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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

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