

***The Pinball Wizard is alive and well at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina***



I left the Arts Center's new production of "The Who's Tommy" feeling moved, inspired, and... confused. Moved, because the final number, "Listening To You," is seriously, over-the-moon transcendent. Inspired, because I'm always inspired by terrific performers pouring themselves out with abandon. Confused, because the ending doesn't make much sense. You walk away knowing you've been through something, but you're not sure *what*. Some kind of catharsis has occurred, but its meaning is too vague to process. Is it the play that's dense, or you?

As I discussed these questions with my husband on the drive home – running through the show's more obvious metaphors, searching for its deeper philosophical implications – he laughed and said, "Margaret, it's a rock opera. A *rock opera*. You're looking for Shakespeare in the work of Pete Townshend." This, from a man who loves The Bard

*and*

The Who, but who keeps things in their proper perspective. (Why do you think I married him?)

Jeff had his own hurdles to clear with this production... which is technically a rock "musical" *based*

on a rock opera. As a longtime rock aficionado, but not really a show tunes guy, he had a hard time hearing the rough, jagged power of The Who's original music buffed and polished for polite company. And this aesthetic conflict (which I didn't share) relates, I think, to the point I was circling above. "Tommy" isn't quite sure what it wants to be; much like its titular hero, the show has a fractured personality.

This review from the *New York Times*, published shortly after "Tommy" hit Broadway in 1993, sheds some light.

Music critic Jon Pareles writes:

*“Consciously or not, the original ‘Tommy’ must have been Mr. Townshend’s reaction to his own celebrity and the way it interlocked with the bewildering late-1960’s combination of newfound independence and longing for direction...*

*“On Broadway, ‘Tommy’ seeks neither spiritual fulfillment nor political ferment; the revised goal is domestic comfort. The cult-leader references have been excised: no ‘disciples’ in ‘Pinball Wizard,’ no ‘messiahs pointed to the door’ in ‘I’m Free.’ Nearly every scene has some reminder of homey bliss in it; there’s a suspended chair, or the doorway to a house, or a family gathering. The furniture hangs over the show because now, in ‘I’m Free,’ Tommy sings a new line that proves the 1990’s are the 1960’s upside-down: ‘Freedom lies here in normality.’ (Normality wasn’t a big goal in the 1960’s.)”*

So, “The Who’s Tommy” took a 1960’s vision and retooled it for a 1990’s sensibility. From where I sit in 2010, it doesn’t quite work. Not on an intellectual level, anyway.

But on a visceral level? Well, here comes the good part of my review. The Arts Center’s “Tommy” is a very compelling night of theatre. Anything that’s wrong with the show is inherent to the show itself (or, possibly, all in my head) and says nothing about the caliber of this exciting, highly entertaining production helmed by director Russell Garrett and musical director John Bell.

A brief synopsis from the playbill: “The plot revolves around a young boy whose life is forever altered and defined by a terrible act of violence. Tommy Walker’s mother, believing her husband has been killed in World War II, becomes involved with another man. When Capt. Walker returns home to find the couple embracing, he becomes enraged, and accidentally kills the lover. Tommy, who witnesses the murder in the reflection of a mirror, is so traumatized, he loses the ability to hear, speak or see.”

Like most folks, I knew this basic setup – along with the fact that the “deaf, dumb and blind kid” eventually becomes a “pinball wizard” – before going into the show. What I *didn’t* know about was all the stuff that happens to Tommy in the interim... stuff that, for my money, seems every

bit as “traumatizing” as that initial “trauma.” It’s a sinister world the boy inhabits – effectively realized by set designer Terry Cermak – with a serious shortage of virtuous grown-ups. Pedophiles, pimps, junkies and sadists are just a few of the unsavory characters who cross paths with young Master Walker.

Four local children are alternating in the roles of Tommy at ages 4 and 10 (Rachel Valvo, Delaney Yurco, Whitaker Gannon, and Jarod Valvo), and I’m not sure which two I saw. They were both fantastic! But I kept resisting the urge to snatch them from that dark, ominous set and whisk them away for ice cream cones and a second viewing of “Toy Story 3.” (As the mother of an aspiring young thespian, I found myself exceedingly relieved that her latest role involved nothing edgier than wearing a teacup costume while singing “Be Our Guest.”)

Adult Tommy is played by Lucas Andrew Wells, who nails the role with a winning combination of manic energy and beatific grace. Moving effortlessly from arrogant “Pinball Wizard” mode into heartbreaking “See Me, Feel Me” sincerity, the boyishly handsome Wells has a wonderful, emotive voice and a limitless range. According to his bio, he’s just come off a two-year tour of the hit show “Spring Awakening,” during which he understudied every male role. Limitless range, indeed.

Inhabiting the role of Tommy’s father, Capt. Walker, is Patrick Oliver Jones, tall and dashing and blessed with a rich, resonant baritone. Laura Hodos as Mrs. Walker is a lovely, forceful presence on stage, and an equally gifted singer. In fact, it’s almost pointless to elaborate on the specific voices in this production. There’s really not a weak link in that respect, from principals to ensemble members. This is what you get when you see a show at the Arts Center – this level of quality and professionalism – and I’ve just come to expect it. But what a pleasure it always is!

I *do* want to mention a few more standout performances. James Zanelli is riveting as Tommy’s wicked Uncle Ernie; he makes the “Fiddle About” scene nearly as difficult to watch as it is to look away from. Merrill Peiffer is a powerhouse as The Gypsy in the almost-as-unsettling “Acid Queen” number. And Ethan Paulini is perversely charismatic as Tommy’s malicious Cousin Kevin. Thank goodness for Alexandra Fassler, who brings a fresh, bright sparkle to what borders on being, in this writer’s mind, an excessively dark show, in the role of Sally Simpson. Fassler proves the old adage that there are no small parts...

Despite my husband’s purist protests that “the original album is better,” I thought the music in this production... well, *rocked*. It rocked *hard*. The “orchestra” is more like a band, complete

with keyboards, guitars, a bass and drums. All the songs you know are there, and some you probably don't *know* you know, and they sound amazing. You hardcore rockers out there, don't be afraid to open your minds to the power and glory of six-part harmony! This music may be prettied-up a bit, but it's still plenty raw, and despite what the *Times* music critic above says, it tells a story that's still plenty brutal. It may have been domesticated to a certain degree, but this ain't no show for sissies.

In fact, were it not for that beautiful, redemptive finale, this (semi-sissy) writer might not feel as good as she does about recommending "Tommy." (And I *don't* recommend it for young children.) But when those sad, bad, deeply flawed characters come together on stage for the last time, in all their complicated humanity – and get *right in your face* – they sing with such sweetness, such exuberance, such repentant jubilation... And it's just one of those unforgettable moments in theatre.

Listening to you I get the music.

Gazing at you I get the heat.

Following you I climb the mountain.

I get excitement at your feet...

Suddenly, it doesn't matter that this happy ending has come out of nowhere... or that these lyrics make little sense in this context. All that matters is this magnificent song and these people singing it just for you.

You see them. You feel them. They touch you. They heal you.

*“The Who’s Tommy” runs through August 1<sup>st</sup> at the Arts Center of Coastal Carolina. For ticket information, visit [www.artshhi.com](http://www.artshhi.com)*

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