

'Tommy' misses a few notes but still brings down the house

Kerry Lengel

The Arizona Republic
Jun. 2, 2006 06:47 PM

The Who's Tommy is a beautiful mess.

That doesn't just go for Nearly Naked Theatre's season finale, which packs nearly three-dozen actors, musicians and dancers onto a stage so small that simply not tripping over each other amounts to a masterpiece of direction.

No, the mess began in 1969, when the Who released the original rock opera. *Tommy* was a huge success and hugely influential, yet it's not quite a masterpiece. It has some of the band's best songs (*Pinball Wizard*, *I'm Free*) but also some musically bland filler that doesn't add up to a true opera - the story remains sketchy, with many of the details added by songwriter Pete Townshend after the album was recorded.

The 1975 film version filled in more gaps and changed key details, such as when the story takes place. Finally, in 1993, Townshend's dream of a full staging came true with a Tony-winning Broadway adaptation. But *The Who's Tommy*, updated by Townshend and director Des McAnuff, wasn't exactly the *Who's Tommy*.

The changes went beyond a new song and added dialogue. The ending was a 180-degree turn: Instead of an egomaniacal cult guru, Tommy, miraculously cured of his deaf-dumb-and-blind affliction, becomes a reluctant messiah who angers his followers by embracing normality. There is still a lot of dark material, particularly the issue of sexual abuse, but the new happy ending utterly changes the meaning of the musical.

Tommy undergoes yet another transformation at Phoenix Theatre in the Little Theatre, where Nearly Naked is offering the most ambitious production of its seven-year existence. In addition to 19 actors playing twice as many roles, Scorpius Dance Theatre adds seven more bodies to the visual spectacle. Oh, and let's not forget the six-piece live band.

It's big, but it's still a shoestring operation, with no space or money for the kind of special effects and set pieces that made *Tommy* a Broadway hit. Yet what it lacks in expensive accouterments, this alternative troupe more than makes up for in spirit.

Much of the credit goes to artistic director Damon Dering, whose ability to create a unique world onstage is undeterred by budget constraints. If you can't rig the cast for flight, you can still have soldiers "parachuting" down a firehouse pole. Dering trusts his audience to understand metaphorical shortcuts, such as apartment spaced defined only by the opening and closing of a door.

There's a lot that's working in this staging, including some nice touches with the mirror that Tommy - played by three actors at different ages - stares into, able to see nothing but himself. The Scorpius dancers create some interesting images as well, including a human simulation of a pinball game.

Plenty of problems pop up, too. For starters, the interpretive dance doesn't always work. Perhaps in deference to the cramped space, there's a lot of baby-step shuffling that just looks cheesy. Although you can't do *Tommy* without dance, the choreography misses more than it hits.

The small stage also hampers the actors, although the only real casualty on opening night was an inadvertently toppled chair. And one aspect of this production that definitely needed more money is the sound equipment, which added distracting crackles and rendered some lyrics unintelligible.

Despite all the challenges, however, the cast pulls this *Tommy* through. As the Narrator and adult Tommy, Sean Rhys Gilyeat is a true triple threat, with big Broadway pipes and assured dance moves to go with solid acting. As the

wicked Uncle Ernie, Adam Vargas does a hilarious carnival comedy bit in *Tommy's Holiday Camp*, and the gloriously bald Gregg Temple is an imposing presence as the High Priest.

The crucial element in *Tommy*, of course, is the music, and Nearly Naked delivers the goods. There are a number of strong voices, including Beau Heckman (Tommy's dad), Brad Rupp (Cousin Kevin) and Laura L. Webb, who does an *Acid Queen* that does Tina Turner proud. But the ensemble pieces are what makes this big and busy show a real thrill.

In the finale, a dozen singers are belting out the anthem ("Listening to you, I get the music / Gazing at you, I get the heat"), and they do more than fill the room. The sound buzzes up your spine from your feet to your head, where the melody will be echoing for days.