

Wednesday, April 15, 2009

## Mash-up masterpiece

MSU Theatre's remixed 'Tommy' a killer cyborg of show

by Tom Helma



Ten seconds into "The Who's Tommy," the much anticipated techno-mania of Michigan State University wunderkind professors Rob Roznowski and Kirk Domer, explodes across the stage, like a Fourth of July fireworks finale gone awry.

Technophobes beware: This isn't your grandfather's live theater. Seven screens project imagery; they drop from the ceiling and whiz from left to right, acting like a zoom lens to expand and shrink the stage. Star strobes and LED lights illuminate the set, which comprises a series of virtual sets. One minute, it's a trashy trailer park on a hill, the next it's a TV evangelist's pulpit, then a talk-show set, a la's Oprah's two-chairs format.

One wants to applaud the chutzpah/audacity of the experience before the baby version of main character Tommy is even born.

Those unfamiliar with the blind, deaf and dumb character at the core of this play may find it hard to figure out what's going on at first. The fragmented, multi-media exposition of the plot is itself part of the metaphor of the play — art imitating life in this 21st century of confusing overlaps and subsequent loss of meaning.

There are many Tommys in our society, gifted mutant-children and adolescents who have lost their way.

MSU's reconstructed, in-your-face production of this 1960s rock opera is even more relevant than it was a generation ago. It amplifies, with multiple woofers and tweeters, overlapping keyboard and guitar riffs and the social disconnects and emptiness experienced by young people struggling to make sense of things.

Emilio Pido, as the child Tommy, heads up a powerful ensemble of singers and dancers who shout out the story in well-rehearsed harmonies accompanied by tightly choreographed, muscular dance moves.

The pit orchestra, led by the bombastic percussion of drummer Ryan Mclean, keeps the production moving, giving the audience scant moments to breathe throughout the play. Photomontages are offered as exotic side dishes throughout the show, as the autistic-seeming child transforms into an idolized teen, complete with a worshipping, wannabe fan base. Ross Egan takes over the role of adolescent Tommy, playing the celebrity aspect of his character to the hilt.

In the end, Tommy rejects the internal alienation of computer gaming and external emptiness of media celebrity, instead accepting the paradoxical joy and sorrow of everyday life.

While Roznowski brings all the actors on stage for a final, rousing version of "Listening to you, I get the music..." , those offstage must also be acknowledged to really get the play. Kudos to sound designer Lucas Nunn, technical director Brian Adams, video director Kris Sundberg and the gaming crew of Dan Marsh, Gyoung Kim and Matthew Bombach.

MSU Theatre has created a new cyborg-like collaboration with this production, live theater enhanced by technowizardry of the highest magnitude.

### 'Tommy'

Through April 19 7:30 p.m. Wednesday & Thursday 8 p.m. Friday 2 p.m. & 8 p.m. Saturday 2 p.m. Sunday MSU Theatre Department, Concert Auditorium, MSU campus \$17.50 1 (800) WHARTON [www.whartoncenter.com](http://www.whartoncenter.com)

### Related Content:

- Purple Rose 'Apartment' anything
- Holy diver
- Mean streets
- Michigan-loving chef has diners
- Sparkling 'Glass'
- Stopped in the name of love

### Related to:

msu tommy play character production stage throughout life

# CityPULSE

“Tommy”

A Review for the Lansing City Pulse

By Tommy Helma

Ten seconds into “The Who’s Tommy” the much anticipated techno- mania of MSU wunderkind professors Rob Roznowski and Kirk Domer explodes across the stage, much like a Fourth of July fireworks finale gone awry.

Technophobes beware. This is not your grandfather’s Oldsmobile version of live theater.

Seven separate screens project imagery. They drop from the ceiling, whiz across the stage from left to right, act like a zoom lens expanding and shrinking the stage. Star strobes and LED’s, (light emitting diodes) illuminate the set, but there is no set, as such, rather a series of virtual sets. One minute it is a trashy trailer park on a hill, the next minute, a TV evangelist’s pulpit, then a knock-off version of talk-show host Oprah’s two chairs format.

One wants to applaud the chutzpah-audacity of the experience and the baby version of the lead actor Tommy is yet to be born.

Those audience members not already familiar with the blind, deaf and dumb character at the core of this play may find it hard to figure out at first what is going on. The fragmented multi-media exposition of the plot is itself part of the metaphor of the play—art imitating life in this 21<sup>st</sup> century of

confusing overlaps of existential insignificance and losses of meaning.

There are many Tommy's in our society, gifted mutant-children and adolescents who have lost their way because deaf and dumb parents do not work hard enough at finding ways to relate to them.

Michigan State University's reconstructed in-your-face helter-skelter production of this now-classic rock opera of the late 1960's is even more relevant than it was a generation ago, and amplifies, with multiple woofers and tweeters, overlapping keyboard and guitar riffs, the social disconnects and emptiness experienced by young people struggling to make sense of things.

Emilio Pido as the young child Tommy heads up a powerful ensemble of singers and dancers who shout out the story in well-rehearsed harmonies accompanied by tightly choreographed muscular dance movements.

A pit orchestra led by the bombastic percussion of drummer Ryan Mclean keeps the production moving, giving the audience scant moments to breathe throughout the play.

Photo montages are offered up as exotic side-dishes throughout the play, as the story line transforms from one of internal alienation to external exploitation. The once autistic-seeming child Tommy now transforms into an idolized teen-

Tommy, complete with a worshipping wannabe fan base. Ross Egan takes over the role of now adolescent Tommy and plays the celebrity aspect of his character to the hilt.

In the end, Tommy rejects both the internal alienation of second world computer gaming and the external emptiness of media celebrity and comes to accept the paradoxical joy-and-sorrow elements of everyday life.

While Director Rob Roznowski brings out all the actors on stage for a final rousing version of “Listening to you, I get the music...,” one must also acknowledge those off-stage to really get the play.

Kudos to Lucas Nunn for sound design, to Brian Adams, the technical director, to Kris Sundberg, the video director, to Dan Marsh, the game sequence supervisor, to Gyoung Kim, the gaming sequence concept artist and to Matthew Bombach, the game sequence modeling and animation specialist.

Michigan State University theatre department has created a new Cyborgian form of collaborative theater with this production-- live theater enhanced by techno-wizardry of the highest magnitude.

Tommy Helma  
Lansing City Pulse