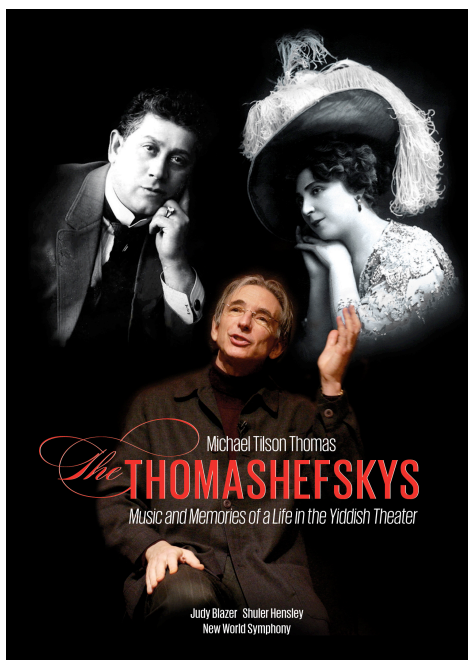


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**MICHAEL TILSON THOMAS TO BRING *THE THOMASHEFSKYS: MUSIC & MEMORIES OF A LIFE IN THE YIDDISH THEATER* TO A BROAD AUDIENCE THROUGH A PBS *GREAT PERFORMANCES* BROADCAST THURSDAY, MARCH 29 AT 8:00 PM (CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS) AND DVD RELEASE ON APRIL 24**



***“Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! Tonight we’re here to tell you a story. It’s the story of Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, two kids from little shtetls in the middle of the Ukrainian nowhere who came to America and became the founders and pioneers of the American Yiddish Theater... they also happened to be my grandparents.”***

So begins *The Thomashefskys: Music & Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater* written, hosted and conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas that will be broadcast nationally on PBS *Great Performances* on Thursday, March 29 at 8:00 p.m. (check local listings) and released on DVD and digitally on April 24 by New Video. Recorded in April 2011 at the Frank Gehry-designed New World Center in Miami Beach, the performance of *The Thomashefskys* for the March 29 broadcast and DVD stars Judy Blazer as Bessie Thomashefsky and Shuler Hensley as Boris Thomashefsky. It also features Ronit Widmann-Levy and Eugene Brancoveanu and the New World Symphony, and is directed for television by Gary Halvorson.

The stage version of *The Thomashefskys* has been performed to sold-out houses in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Miami, and at the Tanglewood Music Center in Massachusetts. Directed by Broadway veteran, Patricia Birch, who created the work with Mr. Tilson Thomas, it features music reconstructed from the original Yiddish theater repertoire interwoven with projected images and dramatized stories from Bessie and Boris's lively memoirs. It's all presented by Mr. Tilson Thomas with personal affection and wry humor that brings his grandparents back to life and salutes their remarkable spirit and legacy. Through the stories of Boris and Bessie, the audience is transported back in time and given a colorful glimpse into a vibrant, daring and wildly popular era of entertainment that planted the seeds for many actors, writers and musicians to come. The *San Francisco Chronicle* said, "Thomas and his collaborators do what Yiddish 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."

Mr. Tilson Thomas says that one of the most poignant things about reliving the glory days of the Yiddish Theater through these performances has been the affectionate audience responses: "Audiences have included former actors and musicians of the Yiddish Theater, as well as the children and grandchildren of my grandparents' contemporaries whose own memories and stories have been unlocked at these live performances. It has been touching for me to hear, from the laughter and the response from the live audiences, an echo of their own experiences. And perhaps most meaningful to me was to see the many young faces who were obviously finding a world that had meaning for them. This is a story of immigration and assimilation, something to which everyone can relate."

Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, immigrants from the Kiev province of the Ukraine, became two of Yiddish Theater's biggest stars, dominating center stage not only as performers but also as entrepreneurs who drew countless authors, composers, actors, musicians, producers and designers into their creative circle. Through musical comedy and drama, they created a repertoire of new works based on the experiences of immigrant Jews in America. This repertoire was first performed in the theater houses of New York City's Lower East Side between 1892 and 1927--including Thomashefsky's People's Theatre on the Bowery and Thomashefsky's National Theatre on Houston Street and Second Avenue--greatly influencing American popular culture. The Thomashefsky name even became an idiom of the day. If you were doing something dramatic or over-the-top, someone might say: "Look at him, he's a real Thomashefsky!" Their plays also addressed social issues. Those produced by Bessie Thomashefsky when she became manager of People's Theatre in 1915 were often about women's rights. Her wildly popular wise-cracking-in-the-know characters have had a lasting impact on generations of comediennes.

As a living link to the Thomashefsky legacy, Mr. Tilson Thomas's personal recollections were drawn from the many hours spent with his grandmother Bessie up until her death when he was 17, his father Ted Thomas, and Uncle Harry Thomashefsky, absorbing the stories and

humor of the Yiddish Theater in its heyday. (Boris Thomashefsky died in 1939, before Michael Tilson Thomas was born.)

“My grandparents became mega-stars and found themselves smack in the public eye,” says Mr. Tilson Thomas. “They were subject to adulation and relentless scrutiny. Legions of crazed fans were obsessed with every detail of their work and their lives.”

*The Thomashefskys: Music & Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater* was created in association with The Thomashefsky Project, which was founded by Mr. Tilson Thomas in 1998 to rescue and preserve the story of the Thomashefskys. Under executive director Linda Steinberg, Director of Education at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, the Project has worked with archives worldwide uncovering scripts, scores, memoirs, letters, essays, photographs, posters, and playbills about the lives and works of Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky.

The national PBS *Great Performances* broadcast on Thursday, March 29 at 8:00PM (check local listings) is produced by THIRTEEN for WNET, one of America’s most prolific and respected public media providers, and by The Thomashefsky Film Project LLC. *The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater* will be released on DVD and digital platforms by New Video in the U.S. on April 24 with international release to follow. The DVD will feature extras including additional music performances, an interview with MTT about the Thomashefskys and a feature on the New World Symphony, America’s Orchestral Academy ([www.nws.edu](http://www.nws.edu)). The New World Symphony was founded in 1987 by Michael Tilson Thomas and Ted Arison, and has launched the careers of over 800 musicians. Pre-orders for the DVD are currently being accepted at Amazon.com and will be shipped immediately following the April 24 release date. The DVD will also be available from the New World Symphony and San Francisco Symphony web site stores.

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High resolution production photos are available to download from <http://www.thomashefsky.org/productionphotos.html> and archival photos from <http://www.thomashefsky.org/archivalphotos.html>

For more information, interview requests or to request a review copy of *The Thomashefskys: Music & Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater*, please contact: Shuman Associates, Inc, [shumanpr@shumanassociates.net](mailto:shumanpr@shumanassociates.net), (212) 315-1300.

## About the Performers

**Michael Tilson Thomas** (Conductor and Narrator), the Grandson of Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky, is Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony, Artistic Director of the New World Symphony and Principal Guest Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra.

A Los Angeles native, Mr. Tilson Thomas began his formal music studies at the University of Southern California, where he studied piano with John Crown and conducting and composition with Ingolf Dahl. During this same period he was pianist and conductor for Gregor Piatigorsky and Jascha Heifetz.

In 1969 Mr. Tilson Thomas was appointed Assistant Conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. That year he also made his New York debut with the Boston Symphony and gained international recognition after replacing Music Director William Steinberg in mid-concert. He was Music Director of the Buffalo Philharmonic from 1971 to 1979, a Principal Guest Conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic from 1981 to 1985, and Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra from 1987 to 1995. In 1995, he assumed his current post as the San Francisco Symphony's Music Director. His guest conducting includes appearances with the major orchestras of Europe and the United States.

In 1987 he created the New World Symphony, a post graduate orchestral academy based in Miami Beach. Over 800 graduates of the academy are now in musical leadership positions internationally.

His television credits include a series with the London Symphony Orchestra for BBC Television and the television broadcasts of the New York Philharmonic Young People's Concerts from 1971 to 1977. With the San Francisco Symphony he has produced *Keeping Score*, which includes television, web sites, radio programs and programs in schools. In April 2009 he conducted the YouTube Symphony Orchestra in Carnegie Hall and in 2011 in Sydney Australia, which was watched by 33,000,000 people online.

Mr. Tilson Thomas is a Chevalier des Arts et Lettres and has won ten Grammys for his recordings and a Peabody Award for his radio series *The MTT Files*. In 2010 he was awarded the National Medal of Arts.

**Judy Blazer** (Bessie Thomashefsky) began her career as a young singer in opera, oratorio, and recital in New York City and throughout Italy. She moved into Broadway theatre with leading roles in *Me and My Girl* (Sally), *A Change in the Heir* (Prince Conrad), *Titanic* (Lady Caroline) and Neil Simon's *45 Seconds from Broadway* (Cindy), and was featured in *LoveMusik*, directed by Harold Prince.

Off-Broadway, she was featured in *Candide* (the Old Lady), *The House of Bernarda Alba* (LTC) and *Sweeney Todd* (the Beggar Woman) with New York City Opera, *The Torch Bearers* (Florence) with The Drama Dept., Lincoln Center's *Hello Again*, (Drama Desk nomination), The Roundabout's *Hurrah at Last* by Richard Greenberg and the New York City Center Encores production of *Connecticut Yankee* (Alice/Sandy). She most recently performed a solo piece at Primary Stage's Inner Voices: *Whida Peru; Resurrection Tangle* by David Simpatico and Josh Schmidt, directed by Jonathan Butterell.

Ms. Blazer has sung at the Metropolitan Opera as a soloist in Twyla Tharp's *Everlast* with American Ballet Theatre, and she has performed in concert at Lincoln Center and at Joe's Pub at the Public Theater. She has been a guest on the recordings of Mandy Patinkin and Nadja Salerno-Sonnenberg, as well as a featured artist on over 20 recordings of varied genres.

Ms. Blazer has been seen on television in *Law and Order* (as Defense Attorney Simon and as Clara Porazzi, convicted murderer), *As the World Turns* (Ariel), *Guiding Light* (Marissa), and as a featured artist on two PBS specials: Bernstein's New York and In Performance at the White House. Regionally, she has just completed a run of *Giant* (Luz) at the Signature Theatre. She played the title roles in *Funny Girl* at Sundance Theater, *The Miracle Worker* at George Street Playhouse, *My Fair Lady* at the Paper Mill Playhouse and the 5th Avenue Theatre in Seattle, *Peter Pan* at Artpark, and *The Night Governess* at McCarter Theatre. She has appeared as Maria in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* at the Long Wharf Theatre and Lily Garland in *On the 20th Century* with the American Musical Theatre of San Jose.

A graduate of the Manhattan School of Music from which she received a Distinguished Alumni Award, Ms. Blazer has been on the voice faculty of New York University and is a guest teacher in colleges throughout the United States and major cities around the world. She is also the Founder and Artistic Director of the Artist's Crossing Theatre Company and School.

**Shuler Hensley** (Boris Thomashefsky) who wowed Broadway and London audiences as Jud Fry in the internationally acclaimed revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!*, recently starred on Broadway as "The Monster," in Mel Brooks' musical, *Young Frankenstein*, and in the World Premiere of *Paradise Found*, directed by Harold Prince and Susan Stroman.

Mr. Hensley garnered the coveted Tony, Drama Desk, Outer Critics Circle, Olivier, and Theatre World Awards for his showstopping—and show-stealing—portrayal of tormented farmhand Jud Fry in the groundbreaking revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* He went on to make his critically acclaimed Broadway debut as Javert in the long-running musical *Les Misérables*. He also co-starred as Kerchak, head of the Gorilla Tribe, in Disney's *Tarzan* and starred Off-Broadway in *The Great American Trailer Park Musical*.

Mr. Hensley brought his titanic talent to the silver screen in May 2004 with the release of Universal Pictures' epic action-adventure film *Van Helsing*, in which he portrayed the fabled monster created by author Mary Shelley's fictional Dr. Frankenstein. Mr. Hensley was also seen in the feature film *The Legend of Zorro* starring Antonio Banderas and Catherine Zeta-Jones. Other film projects include *Opa!* with Matthew Modine, shot on-location in Greece and the independent feature, *Cheer the Brave*.

Throughout his eclectic career, Mr. Hensley has also appeared as a guest soloist in numerous concerts including The Happy End by Kurt Weill at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, The American Songbook Tribute to Frank Loesser at Lincoln Center, Regina, with Patti LuPone at the Kennedy Center and the premiere of The Thomashefsky Project, conducted by Michael Tilson Thomas.

Mr. Hensley's television appearances include the recurring role of Bob Arnovitz on NBC's *Ed*, the TNT movie *Monday Night Mayhem*, as well as appearances on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. His film credits include the romantic comedy *Someone Like You* and the multi-award-winning independent film *The Bread, My Sweet*.

A Marietta, Georgia native, he made his performance debut at the age of four in a production of *The Nutcracker* directed by his mother. At age nine, he became a member of The Atlanta Boys' Choir. His father, an All-American football star, influenced his passion for sports and he attended the University of Georgia on a baseball scholarship while majoring in business and performing in the school's choral programs. He studied opera at the Manhattan School of Music and attended graduate school at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music, performing leading roles in *Don Giovanni*, *La Bohème* and *The Magic Flute*. He recently returned to Curtis as a Guest Artist to perform the demanding title role in Berg's *Wozzeck*.

Mr. Hensley resides in New York City and Atlanta with his wife Paula and their children, Skyler and Grayson.

**Ronit Widmann-Levy** (Various roles including Mme. Krantzfeld and Sophie Karp, co-star of Alexander, Crown Prince of Jerusalem) has received accolades for her operatic and concert performances throughout the world. A versatile artist equally at home on both concert and opera stages, she has sung in opera houses and festivals in San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, Cincinnati, Kentucky, Berlin, Munich, London, Bangkok and Jerusalem. She sang at the Ravinia Festival in Chicago, Bath and Dartington Festivals in England, Jüdische Kulturstage in Berlin, and America Haus Concert Series in Munich. Ms. Widmann-Levy made her debut with the San Francisco Symphony in February 2005 in Schumann's *Das Paradies und die Peri*, conducted by Ingo Metzmacher. She has regularly performed with Michael Tilson Thomas and the San Francisco Symphony in Carnegie Hall, with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and with the New World Symphony. Ms. Widmann-Levy's interpretation of Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire* has won praise and she has been invited to perform the piece in Europe and the United States. Her repertory includes the roles of Violetta, Constanza, Madame Butterfly, Micaela, Mimi, Liù, Gilda and Freia. Symphonic works include, among others, Carmina burana, Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and the Second and Fourth symphonies of Mahler. She is renowned for her interpretation of Ladino Romance and in the fall of 2005 she embarked on a world concert tour of her CD *Como la Rosa*.

Critics have consistently praised Ms. Widmann-Levy's singing, writing that her "naturally extensive range shows fine-spun altitudes" (Washington Times). Of her performance as Micaela, *The Eugene Register-Guard* wrote: "One of the most impressive artists was Ronit Widmann-Levy playing...Micaela, the sweet innocent country girl...Widmann-Levy, made her two arias memorable. Her voice has a weighty tone, and she uses it with solid technique." Bill Glackin of the Sacramento Bee wrote of her performance of the last scene from *Capriccio* by Richard Strauss: "she is a singer of compelling conviction and warmth as well as unusual personal beauty."

**Eugene Brancoveanu** (Various roles including Young Boris Thomashefsky and Leon Blank, co-star of The Green Millionaire) Eugene Brancoveanu's virile voice and superior stagecraft have earned him critical acclaim in both North America and Europe. Following recent performances of San Francisco Opera's *The Little Prince*, the *San Francisco Chronicle* lauds the superb cast as being "led by extravagantly gifted baritone Eugene Brancoveanu as the Pilot. With his unforced charisma, vocal clarity, and total

heft, Mr. Brancoveanu managed the tricky feat of doing most of the show's heavy lifting..."

He held a prestigious appointment as an Adler Fellow at San Francisco Opera for two seasons, directly following his critically acclaimed summer 2004 performances of Tarquinius in *The Rape of Lucretia* with the company's Merola Opera Program. With San Francisco Opera he has performed Christian in *A Masked Ball*, Marullo in *Rigoletto*, Moralès in *Carmen*, Frank in *Die Fledermaus*, Fiorello in *The Barber of Seville*, the Innkeeper and the Captain in *Manon Lescaut*, Belcore in *The Elixir of Love* and The Pilot in Portman's *The Little Prince*.

Mr. Brancoveanu sang Karnak in Lalo's *Le Roi d'ys* with the American Symphony Orchestra; Boris in Shostakovich's *Moskau, Tscherkomuschki* at Staatstheater Stuttgart; Count in *The Marriage of Figaro* with Livermore Valley Opera; as soloist in Elijah with University of California/Davis; and in *Carmina burana* with Peninsula Symphony Orchestra. He has performed *The Thomashefskys* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Boston Symphony at Tanglewood, San Francisco Symphony and New World Symphony. Other recent highlights include his New York City Opera debut as Pandolfe in *Cendrillon*, soloist in Brahms' *A German Requiem* with the Alabama Symphony Orchestra, and in a concert of Bernstein repertoire with the Pacific Symphony Orchestra.

Originating the role of Marcello in Baz Luhrmann's Broadway production of *La Bohème*, the honorary Tony Award winner is also a recipient of a 2004 LA Stage Alliance Ovation Award for his performances of this production in Los Angeles. Other career highlights include performing the role of Nicomedes in the rarely heard Lou Harrison opera, *Young Caesar*, for Ensemble Parallèle; a recital as part of the prestigious Schwabacher Debut Recital Series; the title role in *The Marriage of Figaro* with the International Music Festival in Gut-Immlings, Germany; and the title role in Philip Glass' *Orphée* with the Universität Mozarteum Salzburg. Mr. Brancoveanu's numerous performances with the Romanian State Opera include the Count in *The Marriage of Figaro*, the title role in *Don Giovanni*, Silvio in *I Pagliacci*, Figaro in *The Barber of Seville*, Escamillo in *Carmen*, and Uberto in *La serva padrona*.

Mr. Brancoveanu is a graduate of the American Institute of Musical Studies in Graz and the Universität Mozarteum Salzburg. He is also a recent winner of the National Young Opera Singer Competition in Leipzig, International Music Award in Loenberg, and International Opera contest "Ferruccio Tagliavini."

[www.thomashefsky.org](http://www.thomashefsky.org)