

What about the boy? In 'Tommy,' new insights into Pete Townshend



Chris Jones

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

cjones5@chicagotribune.com

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When, in 1975, the movie director Ken Russell turned "Tommy," an album by The Who, into a film, catapulting the Pinball Wizard to further glory, he made one particularly notable change: He switched the period of the rock opera from the years following World War I to the years following World War II. This necessitated changing the title of one of Pete Townshend's rock numbers ("1921" became "1951"), but the benefit was not just a more contemporary milieu (back in '75, at least) but a period that more closely charted Townshend's own life.

That change was continued when "Tommy" became a Broadway musical in 1993, directed by Des McAnuff. (The stage version of "Tommy" has played the Chicago area many times over the years, including productions by the Circle Theatre and now-defunct White Horse Theatre, as well as a memorable stint for McAnuff's road show at the Auditorium Theatre in 1999.)

The stage musical, adapted from what always has been a very loose plot, is set in the years after World War II, suggesting that the conflict ripped families and marriages apart. In the case of "Tommy," we see a husband and father shot down by the enemy. His wife thinks he is dead and takes another lover. When her husband returns, he violently confronts the lover, which is what sets his little boy, Tommy, off on his trajectory. Told that he saw, heard and felt nothing, he takes those instructions to heart.

There's a very good "Tommy" in town at present — well, not far out of town, anyway, in Aurora. Here's the thing that stands out about director Jim Corti's production: It makes us realize that while we always think the main influence on the British rockers of the 1960s and 1970s was the milieu of their creative prime, it's more accurate to see these figures as products of the postwar years, when it was tough to be a kid and even tougher to be a parent.

Think about it: Roger Daltrey of The Who, who sang the title role in "Tommy," was born in 1944, Townshend in 1945. Drummer Keith Moon was born in 1946. Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones was born in 1943, Paul McCartney in 1942, Freddie Mercury of Queen in 1946, Syd Barrett of Pink Floyd in 1946. Heck, those years were a period of creative birth, surely, to rival the Renaissance. Those artists all were kids in those austere years when fractured families were still recovering, when to be a kid meant to see some tough stuff, just like Tommy. These were their formative years as artists.

And yet when we see the work of these songwriters and performers in the theater, they're invariably surrounded by the clutter of the 1960s and 1970s, which we think of as their original context, theatrically speaking. You can see that in "Beatles Love" in Las Vegas and the various other Beatles or Queen tributes out there. There is nothing of the 1950s in "We Will Rock You," the Queen musical. Most Rolling Stones shows focus on the swagger, not the shy kid of the 1950s.

About the only writer who has ever figured out the true genesis of these rock icons was Tom Stoppard, whose 2007 play "Rock 'n' Roll" (seen at the Goodman Theatre) charted the source of the crazy but wildly dysfunctional genius of Barrett, past, present and future. But, really, these men all were kids of the early 1950s, surrounded not by free love but uncertainty and dislocation. From thence came their art.

I find it hard to articulate quite how Corti's "Tommy" manages to unlock that sensibility, and, in fairness, it certainly is based on McAnuff's previous work building a viable theatrical narrative from Townshend's initial fever dream of vibrations. But the Aurora show at the Paramount Theatre somehow finds a new way into "Tommy," and, since the two are so inextricably linked, into the whole art-changing genre of the rock opera.

"Tommy" plays through Feb. 15 at Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora; tickets are \$41-\$54 at 630-896-6666 or paramountaurora.com

cjones5@tribpub.com

Twitter @ChrisJonesTrib

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