



tommy's next stage

From record album to cult film and now to Broadway, *Tommy* has had many lives in the last 24 years. **John Holpern** catches up with the creator of the first rock opera—Pete Townshend

The arrival of the landmark rock opera *Tommy* at the St. James Theatre on Broadway is the latest surprising step of a phenomenal journey. From its teenage beginnings as the revolutionary 1969 rock album, *Tommy* took its composer, Pete Townshend, and the *Who* from the brink of self-destruction to megastardom.

Tommy was the first rock opera—an outrageously ambitious concept that led the way to the roller-theater operas (or pseudo-operas) of Andrew Lloyd Webber. But in its day, it was as if Led-Z had kicked a tonka on Wagner. To the amazement of cultural elites, *Tommy* wound-come into the opera houses of Europe and America. In 1970 the *Who* played it to a packed Metropolitan Opera House in New York—the first contemporary music performed there. “We couldn’t go the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden,” Townshend says today. “We was invited for the Met.”

Twenty years later, the *Who* was performing *Tommy* to sold-out stadiums across America during its positively final farewell tour. Townshend’s classic score—including “Pinball Wizard,” “Acid Queen,” “See Me, Feel Me”—has, then, stood the test of time. *Tommy* also became the halfheartedly movie dramatized by Ken Russell, featuring Elton John (pop-art Pinball Wizard), Tim Turner (the Acid Queen), Eric Clapton (the Preacher), Ann-Margret (the Moll-

usk like Pete Townshend, left, in his past in Surrey, England, 1969, surrounded by gifts for his newborn daughter, and, left to right: the *Who* performing *Tommy* at the Princess Theatre in 1980; Peter Townshend as the Acid Queen in the 1970 film version of *Tommy*; also from the film are shots of Ann-Margret as Tommy’s mother, Ann-Margret with Jack Nicholson, the Preacher,

eri, and Jack Nicholson (the Special in), singing like Rex Harrison. In other surprising re-incarnations, it has been danced by Los Gringos Baileros Callejeros, performed by marching bands and the Boston Pops, and recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra.

If rock was once over to the Broadway of the nineties, *Tommy*’s day is also—some would say overdue. The principal producer—with the First Theatre Group—of the \$5 million Broadway version is the now-60-year-old, baby-boomer syndicator Dodge Productions, which is responsible for the super Broadway arrival of *Cats* and *Shrek* (as well as Broadway’s *The Evening Garden* and into the *Wood’s*, *Producer Ed Stoppard* of the *Dodgers*, as the group is known, is a 44-year-old Harvard graduate. “My freshman year was *Kjv*, *Popper*, and I graduated in *Tommy*,” he recalls, smiling happily with the latter. But he’s no sentimentalist. The cult of *Tommy* was diversely researched and developed last summer at the nonprofit La Jolla Playhouse in southern California, just as the *Dodgers* did with Roger Miller’s *Big River*. “*Tommy*’s impact proved so successful it was extended for an additional seven weeks. “But the nature of the gambit is different on Broadway,” Stoppard adds. “We’ve been told we were out-of-our-minds before! The challenge of Broadway and *Tommy* is the balancing act of winning the theater audience and not losing the rock following.”

Pete Townshend’s costar is 40-year-old (by himself) the artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse (he was a long Award for his direction of *Big River*). McKinnell first heard *Tommy* when he was in high school, where he played in a rock band. “*Tommy* became an icon of our generation when we were celebrating just the notion of being young,” he says, smiling nostalgically. “It takes the phony adult world of Holden Caulfield one step further—to complete one man.”

McKinnell has nevertheless created the action of *Tommy* in a specific time (from 1940 to 1965) and place, based above the cinematic drug wars and psychedelia, and, with set designer John Aronson and 25 performers, gives the action a high-tech MTV’ish style. But Tom. **B-114**



Naming on-screen:
 1. Producer for the 2010 movie;
 2. Roger Daltry as a lead singer of the 1970s band;
 3. Elton John recreates the Who's 1970s music video—Mogwai, Tommy onstage;
 4. Actor Michael Gambon in rehearsal for the Broadway show.



er's enduring mystique and popularity have always contained a central mystery. The story and subtext of *Tommy*—"that deaf, dumb, and blind kid" who "never plays a mean pinball!"—would take the combined wisdom of Freud, Jung, and King Solomon to figure out. Few people—including Peter Townshend, at least until the new adaptation for Broadway—could entirely explain his meaning. "I don't understand everything about Peter Gossamer either!" said Rudolf King of the Metropolitan Opera.

Tommy, a parable of protest and of false gods, is basically the story of a young boy who is traumatized by witnessing his father shoot his mother's lover. Sworn to secrecy, he becomes deaf, mute, and blind. He is treated with contempt, sexually molested by an uncle, and battered by a cousin. "These loaves haven't gone away," says McManis. "The young boy that discovers a single voice: He becomes a pinball wizard and acquires a fanatical following. "As rock stars do," Townshend adds. *Tommy* undergoes a miraculous healing and is returned to reality.

Townshend was at work on the *Who* and the new music for the Broadway production when I met him, a middle-aged rock icon, in the minimalist brick site of his suite at the Royalton Hotel in New York. He's 48 now. What happened to the once-revered "Hope I die before I get old" from the *Who*'s anthem, "My Generation"? "Well, it almost happened a couple of times," Townshend replied. "Luckily, Daltry collapses in public. I could get framed."

He was fortunate to survive. (Keith Moon, the *Who*'s drummer, widow of them all, died in 1981.) Townshend has battled successfully against drug and alcohol addiction, though his hearing remains partially damaged. (The *Who*'s decried lead is in the *Glastonbury Book of World Records*.) Ironically he's followed since the days on the road when he made the *Saturday Night* biggie by smashing his guitar in pieces onstage in a frenzy

of surreal destruction. He's still married to the girl he met 30 years ago at Hatfield Art School in London. He studied there with R. B. Kiki and was influenced by the avant-garde, anti-destructive experiments of the Austrian Gustav Klimt. "He was a weird little guy," Townshend noted. "He used to build these sculptures that fell down—deliberately." Ron Wood of the Stones and Freddie Mercury of Queen were Townshend's contemporaries at Hatfield. Today Townshend lives quietly by the Thames in Twickenham in a home built in 17th-century over the residence of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. (Townshend's 24-year-old daughter, Emma, is studying for a Ph.D. at Cambridge; his 22-year-old daughter, Anniela, is studying languages at Exeter University; he also has a three-year-old son, Joseph.) Why do British rock stars seem to end up as solitary country gentlemen? "I don't think we end up that way," Townshend said. "I think we start that way. I've always lived by the Thames. Like in *Who* (London), the *Who*'s bass guitarist) bought a grand estate in Stone on the West, Gloucestershire—on a lot of land particularly, but the main house is surrounded by about 10 cottages. Very nice. Roger [Daltry, lead singer of the *Who*] bought his Tudor house with 500 acres in Sussex immediately after the success of *Tommy*. He's an avid local farmer. I think he just wants free life."

For the past decade, Townshend has worked as an editor at Faber & Faber, commissioning books on music and art. In 1992 he published his semi-biographical novel, *Peter's World*, and in 1999 he adapted the *Who* film, a tale by England's post-hippies Ted Hughes, into an album and musical-theater piece. "I'm too old and the genre to change the rules of rock anymore," he said. "I know that to the kids with guitar blasters. But I've changed what I know into theater? Dylan proved you can write a rock song about anything. It's a becoming time for me. I'm getting such a kick out of writing on *Tommy* again, which was the music of this 14-year-old kid, who was me."

Perhaps I ought to say that 20 years ago, when *Tommy* was in the making, Elton John Townshend. He had a mental illness who was in a motor and the driving force behind the original *Who* album. Kit Lambert, who went on to own a palace in Venice and spend two years on herle, was the Broadway manager of the *Who*. He was a friend, generous-gauche of rock and roll, the upper-class, Oxford-educated embodiment of the teacher and self-destructive Sebastian Flyde of *Who*'s *Who* *Who*. Townshend is the son of an accomplished musician who played the saxophone in a band. Lambert was the son of Constant Lambert, the Icelandic composer and publisher of Sallier's *Wells*. Kit Lambert (whose publishers were Sir William Walton and Sir Frederick Ashton) conceived the operatic form of *Tommy* with Peter Townshend and gloriously named it rock opera. When Lambert died virtually destitute in 1981 at age 45, Townshend led his memorial service at St. Paul's Covent Garden, where the London Symphony Orchestra played his requiem for *Tommy*.

"It made it happen," Townshend said. "We talked endlessly about how absurd, pretentious, and dangerous *Tommy* was! I miss him, miss the fun. But something else was going on. Kit never felt that his father got the recognition he deserved. *Tommy* was his revenge against the classical-music establishment. He hit the *Who* collective and ridiculed the establishment, particularly the Covent Garden Opera people. Both of us actually dreamed of performing *Tommy* at Covent Garden. It should have been done there. It would have been able to make it Kit in the Royal Box."

The idea of a rock opera began literally as a joke. Townshend had written a short story open in a birthday present for a friend of Keith Moon's. Lambert found it and thought it wasn't such a crazy idea. Then, when the recording of the *Who*'s album *A Quick One* hit an album about, Lambert suggested they fill in the space with a song cycle that he proudly announced as the first rock-musical in the world.

And *Tommy* took? "It came about because the *Who* was in it—1980

PHOTOS: 1. MICHAEL O'NEILL; 2. JEFFREY MATHIAS; 3. MICHAEL O'NEILL; 4. JEFFREY MATHIAS; 5. MICHAEL O'NEILL; 6. JEFFREY MATHIAS

ished," said Townsend, taking a big surprise, as he often does. "We were floundering in Sgt. Pepper time. We'd lost grip of our audience. We weren't getting the hits. There was damage to the band, too. We were exhausted, and we were broke. It cost us more than we earned when we smashed up our equipment. I remember saying to Kit, 'We've got to do something or we're going to lose everything, the whole machine.' He said, 'Make a statement. Do a rock opera.' By the time we completed it, we'd spent every penny we had and borrowed every penny we could. And all the tapes were that it was going to get completely and utterly slaughtered. But Jimmy saved us."

Jimmy was imprisoned in the recording studio. Pinball went on even in the original version. The result of an inspired pinball game in Soho between Townsend and a rock critic, the song "Pinball Wizard" was slated in later. There wasn't a score of a lithe-to-they were writers stems after the recording). "I've never written a score," said Townsend, "though I can read music. I've always used tape machines. The tape is the score." And the libretto? "It was a large piece of cardboard! There wasn't a story in the traditional sense. It was a collage of ideas written on a piece of cardboard, with song titles and lyrics and bits of text. Kit Lambert used to say, 'Oh, Pete, for God's sake! All opera is nonsense. If the story can be understood at all, it simply won't be opera!'"

Lambert's partner and co-manager of the Who was Chris Stamp, the working-class son of a typewriter (and brother of actor Trevor Stamp). He is now 50, a film producer living in Manhattan. He has kept his hair and his broad working accent. "I thought it was magic to do a huge extended piece," Stamp recalls. "When I was seventeen, I was a stage manager for the Sadler's Wells Opera. I'd heard Wagner and blurted up the name! That's why I didn't laugh at the whole idea of Jimmy. The big risk was presenting opera to a rock audience. Rock was still in its infancy in those days. The point is, we thought rock and roll could achieve anything. That's how we felt in the studio."

"Right behind you I see the millions," goes a Jimmy lyric. "Do you I see the grip? From you I get opinions From you I get the cry." But what's the message? "When we took Jimmy on the road," Townsend explained, "we found that the kids sensed another story. It was the ongoing soap opera of the Who. Our hero, Jimmy, is worried for doing something so shallow as playing pinball. The Who became heroes by playing rock and roll. On one level Jimmy is about teens and lycans and the danger of making naive boys into some kind of heroes. Elton John was crushed to death during a Who concert in Cincinnati. So the Who became Jimmy's story. The group was the context. Will that crazy guy on the drums kill himself? When do they split up? What happens next? Who dies first?"

And the real story within Jimmy? "The closest to Jimmy was adolescent rage," said Townsend. "It was rooted in the inarticulate desperation of our first fans, and maybe of myself. At the same time, I believed the teaching of the Indian master Maharishi. [He still does.] A lot of Jimmy was also based on Buddhism, which inspired me. So what I wanted to do was to tell the story of a boy who is on a spiritual journey but who doesn't know it. And I tried to create a metaphor to demonstrate it, which is that we are all so dead, dumb, and blind to our own potential as the character Jimmy is in the rock opera."

And now? "Right now, it's about finding out what happened at the end!" Townsend said, and laughed. "We never really had an ending. And if we could find it, we'd know where this poor sap has to go to get there!" Then he told me this story:

A year or so ago, when Jimmy was first discussed as a Broadway show, Townsend went to see his mother, who lives in Spain. He was troubled by gaps in his early childhood. His mother and father had split up when he was five years old. He was left in the care of an half-brother grandmother. His father didn't visit him for two years. His mother had a lover.

"What I discovered in returning to Jimmy," Townsend said, "was that in all its vagueness, it's a story about a real person and a real family. I discovered that Tommy's awful neglect and trauma, the terrible abuse, the lovers, the murders—emotional murders—all of those things actually happened. They happened to me. I saw them as a young child. I saw the adult world at its worst. And I saw it at its best, because my parents finally got back together again. But I saw an ending. And so I do have an ending to Jimmy. Which is that one forgives one's awful parents for everything they've done. Because if you don't, you spend the rest of your life going back and away." ■

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