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MSU's 'Tommy': an all-virtual design

By Taras Berezowsky

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Outdoors, the drab spring rain on a recent morning in East Lansing disclosed no hint of the dazzling artistry at work inside both the Departments of Theatre and of Gaming at Michigan State University. A conceptually updated backdrop for the story of Tommy, the boy who rocketed to pinball stardom in The Who's classic rock opera and stage musical, will ricochet into MSU's Concert Auditorium on April 9.

MSU Theatre's own pinball wizards, director Rob Roznowski - whose bowling showdowns with his niece on a Nintendo Wii sparked the concept for an all-virtual production design of "The Who's Tommy" - and designer Kirk Domer both have a sparkle that exudes boundless creative energy. They're relatively young and display no complacency brought on by decades in academia's ivory tower, suiting their partnership perfectly.

"Having worked together before and discussing what makes a good director-designer collaboration, Kirk and I knew that this production would be bigger than anything we've done," Roznowski says.

The two professors have been developing the project for a year, culminating in a virtual presentation at an international design conference in Berlin that documented the mediation of virtual technology in performance. In other words, they explored how live people interact with scenography. Domer used 3D Studio Max to create the renderings for "Tommy" in a practically paperless process.

"Working virtually is a lot cheaper," he says. "We already own the screens, the projector, and it all fits into a van. Traditionally, if a hurricane comes through, lumber costs skyrocket and we're in trouble."

Domer still believes in balancing virtual technology with old-school stagecraft. Emily Movsesian, a first-year student, undertook a professorial assistantship to work with the design team, and has contributed both virtual research and scene shop hours. "I'm pretty sure I didn't know how to use a flash drive when I came here," she says, "but it's been more fun than anything else."

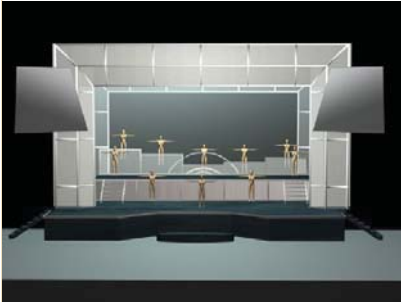
Domer adds, "She still has to learn how to wield a hammer."

The mise-en-scene involves several muslin screens on which images are projected, including one that glides across the stage. Progression from one virtual scenic location to another affords the actors more seamless transitions than traditional set changes, creating an orientation more closely associated with the jumps and cuts in film. "Audiences are more sophisticated," Roznowski estimates. "We jump across environments and adapt to their point of view."

Arguably the coolest addition: Tommy will play an original Wii-like video game onstage in real time, created by professors and students at the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media.

"In our version, Tommy's playing games when his

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@ Zoom
 - The virtual design for the overture to 'The Who's Tommy.' Photo: MSU Dept. of Theatre

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father is killed, and the mirror he's looking into in the original is now a TV screen," Roznowski explains. The creative team conceptually attributes Tommy's catatonia and his development of extraordinary pinball skills to the transformational pull of the video game.

How will this all pan out? "My biggest fear is a visual overload for the audience," Roznowski confides. "We won't really know until opening. It's scary, but exciting."



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