people shaken by immigration, whose cultural and religious institutions had been weakened and their traditional social networks cut, theater in their native language acquired a central place at the heart of their community. This was intensified by plays mirroring the problems of modern immigrant life.

The audiences also adored their stars. Although playwrights contributed repertory that ranged from intellectual drama to low comedy, this was above all a theater of powerful actors. And fans were fascinated by performers' lives, onstage and off. They devoured gossip columns and stars' memoirs; Boris published two autobiographies, one serialized, and Bessie published three. In tribute to their glamour, one faithful theatergoer presented the couple with a silken hanging she'd painstakingly embroidered in gilt thread; enclosed within laurel wreaths were the names of all their most beloved roles.

Boris was handsome in the florid style of the period. When girls turned up their noses at eligible suitors, the jeer was, "What are you waiting for—Thomashefsky for a husband?" When costume operettas were the rage, and he played swashbuckling Prince Alexander in doublet and clinging silken tights, Yiddish editorials scolded that his calves were destroying the modesty of Jewish womanhood. Fans were especially enchanted by his voice (he descended from at least eight generations of synagogue cantors) and his musicianship.

Bessie started as a stage-struck immigrant child but bloomed into a diva. Photographs show her in queenly poses, crowned with gleaming dark hair, looking soulfully past the camera. She had a "smoky" singing voice, recalls Tilson Thomas, and she "knew how to use it." One of her personae was spunky, city wise, and wisecracking (think Fannie Brice). She played swaggering "pants" roles, as did Sarah Bernhardt during the same period. Bessie



Boris Thomashefsky as Hamlet

COLLECTION OF MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

Stage Legacies



A poster from
circa 1915

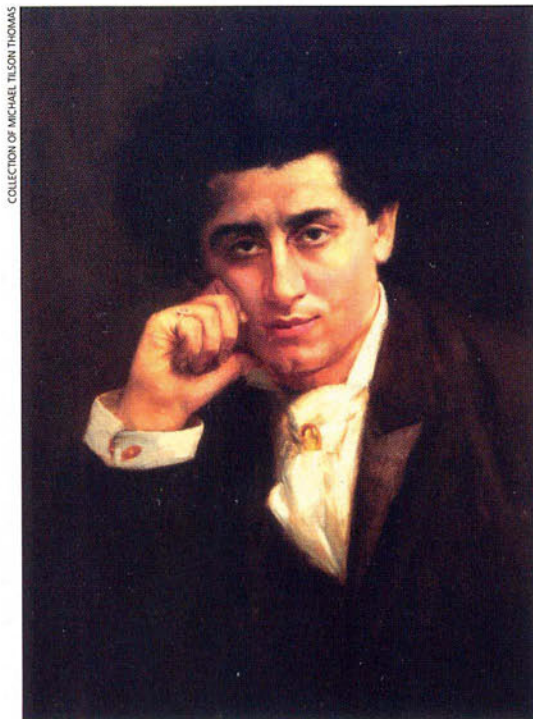
was also a realistic dramatic actress. When she and Boris later separated, she reinvented herself, managing her own Lower East Side troupe and even playing some of his favorite roles.

As a boy in North Hollywood, Tilson Thomas adored his grandmother's flamboyant yet down-to-earth personality, her generosity, and her youthful zest for life. Boris had already died, but Tilson Thomas heard many Yiddish theater songs and stories from Bessie and her friends, and from her son, the conductor's father, who was himself a considerable theatrical personage. Still, a grown-up acquires new perspectives on what he took for granted as a child. Eventually, says Tilson Thomas, he understood so much more clearly what they were trying to do and discovered that "it was the very essence of what I'm doing now."

"Their attitudes toward new and innovative things, their openness toward exploring the avant-garde as well as making the classics more accessible to a new audience, are very important themes that have continued in my own life and career," he told the *Jewish Bulletin of Northern California*. Take for example the range of roles they embraced. Boris's most famous parts included the romantic hero Prince Alexander, a soul-searching yeshiva scholar (in an adaptation of *Hamlet*), and a humorously plainspoken green-horn delivering blocks of ice. Similarly, Bessie starred with huge success as a clumsy servant girl, a fiery suffragette, a biblical princess, and the seductive Salome. Together, they presented plays about Sherlock Holmes and Hitler, problem plays by Ibsen, and folk operettas by Avram Goldfadn, the father of the Yiddish theater. Boris also produced Wagner's *Parsifal*—with costumes he shlepped downtown from the Metropolitan Opera House!

Beyond this eclecticism, Tilson Thomas's grandparents showed him "what a performance can be, where it can lead people." In fact, he reflects, his concept of conducting is very much his grandparents' legacy. "I try to create a subtext like an actor, to enter the persona of each composer," he says. He goes on to remember how Bessie once struggled to explain how she created a role. "All she could say was, 'I looked I saw I imagined,'" recalls the

Stage Legacies



COLLECTION OF MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS

An oil painting
of Boris
Thomashefsky

All the same, till now, there was no way for the rest of us to glimpse the Thomashefskys in performance except for one feature film, *Bar-Mitzvah*, which is in the archives of the National Center for Jewish Film, and several brief recordings in the sound archives of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

This show of music and remembrances will bring both Thomashefskys to life at last, onstage, where they belong, and as authentically as possible. It is meant to introduce The Thomashefsky Project to the wider public, with an eye to future traveling exhibits and productions. It is also a very personal celebration of Tilson Thomas's 60th birthday and of his tenth year with the San Francisco Symphony—a real family occasion.

Yiddish theater reached its climax by the middle of the 20th century. There remain only a few resident companies scattered across the globe in Bucharest, Warsaw, Tel Aviv, Montreal, and in New York, where the Folksbiene continues to be the longest running Yiddish theater anywhere. There are still circles, in other words, where people will say, "Michael Tilson Thomas—you know who that is? That's the Thomashefskys' grandson!"

conductor. "That's all she could say. Because with her, it was a colossal instinct—it was being in the creation. And for me, what I do means encouraging and guiding other people to be alive in the creation. 'Play it like you're improvising, like it was never written down,' I tell musicians. 'It's as much about you as about Tchaikovsky.'"

The Thomashefsky Project was created in 1998. Its Executive Director, Linda Steinberg, enthusiastically describes the memorabilia—including props, playbills, posters, and Bessie's own snazzy top hat and tails—that Tilson Thomas inherited from his grandparents. The Project also has collected copies of hundreds of scripts and many scores; the latter are often in fragmented playing versions, but Tilson Thomas himself is piecing them together for this month's *Perspectives* concert using his memory—and his ear—to re-create their original flavor.

Nahma Sandrow is the author of Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater and of Kuni-Leml, the award-winning musical based on the classic Yiddish operetta.

NIGHTLINE: Boris & Bessie: Aired on June 3, 2005



On June 3rd, 2005, ABC Television News' Nightline presented a full program devoted to the Thomashefskys and the story of early Yiddish Theater.

Description: "The audience was obsessed with everything that they did on and off the stage, and they couldn't escape from it. They were being shadowed by journalists and every little detail of their lives was all too intensely reported." - *Michael Tilson Thomas*

It's nice to see that there are some constants in our society. Most notably, the fact that no matter what century we live in, celebrity is a prized commodity, and something that we as Americans have never -- and will never -- tire obsessing over. Tonight's "Nightline" is a story about that kind of celebrity, but it's also a story about culture, history and society.

More than 100 years ago, Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky were two of the biggest stars in a particular phenomenon known as the "Yiddish Theatre." In the 1890s on New York City's Lower East Side, home to many of the city's Jewish immigrants, this odd brand of theatre sprung up almost overnight. The performances themselves were a strange mixture of "stories-ripped-from-the-headlines," music from the old world, a dash of Shakespeare, and a good helping of gossip. In its own way, it was immensely successful. For 10 cents, an immigrant family working in a sweatshop for 15 hours a day could spend a few hours sitting, relaxing, and laughing at themselves.

Boris and Bessie were two of the new phenomenon's biggest stars. Newspapers and gossip followed them wherever they went, tracking their infidelities, foibles, successes and failures. They were almost always front page news, and I'll bet you've still never heard of them.

Their grandson, Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor of the San Francisco Symphony, wants to make sure that doesn't happen. Over the past few years, through his "Thomashefsky Project," he has been working to preserve their memory. Searching through archives around the country, they have unearthed a treasure trove of Boris and Bessie memorabilia. Tonight, Jeffrey Kofman sits and talks with Michael Tilson Thomas, and we'll see some of that history: photos, headlines, posters and flyers that made the Thomashefsky couple famous. Plus, for the first time in more than 100 years, we will actually hear Boris and Bessie sing.

And because television is about excess, we'll hear from Fivish Finkle. He's the star of Boston Public and Picket Fences, who, some 70 years ago, actually acted with Boris. I would like to take credit for booking Fivish, but the truth is that he happened to be eating at the 2nd Ave. Deli 10 minutes before we started shooting.

Ted Gerstein & the Nightline staff. Producer, ABC News, New York.



Performing Arts

Project Recalls Yiddish Theater Legends

by Jeff Lunden



Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky were the most popular performers of the Yiddish Theater era. Thomashefsky Project/Michael Tilson Thomas



Michael Tilson Thomas, left, with his grandmother, Bessie, and his father, Ted Thomas Thomashefsky Project/Michael Tilson Thomas

Morning Edition, April 15, 2005 · Michael Tilson Thomas is a superstar in the classical music world. He is the music director of the San Francisco Symphony and artistic director of Miami's New World Symphony. This weekend, Tilson Thomas is taking a look at the world of his grandparents, who were superstars of another era: Yiddish Theater greats Bessie and Boris Thomashefsky.

Tilson Thomas says that, growing up in Los Angeles, his grandmother Bessie Thomashefsky was a frequent houseguest. He never knew his grandfather, who died in 1939.

The pair, born in Russia, became legends in Yiddish Theater, a genre they helped define. Among Boris Thomashefsky's more ambitious projects was a version of *Hamlet* that would inspire audiences to explore the original Shakespeare. And Tilson Thomas says he hopes this evening, dedicated to his grandparents, provides similar inspiration.

The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater plays at New York's Zankel Hall this weekend. It will be repeated at Davies Hall in San Francisco this June.

More Yiddish Stories on NPR

- March 25, 2000
Remembering the Early Years of Film
- May 29, 2004
Neil Sedaka, Recording Yiddish 'Memories'
- May 21, 2002
Yiddish Radio Project #10: 'Reunion'

