

# My Yiddishe Cabaret

*Folksbiene Cabaret Gala brings Yiddish alive as it honors past and present*

By JUDITH FRIEDMAN ROSEN

When Jeff Wiesenfeld and Zalmen Mlotek asked me to join the National Yiddish Theatre – Folksbiene some years ago, I

## FIRST PERSON

never believed that one day I would roll up my sleeves and actually run the most amazing fundraiser ever. Is that presumptuous? Well, since I attend tens of fundraisers and galas per year, I know I am on the mark. And the fact that the Cabaret Gala graced the society page of *The Wall Street Journal* is further confirmation.

What does an American-born woman of German Jewish descent, on both sides, have to do with the Yiddish stage? The answer is simple: I love the glitter, the lights and the face paint of the theater. But, most important, the Folksbiene brings the great Jewish literature and theater of our European and early 20th century American past to life. For many in our community, the Yiddish language, Yiddish literature and the theater are the very criteria that define their Judaism. The work of Itzhak Leyb Peretz, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Sholem Aleichem, Mendele Mocher Seforim, Ephraim Kishon

(Hebrew translated to Yiddish) and so many others are brought to us on stage in living color with a new generation of beautiful, enthusiastic and talented young performers. Hershele Ostropolyer, the Jewish “Robin Hood,” starring the indomitable Mike Burstyn and directed by Eleanor Riessa, arrived on the Folksbiene stage to A+ reviews by the major critics of the New York stage.

In the spring of 2010, a cross-generational audience met the cunning Hershele for the very first time. Personally, my most rewarding delight is to bring my little grandchildren to enjoy Kids ‘N’ Yiddish, to watch them enjoy the very same Folksbiene that their paternal great grandparents



Photos: Lindsay Akman/Michael Priest Photography

Author Rosen (right), who chaired the Folksbiene Cabaret Gala, pictured with the evening’s honorees (l-r): Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel; Marion Wiesel; and Ambassador Ronald Lauder, president, World Jewish Congress.

because I knew that fundraising is the lifeline to our wonderful Yiddish, Jewish theater and this

Wiesel. The date was perfect for a wonderful event celebrating the eighth night of Hanukkah. This was confirmed by Ronald Lauder, also an honoree. But then ... a real life drama occurred. Ambassador Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, was scheduled to meet Pope Benedict XVI that day! Thankfully, Lauder postponed the meeting with the Pope and met with him the very next day.

Celebrating Hanukkah in Yiddish at the Folksbiene is not an easy task. We had to decide how to announce our event. Would the invitations be just in English or in Yiddish and English? How much Yiddish should be on the invitation? And, most important, how should one transliterate the word *Hanukkah* from Yiddish to English? We actually had a debate in the office as to how to spell it. In “Standard Yiddish” *Hanukkah* is clearly Kha’ NIKE. I chose to use the spelling *Chanuke* recommended by Zalmen because it looks most familiar to the eye.

We chose the classical Bohemian National Hall (BNH) of Manhattan as our venue because it is refreshingly different, elegant and has a lovely stage. The legendary BNH was built in 1896 as center for Czech and Slovak culture. This jewel on East 73 Street was designed in the Renaissance Revival style, a palazzo built of light brick and limestone. Having recently undergone an extensive renovation, it is a rare survivor of the social halls built in the 19th century for New York City’s immigrant ethnic communities and now houses the Czech Republic’s Consulate. How apropos for a theater four years shy of its 100th

birthday.

After signing the contract I wondered, will it be too big, will I be able to fill the hall? My fears, however, soon changed. Not only would we fill the hall, but we had so many illustrious attendees I was afraid we would not have room for them all. Guests were coming to honor the Wiesels and Ron Lauder, or because they heard of the exquisite talent of our guest stars Magda Fishman, Elmore James and Tony Perry who were featured at the Westhampton Folksbiene concert last summer, or just to support the theater. We had a packed house with celebrities from the Jewish world including: Leo Melamed, former chairman of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, described as one of the most influential men in Chicago; noted architect Daniel Libeskind and his wife, Nina, of Libeskind Studio; Ernie Michel, renowned Holocaust survivor, communal leader and former Folksbiene honoree; Paul Bernstein of Alliance/Bernstein; and former Folksbiene honoree Bryna Wasserman, director of the Segal Yiddish Theater of Montreal among others.

After the candle lighting by the world-renowned Cantor Josef Malovaney of the Fifth Avenue Synagogue, the show began. It was every bit as powerful, emotional, exciting and inspirational as promised. Zalmen Mlotek wove a beautiful program of remembering the Holocaust and human struggle with hope and the miracle of Hanukkah. Beginning with “O, Ir Kleyne Likhtekeh” through the song of the Cracow Ghetto, the Folksbiene ensemble was energetic, inviting and sensitive.

The stars were intoxicating. Singer-songwriter Tony Perry was electric as he sang the Yiddish Ellis Island song inspired by the words of Emma Lazarus on the Statue of Liberty and Cab Calloway’s “Ot Azoy.” The rich voice of international vocal soloist and cantorial student Magda Fishman, singing “Oyfn Pripetchik” and her accompani-

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and great, great grandparents enjoyed decades ago.

So, when Zalmen, the theater’s artistic director, asked me to run the theater’s Fifth Annual Cabaret Gala, I could not say “no”

fundraising celebration would propel us through our 96th consecutive season.

We set the event for Dec. 8, according to the schedule of our honorees, Marion and Elie

## Spring into Folksbiene



Renowned conductor and performer Michael Tilson Thomas (left) will be honored by the Folksbiene at a special performance in Avery Fisher Hall.

Mike Burstyn (right) will play the lead role of the Jewish Robin Hood in “The Adventures of Hershele Ostropolyer,” at the Baruch Performing Arts Center.



The National Yiddish Theatre – Folksbiene has a varied selection of offerings this spring.

“The Adventures of Hershele Ostropolyer,” a musical adaptation of the Yiddish classic. The play, a hit during Folksbiene’s 2009-2010 season, returns for an encore engagement starring Mike Burstyn as the Jewish Robin Hood.

Directed, adapted and choreographed by the Tony Award-nominated Eleanor Riessa, with musical direction by Zalmen Mlotek, Folksbiene artistic director, this family-friendly hit will be performed with English supertitles at The Baruch Performing Arts Center, 55 Lexington Avenue, Manhattan, from May 15-June 26. Michael Tilson Thomas, music director of the San

Francisco Symphony and founder and artistic director of the New World Symphony, will be honored by the Folksbiene on April 6. The New York Philharmonic, which Thomas will conduct that evening, will perform “The Thomashefskys: Music and Memories of a Life in Yiddish Theater.”

Thomas will be celebrated at a gala reception prior to the show that evening at Lincoln Center’s Avery Fisher Hall.

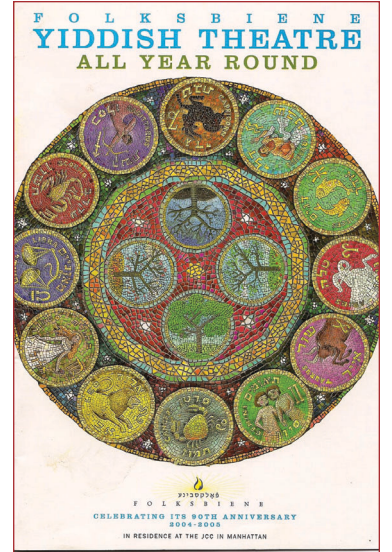
The reception takes place from 6 p.m.-7 p.m.; the show begins at 7:30 p.m. Tickets cost \$75-\$500; special packages with reception are available.

For details on both performances, or to purchase tickets, call 866.811.4111 or visit [www.folksbiene.org](http://www.folksbiene.org).

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*(Left): Folksbiene top echelon, honorees and performers. Pictured are (l-r) Zalmen Mlotek, artistic director; Beatrice Malovany; Cantor Joseph Malovany; Elie Wiesel; Simon Bergson; Jeff Wiesenfeld, chairman of the board; Judith Rosen, dinner chair; and Mark Mlotek, president. (Right): Commemorative poster from the Folksbiene's 90th anniversary. (Below): Gala honorees (l-r) Elie and Marion Wiesel and Ronald Lauder. (Below, left): Honorees Elie and Marion Wiesel (r) share a moment with friends Daniel and Nina Libeskind (left).*



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watched the guests watching the performers. There was intensity and delight in the eyes of our honored guests — Elie, Marion and Ron — and our award presenters, CUNY Chancellor Matthew Goldstein and Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations.

When Marion and Elie got up



*(Above): Friends Fanya Gottesman Heller (left) and Marion Wiesel thoroughly enjoyed the gala including performances by Tony Perry (right), Magda Fishman (center) and opera singer Elmore James (far right).*



*(Above): Representing an appreciation for Yiddish theater in the next generation, a young Sarah Mlotek (left) and Maxine Wiesenfeld performed "My Yiddische Mame."*

ment on the trumpet floored the audience. Then, my favorite performer, Elmore James, who impressed me when he was the son of the African American caretaker in Folksbiene's performance of "Spiel, Spiel, Spiel," sang "Keyser Tey" ("What the Czar Did"). These were followed by the sweet voices of young Maxine Wiesenfeld and Sarah Mlotek, singing "My Yiddische Mame."

I looked around the hall and

to accept the award, Elie thanked the Folksbiene for the beautiful show, saying, "This is our Hanukkah gift." And how right he was.

For me, the countless hours of work over the previous four months were a labor of love — in thanks — for the world of Yiddish song and literature that has been opened to us all.

*Judith Friedman Rosen is a historian and Jewish communal leader.*

*(Below): Honoree Ronald Lauder (left) is congratulated by Jerome Wm. Lippman, publisher and editor-in-chief of this newspaper.*



*The evening's honorees with their esteemed presenters. Pictured are (l-r): Dr. Matthew Goldstein, chancellor, City University of New York (CUNY), presenter; Ronald Lauder, honoree; Elie Wiesel, honoree; and Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice president, Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, presenter.*