



MTH sets rocks out with 'Tommy' with blockbuster cast



Tim Scott and Musical Theater Heritage

By Bob Evans

Rock on and rock out with the inside, concert-style productions created by Musical Theater Heritage at Crown Center as they opened their final show of the season, The Who's "Tommy," with music and lyrics by Pete Townshend and Des McAnuff.

Always known for quality productions and superb vocal casting, MTH set a new, higher standard with "Tommy" and future shows will struggle to meet or exceed "Tommy." Quite different from other MTH shows that feature more of a "book" format, "Tommy" puts the "rock" in Rock Opera with all dialogue sung and the hard rock music blasting away from the band—led by Jeremy Watson, whose musical roots grew from rock-bands.

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“Tommy” at Musical Theater Heritage is phenomenal. Not only are the voices the tops in KC, the band is incredible. You would think you were at a rock concert. Seldom produced, The Who’s “Tommy” was fabulous on opening night. Prediction: Tickets will be in strong demand. Do not delay booking seats.

The album dropped in the late 60’s, so most baby boomers know the music and many had the album long before it was made into a movie or debuted on Broadway, where it ran for 899 performances. The show also generated a 2-year national tour.



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“Tommy” tells the story of a young man who views a murder, resulting in his sensation deprivation of vision, auditory, and vocal channels. He’s known in the lyrics as the “deaf, dumb and blind kid.” Oh, how times have changed and those words are not harsh, unacceptable, and unmentioned. Those were 1950s terms.

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Tommy undergoes extreme doctor analyses, tests, procedures, drugs, sensory experimentation to cure his ills, but nothing works until his inner fragmented memories, dreams, and aspirations cures him and he becomes a medical mystery solved. With senses restored, Tommy becomes the focus on national attention in Great Britain. His song, "See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me," reminds his fans (and the audience) that every life possesses merit and that fulfillment comes from within, not from without.



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The story-line is weak at best, but the music more than suffices in "Tommy." "Pinball Wizard," "See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me," "I'm Free," "We're Not Gonna Take It" stand out as the most recognizable ditties among the songs. Others are more obscure in nature

As for the cast, the three central figures belted their songs with clear, strong vocals. Josiah Mullins and Leah Swank-Miller nailed their performances and their voices blended astoundingly in their duets. A trio of voices brought Tommy to

stage. First, Delilah Rose Pellow charmed the audience as Tommy at age 4. She's already a seasoned performer and an MTH veteran. Next, Maddox Bane as Tommy at age 10 made his MTH debut as the boy who learns to play the pin-ball machines in spite of his medical traumas. He also had a strong on-stage presence. But, hands down, the signature performance of Tommy, in the hands of Tom Vendafreddo set and maintained the tone for the entire production.

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Two villains in the cast appear in the form of Uncle Ernie and Cousin Kevin. While Ernie is a drunk and con-man with a comic side, Kevin is defiantly evil-spirited and torturous to his handicapped cousin, Tommy. Both characters are robustly sung and acted by Ryan Hruza and Daniel Verchelen.



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Choreography, set design, sound and lighting all exceeded expectations. MTH's production team as a whole designed and created magic. The technical work is phenomenal. The band placed the audience directly at a rock concert and held them

captivated throughout, Even after the final bows and actors' exits, many audience members remained and even sang along with the band as it continued to play the score. That's a testament to the quality of the score and the expertise of the conductor and band.

Undoubtedly, Musical Theater Heritage produced a show that could be one of their biggest successes with "Tommy." Ticket demand will be substantial and many performances will sell out.

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Cast: Beth Benedict Borders, Ensemble; Blane Brungardt, Ensemble; Shelby Floyd, The Acid Queen; Rya Hruza, Uncle Ernie; Bob Linebarger, Ensemble; Randa Meierhenry, Ensemble; T. Eric Morris, Hawker; Josiah Mullins, Captain Walker; Chris Owen, Ensemble; Abby Peek, Ensemble; Delilah Rose Pellow, Tommy at age 4; Kenny Personett, Ensemble Tony Pulford, Ensemble; Maddox Bane, Tommy at age 10; Leah Swank-Miller, Mrs. Walker; Tom Vendafreddo, Tommy; Daniel Verchelen, Cousin Kevin; Luke Walker, Ensemble.

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Production Team: George Harter, MTH Founder; Chad Gerlt, executive director; Sarah Crawford, director/music director; Matt Coggins, sound tech; Kylor Greene, lighting design; John Hileman, sound design; Ashley Pike, stage manager; Spencer Thompson, assistant stage manager/ensemble; Jeremy Watson, assistant music director/keyboard/show conductor; Kenny Personett, choreographer; Shelbi Arndt, assistant lighting designer; Beth Benedict Borders, costumes/props; Jim Misenheimer, scenery; Melissa Legg, set construction.

Manon Halliburton



The MTH band: Jeremy Watson, keyboard 1/conductor; Liz Stinman, keyboard 2; Justin McCoy, keyboard 3; Ron Ernst, drums; Joey Panella bass; Doug Perkins, guitar 1; Mike Yunghans, guitar 2; Anrea Stanton, horns.

“Tommy” continues through June 25 at the Musical Theater Heritage Theater in Crown Center. More information can be seen on their website.

Tags: Musical Theater Heritage, Musical Theater Heritage

Theater at Crown Center, "Tommy", Kansas City Theater, Kansas City Performing Arts, Kansas City Arts & Entertainment,