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A WISER AND MORE MATURE TOMMY RETURNS TO THE UK

PHOTO: DONALD COOPER

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**PLASA**

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# TOMMY RETURNS

*Robert Halliday welcomes the production back to London*

Like the deaf, dumb and blind kid whose story it tells, the musical **Tommy** has had a confused upbringing. Conceived by The Who in 1969, it was then dubbed a 'rock opera' and performed by them in concert. In the seventies, it became a film, an outlandish beast directed by Ken Russell and starring Roger Daltrey and a host of other stars. As The Who faded, the show lay quiet for a while.

Now, re-born for the nineties, it is still not quite sure what it is - the Tommy leather jackets, bearing departmental labels such as 'wire choir', try hard to clutch at the show's rock and roll roots. But the five Tony Awards that this new production garnered on Broadway, and the show's current London home, The Shaftesbury Theatre, give the game away. Tommy is now - maybe always has been - a musical, and a visually stunning one at that, as the photographs accompanying this article testify.

Of course, that may have been what Pete Townshend intended when he wrote it, though it almost certainly wouldn't have been seen as 'hip' to be dabbling with musical theatre while at the peak of a rock career. But it took Des McNuff, then director of the LaJolla Playhouse at the University of California in San Diego, to produce a version of the show that actually worked as a staged musical performance. McNuff succeeded because he had the nerve to ignore the most familiar face of Tommy - the film - and to work with Townshend to adapt the piece into a stage show with at least something of the structure of a regular musical.

Success at LaJolla led to a larger Broadway production, then to a US tour, a production in Germany and now, belatedly, to the show's return to its 'home', London. Given the production's success in the States the delay - the Broadway version opened in mid-1993 and closed last year - seems odd, but is no doubt attributable to the problem of finding a suitable theatre in the city. Musicals, especially this one, are expensive to run. Expensive shows need large audiences. And all of the theatres with large enough capacities are already full, occupied by long-running musicals. London has run out of large musical venues, which is why a certain composer is now calmly discussing building one of his own. Tommy's cause was also not helped by a change of management, the original London producer losing interest when a free theatre meant one of his own shows - Martin Guerre - could move out of the musical traffic jam.

The Shaftesbury still isn't quite big enough. The arrangement of the mixing desk area - with racks stacked up to the ceiling to release more seats for sale - shows that the theatre will have to be stuffed full of people, every night, for the show to recover its money. Sold-out previews



***"The show Tommy is a triumph. The images created on stage are stunning, but the show works because they are never simply stunning for their own sake, but move the story along."***

and a raft of rave reviews suggest that the show's new producers, Pola Jones, Joop Van den Ende and Robin de Levita, might just pull off a commercial success. Their technical teams have already pulled off a success in getting the show to fit into the theatre's stage.

Leading that effort was production manager Ted Irwin, working in association with the show's American production manager Gene O'Donovan. Both men receive a 'technical supervision' credit on the show's poster, an Americanism that, though he won't admit it, Irwin seems to have enjoyed! To earn the credit, he had to cram John Arnone's set design into a theatre both narrower and shallower than its Broadway home. He also had to install the complex automation system the set demands, and do so with a minimum of noise and no overnight working. These last constraints were enforced by the residents of the apartments that adjoin the Shaftesbury's stage wall, and who had successfully complained about the noise generated by the venue's previous show, **Return to the Forbidden Planet**.

## SET

The overall structure of John Arnone's set isn't that complicated - a black floor and an open metal framework of truss, with truss towers supporting overhead truss runs and Foy flying

track tucked in for scenes where the 'older Tommy' hovers over his younger incarnations. For the most part, the back of the set contains projection screens used to display a battery of images that set locations and moods.

In one climactic moment as the 'revived' Tommy addresses the crowd, the screens fly out, the truss suddenly creating the feel of a huge arena. The floor also contains a series of cross-stage tracks, used to carry furniture, props and door and window frames on and off stage. These include sofas, chairs and beds for Tommy's parents' house, the frame of the aircraft that carries Tommy's father off to war, a psychedelic medical table and scanner for one of Tommy's visits to the doctor and, of course, pinball machines, including the one for the 'Pinball Wizard' sequence.

This is a giant, chromed 'bucking bronco' type, spinning and swaying machine, armed with explosions from Pyrro Vision. Other scenic elements include the front door to Tommy's house, which rises from the floor, and a variety of flown window frames, sometimes used realistically and sometimes in an abstract manner inspired by surrealists such as Dali and Magritte.

The scenic items set locations - but Tommy rollocks along. Some of the scenic elements are only on stage for seconds at any given time, but in that time will help progress the story. To accomplish the required transitions, all of the scenery tracks are automated so that things can appear not only quickly, but at an accurate, repeatable rate so they can wend their way through a stage full of people. The trans-Atlantic production management meant that the search for suitable suppliers could go rather wider than usual. Eventually Edge & Bratton Scenery and

Display of Canada were chosen to build and automate the set. Irwin, and indeed, many others involved with the show, have been deeply impressed by this company's work, which has coupled high-quality scenery with tracking and drive systems run from their own PC-based show control system. The same system is also being used on the German production of Tommy.

Production electrician Simon Needle has also been very impressed by the scenery company; the set is full of wiring, with lights in the towers, the pinball machines and many other elements of scenery - yet everything turned up wired in suitable cable to a suitable plug, and so could be up and running very quickly.

Although the scenery proved relatively straightforward, Irwin had other problems to deal with. Most notable of these was the lack of wing space - the set is roughly the same size as the New York version, with most of the lost width being in the wings. Each track has several scenic items switched in and out of it, and each of those items has to go somewhere when not on stage. As a result they had to go up, lifted on chain hoists attached to the undersides of the fly floors. This is now quite common on big shows in cramped West End theatres, but Tommy takes it to a new extreme, with sofas triple-stacked in mid air at some points and lightning-fast changes during short scenes. At certain moments of the show, the wings and surrounding corridors are complete chaos as scenery is shuffled around and the cast pile off for rapid costume and radio-mic changes.

The scenic work also continued out into the auditorium, with the box fronts being clad in black and red to allow the entire audience to move inside a pinball machine during the show's most famous number.

## PROJECTION

The opening 20 minutes of Tommy are simply astonishing. You are introduced to the major characters in the show - see Tommy's mother and father meet, father go off to war, parachuting behind enemy lines where he is held prisoner. You see his mother assume her husband is dead and so take a new lover, then his father return and shoot the other man. This prologue throws the show at you with wave after wave of energy, and makes the story completely clear - yet none of the cast utters a sound. The story is told by action, music, scenery, lighting, sound and, vitally, projection. Anyone looking for a true definition of 'multi-media' would do well to use this sequence as an example - especially since, unlike the current raft of so-called multi-media CD-Roms, this sequence does have some real people in it, as well as all the technology.

In these opening minutes the projection shows passing time (as year numbers changing on the back screen), plummeting missiles for the start of war and falling parachutes as the father jumps into Germany. During the rest of the show the projection acts as both a naturalistic guide to time and location, and a surrealistic view of the world, often in strong, lurid colours, seen from inside Tommy's head. For much of the evening it is the dominant design element - to the extent that, in the 'arena' scene when the projection screens fly out, it dominates even by its absence. It is the work of American designer Wendall Harrington, who has been a projection designer for theatre for around 15 years while also working as a graphic designer to support herself. The original idea





for using projection in the show came from director McAnuff and designer Arnone, but they quickly realised the complexity of the undertaking and so sought help.

That first production at LaJolla was relatively simple in projection terms - Harrington brought in the concept of going "inside Tommy's head", and also her view of projection as a "3D medium, rather than just static images as many set designers tend to think of it".

"By the time the production moved to New York, 'experimentation' had allowed people to say 'this is what we want', and so it grew. And because the colouring is based on the costumes and the costumes are fairly realistic, the projections could get more bizarre, more psychedelic because there was something on stage holding the reality," Harrington explains. The New York production also brought in a new lighting designer, ex-pat Chris Parry. "When Chris came on board I just gave him the colour chips and he ordered his scrolls based on them. There was a great deal of collaboration, and it all worked out really well."

Now finally able to work in theatre projection full time, Harrington is supported by a "great team who do all of the work while I direct!" This includes Bo Eriksson, who creates and manipulates images in Paintbox and Photoshop, and researchers including Yolanda Jeffrey in England. Since Broadway, the show has been programmed by Paul Vershbow; his speed allowing the original version to be programmed in just three days.

Each new version of the show has seen some changes to the projection, sometimes to incorporate new technology. Thus where the Broadway production had just one Pani with a slide changer and some Xenon 35mm projectors on the circle front bar, as well as the Kodak E3s lighting the 18-section screen upstage, the Shaftesbury's circle front has been specially re-inforced to take three Pani BP2.5 Compacts with E/T/C PIGI sprocketed film scrollers. Upstage, 56 Kodak Ektapro 4010 300W projectors backlight the rear screens. Some artistic changes have also been made, with a new set of projections defining the move into the Isle of Dogs 'Acid Queen' section of the show. In all, the show features around 2250 images, with over 10,000 slides made during production in New York.

For the UK, the show was re-plotted using the Dataton control supplied, along with the rest of the projection and video equipment, by Creative Technology. Indeed, Harrington seems to have enjoyed her brief spell in the UK, hoping to return and possibly to collaborate again with Richard Eyre, with whom she worked on the American production of the National's *Racing Demon*.

#### VIDEO

As well as Harrington's still and animated projections, Tommy also features both live and pre-recorded video sequences designed by Batwin+Robin Productions and replayed on a 'pros arch' of 35 Barco 2850 monitors, with a second line of 13 monitors that can fly in and out mid-stage; the monitors are all controlled by Electrosonic's Picbloc system. Recorded images, replayed from Pioneer LDV4300 laser disk players, include spinning and somersaulting Tommys, while four Sony SSC-M370 cameras built into hand-held period camera shells allow the 'superstar' Tommy and his fans to be broadcast live. The problem is that the monitors are, to some extent, too dominant with those around the pros, especially, tending to pull the audience's eye away from the real action on stage. They do, however, round off the complete multi-media experience. Both video and projection are controlled by the same operator, John Perks.

#### LIGHTING

Lighting designer Chris Parry, best known in this country for his epic designs for Royal Shakespeare Company productions such as *The Plantagenets*, took over the lighting for Tommy as it moved to Broadway and subsequently picked up a Best Lighting Tony award. Led by the colouring of the costumes and projections, the lighting moves quickly from cool, almost monochromatic looks for some of the naturalistic scenes to bizarre, strangely lurid and, at times, almost psychedelic colours. From here it occasionally even ventures into 'rock and roll' lighting, with small Par cans and strobes lighting through the cast and out into the auditorium.

With Parry tied up on other projects and only able to spend a few days checking up on the complex lacework of the lighting in London,

recreating his work fell to associate lighting designer David Grill and Vari\*Lite programmer Victor Fable. Fable has programmed the show since New York, while Grill came on board at the start of the US tour. Grill was only meant to get the tour up and running but ended up travelling with the show. He has subsequently tidied up the New York show and re-lit the Toronto and German productions.

For the tour the show moved to an ETC Obsession 600, and the London production is running from an Obsession 1500 controlling around 800 channels. Grill is a big fan of the desk: "I can't say enough good things about it. The processor is lightning fast - you hit a cue and boom, it's gone". And, though it isn't yet a common product in this country, the Shaftesbury crew have been impressed by what they've seen.

ETC (via distributors M&M) have also been taking over the rest of the rig; the tour started a move to their Source Four profile and that transition has been completed in London by the addition of 48 Source Pars to the 210 profiles. Other changes include the use of 28 of Arri's tiny 2k Fresnels, as well as Iris, Orion and Coda floods, Wildfire UV floods, Par 56 and Par 16 lamps, an assortment of single and twin-spin gobo rotators (the singles throwing aeroplane propellers onto the pinball backcloth, the twin-spins doing a surprisingly effective snow effect) and four DHA Digital Light Curtains, used without their scrolls for one slow live move as a bar flies out. The London rig has been supplied by White Light.

Wybron scrollers top 66 of the lamps, chosen for their ability to handle the huge number of colours the show demands - the 21-colour scrolls contain 17 colours, plus four repeated colours allowing instant frame-to-frame access.

The show's Vari-Lite rig has also been upgraded over the years, from Broadway's 13 VL2Bs and four VL4s to 17 VL2Cs and four VL5s. The VL2Cs also work much harder in the show; every production has had two front-of-house and two on-stage hard-edge followspots (Pani 1200Ws in London); Broadway also had two over-stage beamlight followspots. There was no room for these on tour or in London, so all of the picking up and highlighting work that they used to do now relies on Vari\*Lites and precise positioning of the actors.

The result looks wonderful - the VL2C might have been invented to light someone wearing a white suit! The VL5s have replaced the VL4s so that they can fit inside a piece of scenery - the fit is so tight that the 5s have to be run without top hats. During the production period, Fable used an Artisan to allow quick access to the lamps for correcting focus positions; the show is now run from a Mini-Artisan triggered from the Obsession's MIDI output via Richard Bleasdale's SAM control program running on a Macintosh, with the Shaftesbury's house crew looking after the rig.

Grill is very happy with the look of the show in London, remarking that it is "slicker, because I've had time to do finessing that I never normally get to do. It's probably the cleanest the show has ever been". He is also quick to praise his team, led by production electrician Simon Needle, with Martin Chisnell as assistant lighting designer, Mark Ninnim as VL technician and the Shaftesbury crew. In turn, Needle and his team were also impressed by Grill's knowledge of the show, and the accuracy with which the rig was designed. Grill's

knowledge of the rig, and the quick-to-focus Source Fours meant that the entire show was focused in just two days, despite having to use bosun's chairs to get to sections of the rig.

The result of all of their work is an excellent piece of lighting, with both the fine detailing and the big colour washes pulled off with great success, giving a show that has an aesthetic all its own; the use of the Vari\*Lites as specials through act one is superb. Strangely, the moments when they are used as obvious moving lights - the chases for the pinball machine - aren't as effective, perhaps because this kind of usage has become so common in the three years since the show was created.

## SOUND

Sound designer Steve Canyon Kennedy's work for Tommy has marked something of a career shift for him. Until then better known as the sound engineer for the Broadway productions of many of Martin Levan's shows, including *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera*, the 'legend' has him being recommended as a designer by another sound engineer who was complemented by Pete Townshend and Des McAnuff on the sound for *The Music of Andrew Lloyd Webber*. As a result, Kennedy designed the sound for the show at LaJolla and subsequently in New York, winning the New York Drama Desk sound award for his efforts.

His subsequent success as a designer meant that he could only manage a brief flying visit to London, sandwiched between the start of the US tour of *Carousel* and the opening of a new musical based on the film 'Big'. Taking charge on his behalf was Jon Weston, who mixed the show at LaJolla and has been associate sound designer ever since; sound engineer Jem Kitchen was responsible for installing the London production, which is operated by David Ogilvy with Matt Dando and Helen Stevenson looking after the multitude of radio-mic changes.

The Broadway production of the show was based around a Cadac E-type console, and the show's Cadac link continues here, though the desk has been changed to a J-type supplied, along with the rest of the rig, by Autograph. Although not the largest of the breed in the West End, the 66-input desk is perhaps the most complex, since 38 of the inputs have Cadac's motorised 'flying faders', and it is also equipped with the company's Programmable Routing Modules. These allow effects to be routed, under computer control, to any of the desk's subs, matrices or aux sends, so both recorded and 'live vocal' effects can be shifted quickly round the desk, and so round the theatre. The versatility of the J-type's frame also allowed it to be arranged into an inverted 'L' shape with effects equipment stacked to the roof to the operator's left, all helping to free up extra seats for paying punters.

Live signals arrive at the desk from Sennheiser radio microphones, and from an



eight-piece band in the open pit. Effects are sourced from MiniDisk, and a battery of processing is then used, notably Valvtronic GainWriter 3 units on the guitars. Crest 7001 amplification works alongside BSS delays and the BSS Varicurve EQ system, which are used to correct the sound for the theatre before it is thrown out through a rig of Meyer UPA-1C, UPA2-C and USW-1, Renkus-Heinz CM81, EAW JF80 and JBL Control 1 loudspeakers. Rigging the speakers presented the team with what Weston describes as an "interesting architectural challenge", since the theatre's side boxes curve out in front of the pros booms and the extra cladding on the box fronts and the 'fake pros' of TV monitors made finding the perfect speaker locations difficult.

Kennedy, Weston and Ogilvy then had to tread the delicate line between giving the audience a loud rock and roll concert, and the sound of a musical where every word has to be heard for the story to remain clear. That opening prologue sequence, devoid of dialogue, allows the show to start with the loud rock feel, the lively energy of the excellent band through the sound system contributing in no small part to the constant onwards drive of the first 20 minutes. Thereafter things become more problematic; from mid-centre of the stalls it was often very easy to tell who was singing, but less easy to actually make out the words. Strangely, reports on the show's sound vary enormously and seem to be closely tied to seating location.

This may be a result of an 'American' approach to sound which is different from the route often taken by British designers who will carefully optimise a system so that it sounds, as far as possible, the same from every seat in the house with the sound 'image' tied back to the location of performers on stage. The approach here seems to have been to produce one 'mix' from the main loudspeakers and then let it do its thing out in the auditorium. Those seated where it works rave; those seated elsewhere

either just appreciate the sound's raw energy or grumble about missing lyrics depending on their point of view and, almost certainly, on how well they already know the show. If you have a rough idea of the plot, there are enough visual clues to drag you through the rest.

The live sound is backed up by the effects, which, like the projection, cover the whole range from falling bombs to a barrage of pinball machine sounds, sampled from vintage machines and then layered on top of each other. Unfortunately, what should be a couple of stunning 'anti-sound' moments, when the show drops down to complete silence as a counterpoint to the rest of the action, are spoiled by the background howl of Vari\*Lites, projectors and automation equipment - another reason that David Grill is considering a change to the quieter VL6s. So far, however, the neighbours haven't complained about the noise!

Tommy is a triumph. The images created on stage are stunning, but the show works because they are never simply stunning for their own sake, but move the story along, sometimes by clearly pointing to a location or time, sometimes by offering a surreal view inside the mind of Tommy or the people around him. They also work with the humans in the show rather than dominating them: in the midst of that stunning opening sequence of lighting, projection and sound, one of the most startling moments is when soldiers actually launch themselves out of the plane. This is simply accomplished - they line up with their parachutes on then, one by one, jump through a hole in the floor. But this comes after the location has been set by scenery and projection, and the image is then continued by a dissolve to a scrolling projection of falling parachutes; the resultant whole is much greater than the sum of its parts.

The show grabs you as it starts and, apart from a few moments in the second act, never lets up. Those changes are made possible by the slick automation, but that slickness means you are practically never made aware of it - only on one occasion, when some stage crew enter to clear some extra props, is the 'magic' momentarily broken. The show is highly polished, and it is strange to think that most of the rehearsal period in London was spent getting the new human beings up to speed; practically every other element in the show arrived on floppy disks from earlier productions.

Surprisingly, even the critics seem to have taken to it, since the show avoided the mauling that cut short the run of the last big sixties musical revival, *Hair*. The Shaftesbury's location, more central than Hair's home at the Old Vic, seems to be pulling audiences in. And it would seem to herald something of a rock-opera revival; the show's spiritual descendant, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, is scheduled for a new production in the autumn.



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