

Review: 'The Who's Tommy' at Paramount Theatre



Chris Jones

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

cjones5@chicagotribune.com

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In the summer of 1968, Pete Townshend gave a lengthy interview to Jann Wenner of Rolling Stone about the future direction of The Who, Townshend's rock band. "We've been talking about doing an opera," he said. "We've been talking about doing, like, albums, we've been talking about a whole lot of things and what has basically happened is that we've condensed all of those ideas, all this energy and all those gimmicks ... into one juicy package. The package I hope is going to be called 'Deaf, Dumb and Blind Boy.'"

That juicy package, which became "Tommy," was a rock opera — except that term hadn't really been coined yet. And in that same interview, Townshend outlined the plot very much in symbolic terms, describing how The Who would play a character who saw things as vibrations, and how the music might create Tommy's feelings so intensely you actually become aware of the boy. If you go and see "Tommy" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora — and if you are a Who fan, you really should — and then read the interview, you'll recognize the plot (Townshend later said he regretted recounting it in such detail before actually writing the music, since it locked him in).

But "Tommy" was not conceived like a traditional musical: It breaks all kinds of rules, creating short-fuse characters like the Acid Queen and Sally Simpson, mostly to serve single numbers. It didn't become an actual Broadway musical until 1991.

The great strength of Jim Corti's excellent — and truly spectacular — production of "The Who's Tommy" is that it manages to embrace the requisite theatrical narrative while better encapsulating those multi-pronged vibrations that so interested Townshend nearly half a century ago, better than any other "Tommy" I've seen.

And that includes Des McAnuff's original Broadway production, which he updated at the Stratford Festival in 2013. That show better cranked up the volume for vocal excitement and general rocking-out purposes — Aurora plays it safe there — but die-hard fans of The Who will likely see things in the Paramount show that they've not seen therein before.

That has a lot to do with the complex visual environment for the show, mostly a combination of the work of Corti, Linda Buchanan, Mike Tutaj (whose projections always look better at the Paramount than anywhere else) and Greg Hofmann. Corti's storytelling is quite specific where needed — you get why Tommy is the deaf, dumb and blind kid much better than before — and, frankly, I was left with what felt like new insights into the devastating impact and aftermath of World War II on parenting. As the Walkers, the excellent David Schlumpf and Hillary Marren seem like caring folk, buffeted by circumstance. The choreography, by Brock Clawson, captures that same sweet spot.

McAnuff's production, which had much to admire, was more in tune with the dark side of the Tommy moon. When you watch Devin DeSantis in the title role in Aurora — along with the two great young Tommys, Peyton Owen and Ricky Falbo — you feel the pinball icon's vulnerability far more.

The famous "Fiddle About" number, in which Wicked Uncle Ernie has his way with the kid, is, thanks to Jake Klinkhammer and some nightmarish vibrations, you might say, newly impactful.

"Tommy" is not easy to play (who wants to re-create Keith Moon's drumming?), and the full orchestra, under the direction of Tom Vindafreddo, is impressive, even if 10 more percent of abandon would add to the whole. Actually, I felt the same way about the singing, its uniform ensemble quality notwithstanding. As the Acid Queen, Meghan Murphy has particular license to let it further rip, but more intense release would help throughout.

I suppose that is a significant quibble, but, still, this is one great "Tommy," writ large and as much for the eyes and heart as for the ears. You wish Townshend could be there.

cjones5@tribune.com

Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib

3.5 STARS

When: Through Feb. 15

Where: Paramount Theatre, 23 East Galena Boulevard, Aurora

Running time: 2 hours

Tickets: \$41-\$54 at 630-896-6666 or paramountaurora.com

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