

TOMMY

The Amazing Journey

by Gerard Raymond

Tommy may be deaf, dumb and blind, but he sure bears a charmed life. The rock and roll song cycle about an autistic kid whose wizardry at pinball rockets him to superstardom began life as a record album 25 years ago. It cemented the reputation of the four-member British band, The Who, in America. Dubbed a “rock-opera” by its composer and lyricist, Pete Townshend, *Tommy* played in several European opera-houses and New York’s Metropolitan Opera after several sell-out concert tours in England and in America. The work was subsequently turned into a ballet by Les Grand Ballet Canadiens and a flamboyant film by British director Ken Russell. Now, it’s a stage musical; *The Who’s Tommy* is a sensation on Broadway and is currently touring through the United States. According to Townshend, this version of *Tommy* finally “closes the loop” on the story he introduced to the world in 1969.

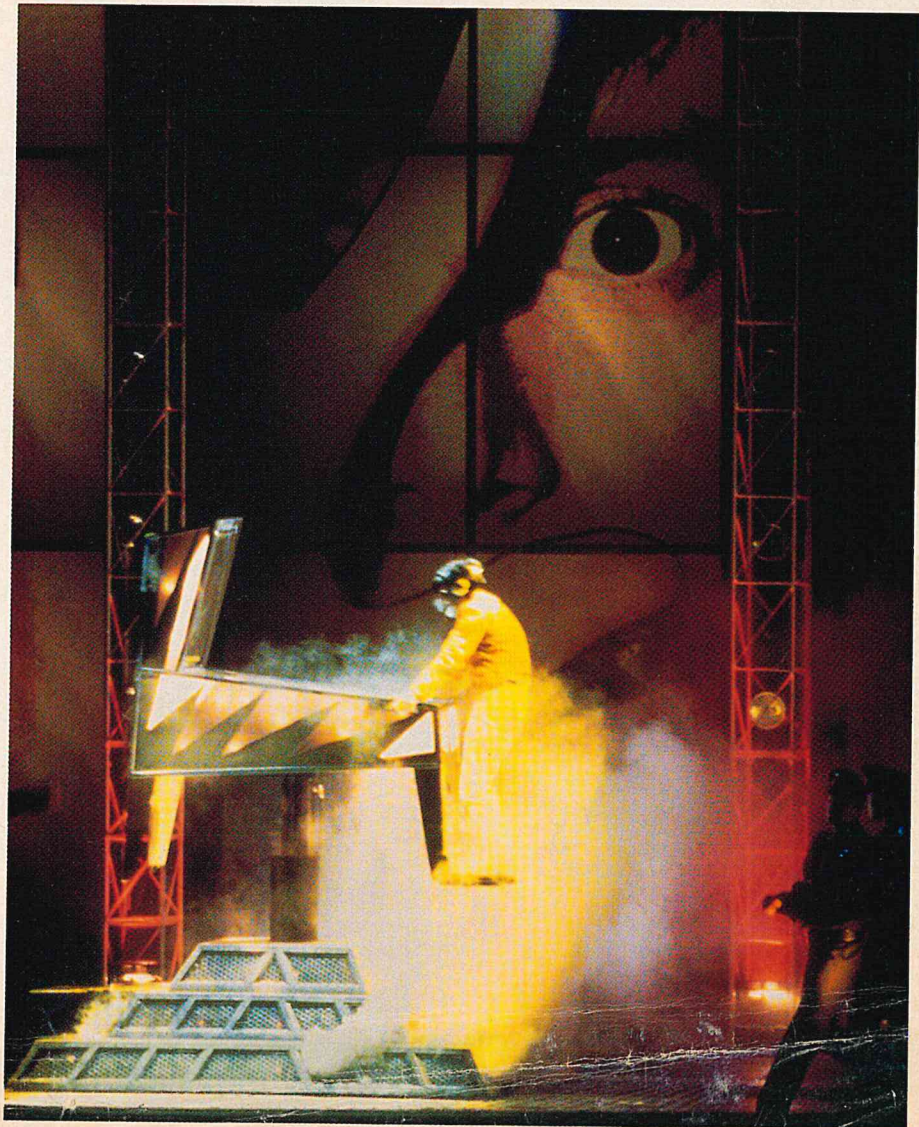
The current incarnation of *Tommy* was born three years ago; PACE Theatrical Group and Dodger Productions asked Des McAnuff, artistic director of San Diego’s La Jolla Playhouse, to mount *Tommy* for the stage. McAnuff, who has directed both Shakespeare and contemporary plays was an appropriate choice. He is a composer himself, and he has staged several musicals in collaboration with pop musicians — he worked with The Kink’s Ray Davies on the musical version of *Around the World in 80 Days* at La Jolla, and with Roger Miller on *Big River*, the Tony award-winning Broadway musical version of *Huckleberry Finn*.

“I didn’t want to do another unofficial version of *Tommy*,” recalls McAnuff, saying he accepted the project on the condition that Pete Townshend would get involved. (The Who had disbanded in 1982; their original drummer Keith Moon had died of a drug overdose in 1978. The band performed *Tommy* for the last time on a 25th anniversary reunion tour in

1989 which climaxed in stagings of the rock-opera in New York and Los Angeles.) “It seemed to me that we would definitely have to make some adjustments to the original, and I wanted Pete to take some responsibility for that,” McAnuff explains.

Although there had been several stage productions of *Tommy* (without Townshend’s participation), McAnuff believed

that the rock-opera had never been successfully translated into a stage piece. For one thing, he says, the songs on the album are connected very tenuously and there is no narrative structure. Extremely popular numbers like “Pinball Wizard” and “Acid Queen” are barely integrated into the story. “On the concert album the gaps in the narrative and the ambiguities are not



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The Tommy Company

a disadvantage, you take hallucinogenic drugs and your imagination fills all the gaps," says McAnuff smiling.

On his first meeting with Townshend, McAnuff succeeded in getting the composer committed to the project, and as it turned out, to a far greater extent than the director had imagined; Townshend eventually composed a new song ("I Believe My Own Eyes") for *Tommy*. McAnuff says he had a hunch that original double LP didn't reflect Townshend's intentions for the song order. "I loved the album, but it was like looking at a great picture through a dirty window," he recalls. Townshend confirmed that it was the record company that had arranged the order of the songs, solely to ensure that they fit conveniently on each side of the album. One of McAnuff and Townshend's first tasks was to rearrange some of the songs to create a structure for the show.

McAnuff also postulated that Tommy's experiences were linked to Townshend's own autobiography, although the part had always been performed (even in the Ken Russell film) by the band's lead singer, Roger Daltrey. When McAnuff discovered that a lot of material was "deeply personal" to Townshend, he found a key to adapting *Tommy* for the stage. "The way to opening it up was to explore [the story] on a more personal level, and then advance it, take it further." McAnuff believes that Townshend had only recently begun to reflect on the autobiographical nature of the work, and Townshend himself said later that he had finally begun to understand "why the story is." This current incarnation of *Tommy*, Townshend claimed in a recent interview, has "completely changed my work and life."

Sometime during previews at La Jolla

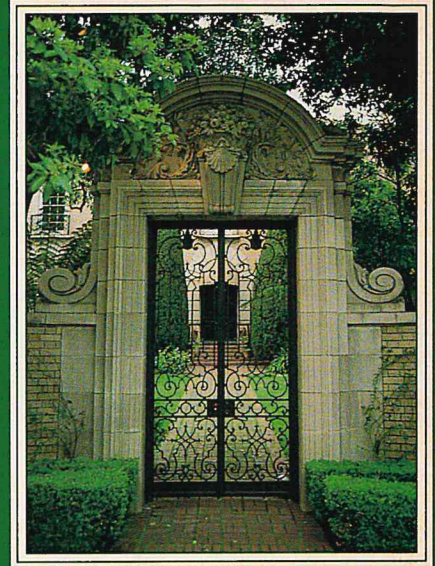
Playhouse, where *The Who's Tommy* premiered in May 1992 prior to its Broadway opening, McAnuff had an epiphany. "*Tommy* is really about the story of rock and roll," he declares. In the musical's second-act show-stopper, superstar Tommy rides in on a turreted pinball machine, which he plays demoniacally until it explodes. The pinball machine is essentially the electric guitar, says McAnuff explaining that for him, Tommy blowing up the pinball machine is equivalent to Townshend smashing his Stratocaster guitar, the composer's signature gesture in the days of The Who.

For McAnuff, relating the story to Townshend meant that *Tommy* could be grounded within a time frame which spanned twenty-three years — from 1940 to 1963. And despite Townshend's misgivings about the musical's ability "to dance," McAnuff decided to indicate the progress of time through period dances which are choreographed by Wayne Cilento. Thus, in *Tommy* the musical, a chorus of young men move from jitterbugging through to rock and roll. McAnuff calls them The Louts and they portray, among other things, the adolescent Tommy's tormentors and later, superstar Tommy's security guards. Cilento choreographed the "Pinball Wizard" musical number using Elvis Presley's "Jailhouse Rock" as a reference; other numbers call to mind the early movies of the Beatles.

To make dramatic sense out of the songs, McAnuff created three Tommys for his production. The adult Tommy serves as the narrator, and is a spiritual guide to the traumatized four-year-old Tommy (the kid becomes autistic after he witnesses his father murdering his mother's lover). The disabled child spends most of his time

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staring into the mirror; he sees his adult self on the other side. "I'll be your leader; I'll be your guide. On the amazing journey, together we'll ride," beckons the elder Tommy. Later in the act, McAnuff introduces a ten-year-old Tommy, who undergoes a series of useless treatments from various doctors and suffers a series of abuses at the hands of his relatives.

"The major conflict in the piece is between Tommy and Tommy," explains McAnuff. "This is [what is] moving about communicating with this deaf and dumb and blind child." Using the multiple Tommy concept, McAnuff incorporates the trendy nineties philosophy of embracing one's inner child as well. In the finale, the adult Tommy (who has returned home after rejecting his superstardom) almost reverts to his childhood traumatized state, but the sight of the younger Tommys in the mirror gives him the strength to lead a normal life.

Although he had to flesh out a narrative and bring coherence to the songs on the record album, McAnuff eschewed a conventional book, opting instead for a narrative throughline created by the musical's designers. The result is a nonstop barrage of visual effects which prompted one critic to dub the production "theater as MTV." The show's *tour de force* is the prologue set in 1940, which charts Tommy's father, Captain Walker's romance, marriage and mobilization with music and images, and almost no words. The prologue ends in a breathtaking *coup-de-theatre* in which Walker parachutes down into enemy territory.

A major part of *The Who's Tommy's* visual effects are projections created by Wendall K. Harrington. Unlike scenery which is designed to give an impression of permanence, Harrington says her slide projections are meant to be ephemeral — fast but leaving a deep impression. She describes it as a "glancing blow," whose impact is realized only after it has gone. Harrington says she selected isolated, often bizarre images to try and give a sense of what might filter through an autistic child's mind. When the ten-year-old Tommy is taken to an optometrist, huge eye charts are projected onto the back of the stage. No previous Broadway show has relied so heavily on projections for story-telling; *The Who's Tommy* uses as many as 2000 slides each night to create its striking imagery.

Harrington also explains that the production's color scheme was carefully designed to reflect the interior state of the



Robert Mann Kayser and William Yaumans

young Tommy. Up until the moment when Tommy is stricken, the colors of the set are muted, with the furniture predominantly white. The moment he is terrorized into staying silent about the murder he witnesses, the colors suddenly go into hyperdrive. "No color is realistic after Tommy has his trauma," says Harrington. While the house remains drained of color, everything that goes on outside of it is color saturated. "The colors are assaultive; there is nowhere to hide but in that mirror," Harrington comments. An intense yellow color, which the designers referred to as trauma yellow provides the background for the posters and artwork for the show.

With the huge success of *The Who's Tommy* (the show won 5 Tony awards last year), you'll be seeing a lot of that trademark yellow logo. Even the stately St. James, the Broadway theater which houses the hit show, has recently been painted over with a matching coat of yellow paint. The six million dollar production shows every indication of turning a profit and, in addition to the current national tour, plans are in the works for overseas clones of the production starting with one in Canada in the fall and a German language production in 1995.

It took over two decades for *Tommy* to arrive on Broadway, what impact will this production have on musicals to come? Some critics who greeted this marriage of rock and roll and the musical theater tradition with rhapsodic praise, have suggested that *The Who's Tommy* will revolutionize the art form in the same way *Oklahoma!* did, at incidentally the very same St. James Theater, half a century

earlier. Des McAnuff argues that his productions comes directly out of the musical theater tradition, and that in the intervening years stagecraft has "caught up with the particular demands of electronic music." One of the reasons why contemporary musicals "run the risk of becoming dinosaurs," he elaborates, "is because they don't pay enough attention to popular songwriting."

But there are those who belong to the rock camp who dismiss the Broadway incarnation of *Tommy* as rock and roll "lite", complaining that the generation which first rocked to The Who's music has just grown old. There are also accusations that Townshend, who is in his late 40s, and McAnuff, in his early 40s, have softened the material for the nineties. Unlike the apocalyptic ending envisaged by the Ken Russell film, and indeed the anarchy celebrated by fans who heard the album when it first came out, the Broadway *Tommy* ends with Tommy embracing his family.

"I hope there has been a maturation of Townshend and me too," says McAnuff in response to their critics. "The original album seems to me to be about a character reaching a point of spiritual and, I think, social enlightenment, and that is the story we are telling in the theater." Quoting Townshend, McAnuff adds, "rock and roll needs the theater as much as the theater needs rock and roll, if it is to live on and grow." □

Gerard Raymond is a freelance writer who lives in New York City. He writes frequently on theater and film.

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