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Music and Lyrics by PETE TOWNSHEND

Book by PETE TOWNSHEND & DES MCANUFF

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# CONTENTS

ABOUT <i>THE WHO'S TOMMY</i> .....	3
THE CHARACTERS IN <i>THE WHO'S TOMMY</i> .....	4
PLOT SYNOPSIS.....	5
THEMES AND TOPICS TO EXPLORE	
The Dramatic Structure and Theme of <i>The Who's Tommy</i> .....	13
The Characters in <i>The Who's Tommy</i> .....	13
Exposition: The Opening of <i>The Who's Tommy</i> .....	14
The Historical Background of <i>The Who's Tommy</i> :	
The Second World War.....	15
The Events Surrounding Tommy's Trauma.....	16
Tommy's Disabilities.....	16
Child Abuse as a Theme in <i>The Who's Tommy</i> .....	17
Tommy, Adolescence, and the Image of Pinball.....	18
The Theme of Drug Abuse in <i>The Who's Tommy</i> .....	18
Tommy's Journey.....	19
Tommy and the Mass Culture Hero.....	19
<i>The Who's Tommy</i> as Musical Theater.....	20
The Elements of Musical Theater Collaboration.....	22
<i>The Who's Tommy</i> as Adaptation.....	23
Create Your Own Musical.....	23
Create a Concept Album.....	24
Critical Analysis	
APPENDIX	
About the Authors.....	25
About <i>The Who's Tommy</i> .....	26
About Rock and Roll.....	28
Critical Acclaim.....	30
RESOURCES.....	32



## About The Who's Tommy

*The Who's Tommy*, the hit rock opera, opened on Broadway to rave reviews April 22, 1993. Written and composed by Pete Townshend, one of the most influential songwriters of the past 30 years, *The Who's Tommy* was adapted for the stage by Townshend and the Tony Award-winning director, Des McAnuff.

*The Who's Tommy*, originally a landmark, multi-million copy selling concept album recorded in 1969, is set in Britain between the end of World War II and the early 1960s. It chronicles the adventures of Tommy Walker, who withdraws from the world following a traumatic experience in early childhood. While in his catatonia-like condition, Tommy demonstrates an extraordinary ability to play pinball. Eventually he re-emerges from his inner-world, becomes a charismatic Pinball Wizard and is turned into an unwilling hero who must live up to the demands of his followers.

*The Who's Tommy*, which received five Tony Awards, fulfills Townshend's prophetic lyric "the crowd went crazy when Tommy hit the stage." Re-invented for the 1990s, *The Who's Tommy* is a masterpiece of contemporary American musical theater.

## **The Characters in The Who's Tommy**

FOUR YEAR-OLD TOMMY

TEN YEAR-OLD TOMMY

NARRATOR/TOMMY

MRS. WALKER

CAPTAIN WALKER

UNCLE ERNIE

COUSIN KEVIN

MINISTER

MINISTER'S WIFE

LOVER

FIRST OFFICER

SECOND OFFICER

NURSES

ALLIED SOLDIERS

JUDGE

FIRST BARRISTER

SECOND BARRISTER

RELATIVES (KEVIN'S MOTHER, KEVIN'S FATHER)

LOCAL LADS/SECURITY GUARDS

LOCAL LASSES

HAWKER

HARMONICA PLAYER

GYPSY (THE ACID QUEEN)

FIRST LOCAL LAD

SECOND LOCAL LAD

SPECIALIST

SPECIALIST'S ASSISTANT

NEWS VENDOR

SALLY SIMPSON

MRS. SIMPSON

MR. SIMPSON

DJ

ENSEMBLE (INCLUDES GROUND CREWMAN, FLIGHT CREW, R.A.F. OFFICERS, YOUNG ENGLISH WOMEN, AIDE, AIRBORNE TROOPS, GERMAN FOOT SOLDIERS, ALLIED PRISONERS, GERMAN GUARD, BABY (TOMMY), POLICEMEN AND POLICEWOMEN, INSPECTOR, MILITARY OFFICERS, CONSTABLES, DOCTORS, LAB TECHNICIANS, HOSPITAL STAFF, CHURCH CHOIR, BARKEEP, PSYCHIATRIST, PSYCHIATRIST'S ASSISTANT, THUGS, HARLOTS, DRUNKS, REPORTERS, INTERVIEWER, CROWD)



## Plot Synopsis

*(The action is continuous with no blackouts or curtains until the end of each Act.)*

### Act I, Prologue/Overture

As the Overture begins, a slide projects the date “1940.” CAPTAIN WALKER, a handsome English officer in his mid-20s, is forced to wait as his plane is being fueled. Walker tries to get the attention of a masked WELDER working nearby. After a few unsuccessful attempts, Walker taps the Welder’s back. The Welder removes the mask; the Welder is a woman. Walker offers her a cigarette, which she accepts before walking away. He follows her.

R.A.F. OFFICERS and YOUNG ENGLISH WOMEN appear, dancing the Jitterbug on a smoke-filled dance floor. Walker’s older brother, UNCLE ERNIE, slowly walks around them, sipping tea. Walker and the Welder (now in a party dress), dance across the room and disappear.

The officers and women separate, and we see Walker, still in uniform, and the Welder (now in a wedding dress), standing with their backs to us as a MINISTER faces them and performs a wedding ceremony. Uncle Ernie, who stands next to his brother, hands Walker the ring. After placing the ring on her finger, Walker and his new wife (MRS. WALKER) kiss passionately as the service continues.

We hear air raid sirens; Uncle Ernie puts on a civil defense armband as everyone scatters. Radio broadcasts of English Prime Minister Winston Churchill and German Chancellor Adolph Hitler join the sound of the sirens; we also hear the drone of bomber engines overhead and explosions, accompanied by flashes of light on the horizon. Ernie hurries off.

A bed appears. Mrs. Walker sleeps as Walker, who is dressed, leans over, kisses his wife, and slips away quietly.

Walker is met by an Aide who helps him change into his a parachute-equipped flight suit. Other plane crew members are seen exercising at the edge of an airfield.

Walker joins SOLDIERS who are seated in the hull of a Wellington bomber; the plane takes off. Anti-aircraft shells explode around them as a trap door opens between the two rows of soldiers. One by one, the soldiers leap out of the plane; Walker is the last to exit.

We see Walker descending by parachute as TWO GERMAN SOLDIERS appear, firing machine guns at the sky, which is full of descending paratroopers. The machine gun fire becomes deafening.

### Act I, Scene 1

A slide announces “London.” Uncle Ernie appears and knocks on the front door of the Walker house; he presents the pregnant Mrs. Walker with sardines, eggs, milk — all contraband food items. She thanks him, and as he leaves, he runs into TWO OFFICERS approaching the house. The officers tell Mrs. Walker Captain Walker is missing and they don’t expect to find him (“It’s A Boy”). Mrs. Walker takes the official papers from one of the officers, and steps back into the house, closing the door. The officers see Ernie and hand him a bottle of whiskey as they leave. Ernie slowly opens the bottle and takes a quick drink. He stands uncomfortable, alone. He reopens the bottle and takes a long drink; the doorway to the Walker’s house disappears and Ernie

is left alone on stage. A section of barbed wire appears and a GERMAN GUARD pushes along a line of Allied prisoners, including Walker. A slide announces the date "1941." Walker, seen in silhouette, paces back and forth.

## Scene 2

Uncle Ernie puts away the whiskey bottle as a Nurse pushes Mrs. Walker in a wheelchair. Another Nurse enters holding a small bundle, a baby boy, which she gives to Mrs. Walker ("It's a Boy — Part 2"). As Ernie continues swigging from the whiskey bottle, slides announce the passing years — "1942," "1943," "1944;" we continue to see Walker pace back and forth. After a slide announces "1945," ALLIED SOLDIERS enter the complex in which Walker is kept. One of the soldiers leads Walker away, telling him the Allies have won the war.

## Scene 3

Inside the Walker home, Mrs. Walker, her LOVER and FOUR YEAR-OLD TOMMY are preparing to celebrate her 21st birthday: a cake with 21 candles, a bottle of champagne and 2 glasses sit on a table in the living room. The room also has a large wardrobe with a full length mirror on its face. The Lover, dressed in T-shirt and trousers with suspenders, watches tenderly as Mrs. Walker blows out the candles and cuts the cake. Both express the hope the coming year will be a good one ("Twenty-One"). Mrs. Walker puts the boy in bed and enters the living room to join the Lover. Captain Walker, accompanied by TWO OFFICERS, approaches the front door of the Walker house. After the officers leave, Walker enters as Mrs. Walker and the Lover embrace. When Mrs. Walker moves to touch Walker, the Lover pushes Walker back toward the door, which precipitates a fight and awakens Four Year-Old Tommy. The boy enters the room, and Mrs. Walker turns him toward the mirror, thinking this will keep him from witnessing the scene. The Lover and Walker continue fighting. When Mrs. Walker tries to separate the men, the Lover slaps her; he picks up a chair to throw at Walker. Walker, enraged, pulls out and fires his revolver, hitting the Lover in the head, killing him. After Walker lowers the gun, they notice Tommy, who has watched it all in the mirror. They hysterically tell Tommy, who is still facing the mirror, that he hasn't seen or heard anything, and they demand he never tell a soul what happened.

The POLICE arrive as Mrs. Walker assures Tommy everything will be all right. Tommy doesn't respond to her questions and continues to stare into the mirror; the room takes on an unreal quality: doors take new positions, chairs fly through the air. As the police question Mr. and Mrs. Walker and military policemen arrive, the NARRATOR (ADULT TOMMY) flies down. He will be Four Year-Old Tommy's guide, even as the young boy's mind is occupied with recording everything it sees and hears ("Amazing Journey"). Uncle Ernie enters and tries to embrace his brother, but is held back by a policeman. After taking another drink, Ernie puts his arm around young Tommy, who is still staring in the mirror. The Narrator vanishes as the house disappears.

## Scene 4

Captain Walker, in uniform, is standing in court before a JUDGE and BARRISTERS. The Judge pronounces the Captain "Not Guilty" of murder, and Mrs. Walker and Uncle Ernie celebrate the finding with the rest of the courtroom. When the Judge addresses Four Year-Old Tommy, we hear

what Tommy hears: the language becomes unintelligible and he stares straight ahead. Tommy's parents realize what they may have done to him.

### Scene 5

Tommy is taken to a hospital where he is rushed from room to room for a series of tests and evaluations: a YOUNG DOCTOR delivers Tommy to a NURSE who takes his pulse and gets a urine sample, as another DOCTOR waits nearby; another NURSE checks his reflexes and takes blood; a DOCTOR unbuttons his shirt and listens to his heartbeat; another DOCTOR looks into his eyes and ears. After studying Tommy's charts, a DOCTOR addresses the Walkers, shaking his head. The Walkers go away, leaving Tommy with the Doctors ("Sparks").

A slide announces "1950." TEN YEAR-OLD TOMMY, a balloon tied to his wrist, appears with a Nurse to meet his parents. The Narrator floats down ("Amazing Journey" — Reprise), takes the balloon from the boy and floats away with it.

### Scene 6

The Walker family — including Ten Year-Old Tommy, Mr. and Mrs. Walker, Uncle Ernie, COUSIN KEVIN and other relatives — attend church at Christmas. The MINISTER and his wife listen as a choir sings. The family comments that Tommy isn't able to appreciate Christmas ("Christmas"). The family greets the Minister and they all sit down to Christmas dinner. Even though there is a space for Tommy at the table, he sits on the floor in front of a large unopened present. As everyone says grace before eating, Walker continues to comment on Tommy's condition. Uncle Ernie plays the French horn to amuse the family, trying to get some response from Tommy, who doesn't respond to anything. Walker guides Tommy to his place at the table, and Mrs. Walker feeds him. The Narrator enters and touches Tommy, who gets out of his chair in response to the touch. Tommy's parents wonder if he has moved in response to their questions, as the Minister and the family wonder if Tommy will ever be "normal."

The Minister and his wife leave after dinner, and Uncle Ernie pours himself some beer as Carolers appear at the door. As the Walkers dance to the Carolers' music, Cousin Kevin picks up Tommy and spins him around like a toy. After some initial concern, Mrs. Walker relaxes and the Carolers comment that Tommy is oblivious to the meaning of Christmas. Everyone except Uncle Ernie leaves the stage.

### Scene 7

Uncle Ernie is now in a bar, finishing his glass of beer. He leaves the bar and staggers to the door of the Walker house. He is there to baby-sit Tommy. Mrs. Walker is nervous about leaving Ernie alone with the boy, but Walker assures her everything will be fine ("Do You Think It's Alright?")

After the Walkers leave for the evening, Uncle Ernie tells Tommy — who gives no sign of understanding — he is going to sexually abuse him ("Fiddle About"). Ernie takes Tommy to the bedroom and puts him on the bed, which begins to spin; Tommy stares up at the ceiling, saying nothing. The bed stops spinning when the Walkers return home. Ernie jumps up to meet them at the door. After Ernie leaves, the Walkers fall on the couch in an embrace; they do not immediately

notice Tommy has come into the room and is staring at the wardrobe mirror. His reflection becomes the Narrator, who implores the boy to see him ("See Me, Feel Me"). The room lights fade and we can only see young Tommy and the Narrator in the mirror.

### Scene 8

Tommy is being watched by Cousin Kevin, his new baby-sitter. Kevin sings how Tommy will be his new toy as he puts a lampshade on Tommy's head; he takes him outside and dumps him upside-down in a trash can ("Cousin Kevin"). Tommy is taken to the church youth group, where Kevin and his friends taunt him; they stop for a moment when the Minister and his wife enter.

Kevin and his friends put a penny in the pinball machine and put Tommy in front of it; they go off to play pool. Tommy begins to play the machine. He is soon winning, racking up a huge score. All the others gather around Tommy. The Narrator appears and articulates the feelings of excitement and awe the crowd feels as they watch Tommy play ("Sensation").

The Minister returns with Tommy's parents, who pull him away from the machine. They look at each other, recognizing pinball as the first thing Tommy has responded to since the murder.

### Scene 9

The Walkers take Tommy to a psychiatric clinic, where he is tested by the staff ("Sparks" — Reprise). When Tommy responds to the tests in his usual puppet-like manner, the Walkers again become very discouraged.

### Scene 10

Tommy and his parents return home. A HAWKER approaches Walker, who has lingered outside the door. The Hawker tells Walker about a woman and shows him some photos of her ("Eyesight to the Blind"). Walker goes into the house and gets Tommy; they go with the Hawker.

### Scene 11

They arrive at the Isle of Dogs, a courtyard formed by walls of corrugated metal fencing. Fires burn in oil drums while a group of men and women pass around syringes, while others drink rubbing alcohol and bad beer. The Hawker tells Walker the woman in the picture — a prostitute known as the ACID QUEEN — has a magical power to heal.

The ACID QUEEN appears after shooting up with a syringe. She tells Walker if he pays for her services, she can make Tommy respond like a normal boy ("Acid Queen"). Walker pays her, but as she is about to take Tommy away, Walker changes his mind; he picks Tommy up and rushes home with the boy. The Hawker takes the money from the Gypsy (The Acid Queen) and gives her a full syringe. As she goes off to shoot up again, the Hawker leaves.

### Scene 12

A slide announces "1958" as Cousin Kevin, accompanied by a few TEDDY BOYS, arrives. Kevin and the Teddy Boys excitedly tell how Tommy has become the world's greatest pinball player ("Pinball Wizard"). Soon they are at an Amusement Arcade. As they dance, we see Tommy —

now 18 and portrayed by the Narrator — playing a pinball machine; as his score keeps rising, bells ring, lights flash and sirens wail. Kevin and the crowd continue to extoll Tommy.

## **Act II, Underture**

As the orchestra plays the “Underture,” a slide announces “1960.” Tommy plays pinball as a crowd of LADS and LASSES excitedly cheer him on. When Tommy, now 20 years old and a neighborhood celebrity, beats the machine, they pick him up and carry him over their heads through the streets, chanting as they move.

### **Scene 13**

They carry him to his mother, who is at the Sunshine Launderette. As she hums “It’s a Boy,” Walker enters to announce he has found a new doctor for Tommy (“There’s a Doctor I’ve Found”). They exit with Tommy.

### **Scene 14**

A team of SPECIALISTS examines Tommy, who hears only the voice of Ten Year-Old Tommy. When the Specialists turn Tommy toward a large mirror, we see Ten Year-Old Tommy and Four Year-Old Tommy. Tommy joins them as they all sing to each other (“Go to the Mirror”); Tommy begins to levitate as he sings with his younger selves; his levitation is unseen by his parents and the specialists. His parents again wonder what is happening to him. He raises his right hand and stares at it.

### **Scene 15**

As Cousin Kevin and the neighborhood Lads toss a ball, they surround Tommy. They ask him if he’s cured (“Tommy, Can You Hear Me?”). The Walker house appears: Uncle Ernie is asleep on the couch and the Walkers are playing cards. The Lads, who have carried Tommy home, deposit him on the couch, waking Ernie. Ten Year-Old Tommy appears in the wardrobe mirror and calls Tommy’s name over and over; Tommy walks over to the mirror and stares at it.

### **Scene 16**

The Walkers, seeing Tommy stare into the mirror, express their frustration with his condition and its effect on their own relationship; they tell Tommy they’ve almost given up hope for him (“I Believe My Own Eyes”). Tommy continues to stare at the mirror, where the image of Four Year-Old Tommy is still calling his name. Walker leaves the room in frustration.

Mrs. Walker begins to ask Tommy what he sees in the mirror. She asks if he can sense her rising anger. She picks up a chair, hurls it at and shatters the mirror (“Smash the Mirror”). We hear the sound of the gunshot from long ago as the stage, for the first time, is plunged into darkness. We see the Lover thrown across the room by the force of the bullet. We also hear the Walkers telling Tommy he has neither seen nor heard anything, and he shouldn’t ever say anything to anyone, ever. Finally, we hear Tommy scream.

When the lights come up again, Tommy is staring at the smashed mirror. As Mrs. Walker watches, Tommy begins to move around the room: he walks to the spot where the Lover had fallen years before and touches it; he walks to the mirror and touches it; he touches his own face. He faces his mother and reaches out to her. She embraces him, but he doesn't return the embrace. Mrs. Walker rushes to get her husband.

Tommy celebrates his new-found consciousness, as first the Walkers, then Uncle Ernie and finally the Minister all come to marvel at his recovery ("I'm Free"). Walker tries to embrace his son, who rebuffs him; Tommy then steps past his parents and walks off into the street.

### Scene 17

Uncle Ernie is giving an interview about Tommy's cure to a NEWSPAPER REPORTER; when Ernie tries to sell the reporter a photo, the reporter leaves. Tommy enters and sees Ernie throw the photo away. Tommy's face is seen on the many video screens framing the stage. Tommy exits as a NEWSPAPER VENDOR enters hawking the front page article, which is about Tommy. FOUR LADS enter, steal the papers and continue hawking them ("Miracle Cure").

Ernie begins reading a paper as Tommy enters, riding a pinball machine and announcing his own arrival ("Sensation" — Reprise). When the machine lands, Tommy is surrounded by awed reporters. When the Walkers arrive, the reporters soon swamp them, also. A slide announces "1961," as the Walkers tell the reporters though they don't see much of Tommy any more, they hope he is happy.

As the reporters move to Tommy, he is joined by Cousin Kevin and some of the Lads, now dressed as SECURITY GUARDS. A slide announces "1962," as Kevin is interviewed by a TV crew; he says he has always believed in his cousin's greatness. A slide announces "1963." Tommy, now a star with a following, refuses an interviewer's question about his private life. His parents enter the studio unseen by Tommy. As Tommy tells the audience to follow him, more Lads dressed in uniforms join Tommy and Kevin ("I'm Free/Pinball Wizard" — Reprise). Video images of Tommy fill the stage as he climbs atop a huge, mirrored pinball machine. After donning a mask which blinds, deafens and mutes him, he straps himself onto the machine, which bucks and spins like a wild animal under him. Tommy plays the machine until it explodes into fire.

When Tommy steps back from the machine, a huge unseen crowd roars. Tommy mounts a podium in a huge stadium, facing a cheering crowd below him, and sings again of his freedom ("I'm Free" — 2nd Reprise). As Security Guards patrol the screaming, adoring crowd, Tommy spins and dances as spotlights illuminate his face. The crowd asks him "How Can We Follow?"

### Scene 18

We see a video of a long line of people. Uncle Ernie is hawking and selling "Tommy" merchandise to the people on line: T-shirts, mirrors, sunglasses, badges — anything ("Tommy's Holiday Camp"). We see a video of Tommy's face as Security Guards, led by Cousin Kevin, hustle Uncle Ernie away.

**Scene 19**

The Security Guards get off the podium, swinging their billy clubs, leaving Tommy in the background. Cousin Kevin tells the story of Sally Simpson, whose father won't let her go to the stadium to see Tommy; as he sings, we see the scene played out ("Sally Simpson"). Sally sneaks out of the house and rides her motor scooter to see Tommy. When Sally arrives at the stadium, the crowd is in a frenzy; the police and the guards protect Tommy as he steps onto the stage. Sally rushes the stage and climbs the podium. When she tries to throw her scarf around Tommy's neck, he pushes her back into the Guards, who beat her up. Tommy jumps off the stage to stop the Guards; he picks her up as the crowd grows silent, watching it all.

**Scene 20**

Tommy announces he's going home, and invites the stadium fans to come with him ("Welcome"). Tommy collects the clubs from the Security Guards as the scene shifts from the stadium to the front of the Walker house. Tommy and Sally enter the house where his parents and Uncle Ernie are having tea; the fans and reporters all try to enter the house. Mrs. Walker helps the injured Sally into the bedroom as more and more people arrive at the door.

When Sally asks Tommy how she and all the fans can be more like him ("Sally's Question"), Tommy says he's been waiting years to become more like them. The crowd doesn't want to hear this news from their idol and they complain ("We're Not Gonna Take It"). Tommy replies they don't need him to feel excitement. Sally and the crowd, sorely disillusioned, exit, leaving Tommy's parents, Uncle Ernie and Cousin Kevin.

Tommy looks into the mirror of the wardrobe and sees Ten Year-Old Tommy; they sing together. Tommy embraces each member of his family in a gesture of forgiveness; all the others in the story join Tommy as he sings of his realization of his connection to his family and the world ("Finale"). The show ends as everyone but Tommy exits; we see Four Year-Old Tommy and Ten Year-Old Tommy staring in different directions as the adult Tommy looks at the audience through the frame of the mirror.

# Themes and Topics to Explore

## Questions and Assignments

Our study guide focuses on a wide-ranging list of themes and topics suggested by the style and content of *The Who's Tommy*:

Avenues for exploring each theme and topic are suggested in the form of:

**QUESTIONS:** Designed to prompt in-class discussions before and after viewing or reading the show.

**ASSIGNMENTS:** Designed to be researched and written out of class.



## The Dramatic Structure and Theme of *The Who's Tommy*

### Questions and Discussion Prompts

- Tell the story of *The Who's Tommy* in one sentence.
- Identify the central theme of *The Who's Tommy*.
- At what point did *The Who's Tommy* first grab your attention? When did you start to care about the characters? When did you become excited by the music and lyrics?
- What is at stake for Tommy, his mother, his father?
- *The Who's Tommy* tells its story through a collage of fragmented vignettes. Why do you think the authors chose this format?
- What influences from film technique do you find in the structure of *The Who's Tommy*?

### Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts

- Tell the story of *The Who's Tommy* in a short paragraph. Be sure to include all main characters.
- The show has a dramatic arc which traces Tommy's recovery from the trauma he suffered in his childhood. Trace this journey.
- How are we given information related to the theme of *The Who's Tommy*. What are the authors' feelings about the theme?
- Write about the ways in which the following ideas are explored in *The Who's Tommy*:

Games and life  
Dreams and desires  
Illusion and reality  
Time and memory  
Loneliness  
Fame and celebrity  
Forgiveness

## The Characters in *The Who's Tommy*

### Questions and Discussion Prompts

- With the exception of the family members, we know very little about the other characters. List the other characters and describe their function in the story.

### Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts

- When writers create characters, they often invent character maps before they begin to write. Create an after-the-fact character map for Tommy (after he loses his ability to see, hear, and speak); his mother, his father, his Uncle Ernie, Cousin Kevin, the Gypsy, and Sally Simpson.

Describe physical and emotional characteristics in great detail. Describe a typical day in each character's life.

- Write an inner monologue for a character revealing what the character might have been thinking in one of these situations:
  - Mrs. Walker, when she sees her husband come in the door after believing him to be dead.
  - Captain Walker, when he sees his wife with another man.
  - Tommy, when his parents tell him never to tell what he saw.
  - Uncle Ernie, when he sees Tommy immediately after the murder.
  - Mrs. Walker, when she realizes what has happened to Tommy after the murder.
  - Tommy, when the judge pronounces his father innocent.
  - Tommy, when Uncle Ernie sexually abuses him.
  - Captain Walker, when he considers handing Tommy over to the Gypsy (The Acid Queen).
  - Tommy, when he gets his first glimpse of the pinball machine.
  - Cousin Kevin, when he realizes Tommy is cured and famous.
  - Uncle Ernie, when he realizes Tommy can speak.
  - Sally Simpson, on her way to the concert.
  - Mrs. Walker, when Tommy comes home.
  - Uncle Ernie, when Tommy forgives him.

## **Exposition: The Opening of The Who's Tommy**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- What must the opening section of a movie, novel, or theatrical work accomplish? What are some of the devices used in each of these forms to reach these goals?
- What is exposition? List all expository devices employed in the opening of *The Who's Tommy*.
- Study the opening of *The Who's Tommy*. What do we learn about the characters and their histories in the opening? What does it tell us to expect from the show ahead?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Retell the events of the opening sequence of *The Who's Tommy* in short story form.
- The opening of *The Who's Tommy* is a prologue. What is a prologue? From what theatrical tradition does it come? What other musicals and plays have prologues?

- Study the openings of five other American musicals. Make a list of eight qualities you think an effective opening for a musical theater piece should have.
- Imagine you have been given the task of finding a new opening for *The Who's Tommy*. Describe your opening. Explain why you chose it.

## **The Historical Background of The Who's Tommy: The Second World War**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Mr. and Mrs. Walker get married although he is about to leave for combat duty. Would you marry someone who was about to go off to fight in a war? Why? Why not?
- How did his father's departure affect Tommy's life?
- Why is Walker confused when he is liberated from the prison camp?
- Is Mrs. Walker wrong to have become involved with another man? What events lead to the tragedy that Tommy witnesses? Could the tragedy have been avoided? How?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- The show begins in 1940. Describe the geo-political climate in 1940.
- Tommy's mother is a welder. Was it common for women to hold such positions in 1940? Explore the role women played in war work.
- What is *blitzkrieg*?
- The voice of Winston Churchill and Adolph Hitler are heard during the prologue. Write profiles of both of men.
- Learn about the German camps for Allied prisoners of war such as the one where Tommy's father was kept interned.
- In Scene Two, Allied soldiers free Walker. Read about the real liberation of the prisoner of war camps in 1945.
- Read about real instances of military men who upon returning home discover their wives have taken new husbands. Do any of these stories end tragically? If not, how did the situation get resolved?
- Explore the relationship between World War II and Rock and Roll. Rock music has been viewed as a form of controlled chaos which was a reaction to the horrors of the war.

## **The Events Surrounding Tommy's Trauma**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- What does Tommy observe that sends him into a “quiet vibration land”?
- Do you think his parents behavior after the murder contributes to Tommy's state of shock? Why? What should they have done?
- When Tommy sees elements of the room magically shift, what does this indicate to us?
- What is foreshadowed when Uncle Ernie enters and finds Tommy staring in the mirror during the police interrogation?
- Tommy trauma deepens when the judge pronounces his father not guilty. Why does this happen?
- When the Walkers realize Tommy's condition, they take him to a series of doctors. What is the result? What comment are the authors making with this segment of the piece?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Write an essay on the lyric “Sickness will surely take the mind where minds can't usually go.”
- Research the manner in which psychologically disturbed children are treated today.
- What is autism? How does the behavior of autistic children compare to Tommy's?
- Research the role of music therapy in treating children with severe emotional problems and conditions such as autism.

## **Tommy's Disabilities**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Should blind students and deaf students be “mainstreamed” (schooled with “normal” children)? What are the advantages and disadvantages of mainstreaming?
- Should a society hide away its members who have physical or mental disabilities? How are such members of society treated in your school, neighborhood and community?
- Tommy is subjected to derision by his fellow students. Why do you suppose some people react to disability with varying levels of discomfort?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Investigate how blind and/or deaf children are educated in the public schools in your community.
- Research the life of Louis Braille, the man who invented the Braille alphabet, a notation system for the blind in which bumps on the page correspond to letters and punctuation. How did Braille become blind? How were blind children treated in his day? How did the Braille system bring music within the reach of the blind? What is the current attitude among blind educators towards the use of the Braille alphabet?

- Read about blindness in America today. What proportion of the population is blind? What are some causes of blindness?
- Imagine spending a day blind. How your life would change?
- Read about deafness in America today. How many people are deaf? What are some causes of deafness?
- Imagine spending a day deaf. How your life would change?
- Tommy is also mute. What causes muteness? Does muteness often accompany deafness?
- Imagine spending a day mute. How your life would change?
- Research the disagreement in the deaf community over the use of lip reading as opposed to the use of sign language.
- What is the “deaf nation?”
- Learn basic sign language.
- Attend a performance of a play featuring audio description for the blind (a narrative heard over a headset describing, for the benefit of the blind, the visual portion of the show) and an on-stage signer for the deaf.
- Write an audio description for a performance of *The Who's Tommy*.

## **Child Abuse as a Theme in The Who's Tommy**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Discuss the abuse Uncle Ernie inflicts on Tommy. What are the circumstances under which this incident takes place? Are Tommy's parents to blame for leaving him with Uncle Ernie?
- Uncle Ernie is depicted having a problem with alcohol consumption. Does this in any way excuse his behavior toward Tommy?
- It has been suggested Uncle Ernie abuses Tommy because he is an outsider trying to find affection. Do you think this is a valid explanation of his behavior?
- Is Tommy's forgiveness of Uncle Ernie believable? Did you want him to forgive Uncle Ernie? Why? Why not?
- In the film version of *Tommy*, Uncle Ernie is killed by a mob of Tommy's dissatisfied followers. Is this a more dramatically satisfying “end” for Uncle Ernie? Why? Why not?
- Discuss the abuse Tommy experiences at the hands of Cousin Kevin. Have you ever experienced physical abuse from an older cousin, brother or sister? How did you deal with it? What role does Cousin Kevin play in Tommy's later life? How does Tommy treat him at the end of the story?
- If you had an experience like Tommy had with Uncle Ernie or Cousin Kevin, would you tell your parents? Why? Why not? What do you imagine are the consequences of telling? Of not telling?

**Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Research the problem of child sexual abuse by relatives in the United States.
- Research the difficulties of gathering testimony from young victims of sexual abuse.
- What protections does the American legal system afford young victims of sexual abuse?
- What kinds of after-effects do child victims of sexual abuse suffer?

**Tommy, Adolescence, and the Image of Pinball****Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Some observers see *The Who's Tommy* as a study of adolescent isolation and the struggle to communicate, and as a battle to grow up and face down the demons of adult life. Is this a valid interpretation of the piece? Why? Why not?
- Like many adolescents who are different from their peers, Tommy is the object of peer group pressures. Have you ever been the object of peer group pressure? Describe the circumstance and the outcome of your experience.
- Discuss Tommy's pinball playing as an expression of rage and frustration.
- Discuss pinball as a metaphor for Rock and Roll.

**Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Have you ever played pinball? Do you still play? How did your parents react to that? What motivated you to play pinball? What other kinds of activities provide similar experiences?
- Tommy excels at pinball. Write about something you excel at and discuss how it makes you feel to know you do something very well.
- One of the characters observes Tommy is able to do so well at pinball because he has no distractions. Does this remain the case?
- Research the history of pinball.

**The Theme of Drug Abuse in The Who's Tommy****Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- During one of the most dramatic segments of *The Who's Tommy*, his father takes the extreme action of bringing him to a drug-addicted prostitute who promises to jolt this boy back to a conscious state. However, at the last minute, Captain Walker panics and pulls Tommy out of her grasp. What do you think this scene means?
- How might Tommy's story have turned out if Captain Walker hadn't pulled him away from the Gypsy?

- In the film, Uncle Ernie, rather than Captain Walker, takes Tommy to the Gypsy who tries to cure him with sex and drugs, but fails. Do you think it is a better dramatic choice to have Captain Walker bring Tommy to the Gypsy? Why? Why not?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Research the history of drug abuse among teenagers in the United States.
- Research current efforts to curb drug abuse among teenagers. Do statistics indicate an increase or decrease in teenage drug abuse?
- Can drug addiction be cured? What are some current methods for helping addicts break their addiction?
- Some suggest teenagers use drugs as a way of coping with adolescent stress. What are other ways troubled teenagers might deal with problems?
- Write about an experience someone you know has had with drugs.
- Research the arguments for legalizing drugs. Prepare a summary of the pros and cons of this idea.

## **Tommy's Journey**

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Write about Tommy's battle with Tommy. In other words, write or explore how Tommy confronts the demons of Four Year-Old Tommy and Ten Year-Old Tommy to become whole again.
- Trace the steps of Tommy's physical journey.
- Trace the steps of Tommy's metaphysical, or spiritual, journey.
- Discuss the end of Tommy's journey as a metaphor for our need to come to grips with who we really are.
- What does his family learn in the process of reuniting?

## **Tommy and the Mass Culture Hero**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- What is a hero? What is a celebrity?
- Do we need heroes? If so, why? Why do we need to tear them down?
- Why do Tommy's fans celebrate him as a hero? Is he a hero? Why do his fans treat him like a hero?
- Discuss Uncle Ernie's willingness to exploit Tommy's celebrity. What current real-life situations does this behavior mirror?
- Why do Tommy's fans reject him when he speaks the truth?

- Read about the difference between heroes and celebrities in *The Image*, by Daniel Boorstin.
- Write about Sally's injury as a metaphor for the damage worshipping false heroes can bring to fans.
- Research instances when fans have been injured or killed at concerts.
- Discuss the role of advertising in the lives major sports figures. Are sports superstars heroes or celebrities.
- Write an essay on Tommy's refusal to be worshipped by his fans.

## **The Who's Tommy as Musical Theater**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- *The Who's Tommy* breaks many established conventions of musical theater. What are some of the ways in which it breaks those conventions?
- *The Who's Tommy* begins with a Prologue/Overture. Overtures can serve different functions: they can prepare and relax an audience for the start of the show by presenting a medley of songs from the show; they can be discreet musical numbers which set the musical tone of the show. How does the Overture function in *The Who's Tommy*? What does the Prologue/Overture tell us musically about what is to follow?
- A considerable amount of exposition is presented during the Prologue/Overture: we are introduced to some of the main characters and we learn something of their histories. Does the music of the Overture help us learn this information? Does the music mirror or illustrate any of the stage action that occurs during the Prologue/Overture?
- The way a show is orchestrated can add a lot to our understanding of characters, story and the themes of a show. Listen to the Prologue/Overture of *The Who's Tommy*. What instruments can you identify? Why do you think those particular instruments were used and what, if anything, do those choices tell you?
- Approximately 23 years pass over the course of *The Who's Tommy*. Is that time change reflected in the lyrics or music of the score?
- Listen to "It's a Boy" and read the scene in the libretto. A lot of exposition is presented in the song. Discuss how that information is presented to the audience. Is it accomplished through the music? The lyric? Is it done visually?
- Listen to The Who's 1969 recording of *Tommy*. Are there differences — musical or lyrical — between the 1969 version and the 1993 stage adaptation? If there are differences, discuss how those changes affect the dramatic impact of the musical.
- There is very little dialogue in *The Who's Tommy*; there is almost continuous music. Is this an effective way to tell this particular story?
- Are there any moments in the show when a song reaches a climax and ends in such a way as to allow the audience to applaud? As an audience member, what impact does this have on you?



- Silence is used sparingly in *The Who's Tommy*. Find those moments of silence and discuss the effect of those moments.
- Reprises — repetitions of songs, in whole or in part — are used throughout *The Who's Tommy*. Listen to the score and identify the reprised songs; discuss the meaning and effect of these reprises.
- *The Who's Tommy* makes extensive use of the electric guitar. However, “Tommy Can You Hear Me” uses an acoustic guitar. What effect does this have on our understanding of the story?
- The Who's 1969 recording of *Tommy* was one of the most popular albums of the last 25 years; many of its Broadway audience members were very familiar with most of the songs long before they ever saw the show. Discuss the implications of this for the reception of the show.
- Rock music is frequently a very rhythmically-driven music, encouraging listeners to dance. Listen to *The Who's Tommy*. How much of the score sounds like dance music? Does the music's “dance-ability” detract or add to your enjoyment of the story?
- Imagine and discuss the meaning and impact of *The Who's Tommy* if the score used Jazz instead of Rock; if the score used Country music instead of Rock.
- Rock music, like most other musical genres, can come in a variety of styles. Read a history of Rock music to understand some of its different styles. How many Rock styles does the score of *The Who's Tommy* utilize?
- How do the different songs use tempos to help us understand character or situation?
- Does the fact that “Tommy's Holiday Camp” is so different stylistically from the rest of the score tell you anything about Uncle Ernie?
- Rock music is traditionally performed and listened to at high volume levels. Is it important the score of *The Who's Tommy* also be heard at a high volume? Why? Why not?
- Discuss the use and effect of the choral moments in the piece — what happens when the entire ensemble sings and what does it tell us or make us feel?
- *The Who's Tommy* is a classic Rock score. Do you think Rock music and other pop music forms belong in the theater? Why? Why not? How might Rock and Roll be used in musical theater?
- Pete Townshend wrote one new, complete song for the show, “I Believe My Own Eyes.” Is it different stylistically — musically or lyrically — from the other songs? If it is, does this work dramatically? Does it help our understanding of characters or plot?

### Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts

- *The Who's Tommy* is a Rock opera. Trace the history of Rock opera. When did it begin? Listen to three other Rock operas. List ten qualities unique to this form of musical theater.
- “Tommy's Holiday Camp” is the only song in the show which is not a Rock or Blues song; its roots lie in the British vaudeville and music hall traditions. Research the British music hall tradition.

- Compare *The Who's Tommy* to a musical theater work such as *West Side Story* or *Meredith Willson's The Music Man* in terms of heroes and heroines, plot structure, and subplots.
- Select one of the following songs of *The Who's Tommy*:

"It's a Boy"  
 "Twenty-One"  
 "Amazing Journey"  
 "Christmas"  
 "Do You Think It's Alright?"  
 "Fiddle About"  
 "See Me, Feel Me"  
 "Cousin Kevin"  
 "Sensation"  
 "Acid Queen"  
 "Pinball Wizard"  
 "There's a Doctor I've Found"  
 "Go to the Mirror, Boy"  
 "Tommy, Can You Hear Me?"  
 "I Believe My Own Eyes"  
 "Smash the Mirror"  
 "I'm Free"  
 "Miracle Cure"  
 "How Can We Follow?"  
 "Tommy's Holiday Camp"  
 "Sally Simpson"  
 "Sally's Question"  
 "We're Not Going to Take It"  
 "Finale"

Summarize the contents of this song. Discuss:

- a. What do we learn about the character or characters? What do the lyric and music reveal of their philosophies?
  - b. What do we learn about the larger themes of the show from the lyric and music?
- Explore and write about other works by Pete Townshend.

## **The Elements of Musical Theater Collaboration**

### **Questions and Discussion Prompts**

- Musical theater is one of the most collaborative art forms. What is the meaning of the word collaboration?
- In what other fields is collaboration an important element?

- How can collaboration and competition be reconciled?
- Is compromise inevitable in collaboration? Must an artist sacrifice artistic vision to be part of a collaboration?
- Pete Townshend writes both lyrics and music, but he collaborated with director Des McAnuff on the book for *The Who's Tommy*. What would you imagine would be some of the advantages writing both lyrics and music? The disadvantages?

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Look at a program from a musical theater production. List all collaborators involved in getting a musical from the page to the stage.
- Write about your own experiences collaborating. What was positive about the experience? What made it difficult?
- Write a short story with another person. What made this process better than writing alone? What made it more difficult? If you had the choice, would you write alone or with someone else?

## **The Who's Tommy as Adaptation**

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Listen to the original 1969 recording of the Rock opera *Tommy*. Then listen to its Broadway cast recording. Compare the experience of hearing the albums and seeing the theatrical version. Compare the experience of listening to the original album and listening to the recording of the Broadway production. How do the two versions differ?
- Watch the film version of *Tommy* directed by Ken Russell. Compare the film and the theatrical adaptation. What are the differences? Why do you think these changes were made?
- Using *The Who's Tommy* as an example, how does the medium in which a story is presented change its message?
- In which version of *Tommy* do you find the music most powerful? Why?

## **Create Your Own Musical**

### **Assignments:**

- Create a musical about someone your age who has to surmount a seemingly insurmountable difficulty.
- Make a list of characters and create character maps for each of them.
- Decide on a physical setting and draw sketches of the setting.
- Write an outline of the story, deciding whether you will use a linear or fragmented structure.
- Write the opening scene.

- Write a lyric or melody or both for one of the songs.
- Create costume and set designs for your show.

## **Create a Concept Album**

### **Assignments:**

- Write a narrative about someone you know well. Divide the life into song units. Make these songs part of a concept album. Who will you cast to perform these songs? (Feel free to cast celebrities or whomever you might think appropriate to your material.) Write the words and/or music for one of the songs.
- Select an extended piece of instrumental music you know well. Create a story suggested to you by the music. Create a theatrical vision of the story; a collection of images to accompany the story. Describe the song units that would relate the story. Who would the characters be?

## **Critical Analysis**

### **Assignments: Research and Writing Prompts**

- Write a review of a performance of *The Who's Tommy*. You may wish to include any combination of the following elements in your review:
  1. Did the show hold your interest? How?
  2. Describe the manner in which the story was presented to the audience.
  3. What was the structure of the story? Was there a simple story or were there multiple stories?
  4. Describe the way music and lyrics worked in the show.
  5. Describe the sets, costumes, lighting, and musical accompaniment. How did these elements add meaning to the show?
  6. Describe the effectiveness of the performers.
  7. Discuss the ideas presented in the show. Analyze their importance to your reader.
  8. Explain why your reader should make an effort to see the show.

## Appendix

The following background material and bibliography are designed to enrich your exploration of the Themes and Topics.

### About the Authors

PETE TOWNSHEND (composer/lyricist/co-bookwriter) was born in 1945 in London. In 1962, after attending art school, he began playing guitar, singing and writing songs for The Detours, a band which included Roger Daltry on vocals and was soon to include John Entwistle on bass and French horn. After drummer Keith Moon joined the band, the name was changed to the High Numbers. The band recorded one single, "I'm the Face," which established their commercial viability. Their managers changed the name of the band to The Who, and encouraged Townshend to become the principal songwriter, with Daltry as lead vocalist. In 1965, The Who's single, "I Can't Explain," reached the Top 10 in Britain and the Top 100 in America. The Who went on to become, after the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, one of the most influential British rock bands of the 1960s and 1970s. In addition to *The Who's Tommy*, Townshend is the principal composer of the recorded Rock opera *Quadrophenia* (1973) and other albums by The Who, including *The Who Sings My Generation* (1965), *Happy Jack* (1966), *The Who Sell Out* (1967), *Tommy* (1969), *The Magic Bus: The Who on Tour* (1970), *Live at Leeds* (1970), *Who's Next* (1971), *The Who by Numbers* (1975), *Tommy* (1975 film), *Story of The Who* (1976), *Who Are You* (1978), *Quadrophenia* (1979 film; also producer), *The Kids Are Alright* (1979 film; also producer), *Face Dances* (1981), and *It's Hard* (1982). His solo albums include *Who Came First* (1972), *Rough Mix* (1977), *Secret Policemen's Ball* (1980), *Empty Glass* (1981), *All the Best Cowboys Have Chinese Eyes* (1982), *Scoop* (1983), *White City* (1985), *Another Scoop* (1986), *Deep End Live* (1987), *The Iron Man* (1989), *Psychoderelict* (1993) and *Coolwalkingsmoothtalkingstraightwalkingfirestoking—The Best of Pete Townshend* (1996). He has written over 300 songs, many of which became pop hits. Townshend is also a short story writer who has published *Horse's Neck* (1985), a collection of short pieces; he is a commissioning editor at the publishing house Faber & Faber. He has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

DES MCANUFF (co-bookwriter/director), a director, playwright, composer and producer, was born in 1952 in Princeton, Illinois, but grew up in Canada. An avid Rock and Roll fan and player from the age of thirteen, he began working in theater during his last year in high school when he wrote and directed a musical after being turned down for a role in a Toronto production of *Hair*. He briefly studied acting at the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute's theater school. He became the assistant artistic director of the Toronto Free Theater, while continuing to write, direct and compose music for theater. After moving to New York in 1976, he joined the Chelsea Theater Center, soon becoming an assistant director and dramaturg. A split in the company led McAnuff and three other members — Michael David, Sherman Warner and Ed Strong — to form the Dodger Theater, which later became Dodger Productions, a theatrical producing partnership. Dodger Theater productions that McAnuff directed include *Gimme Shelter*, by Barrie Keefe (1978), and his own pieces: *Holeville* (Jeff Wangel, co-writer — 1979) and *Leave It to Beaver Is Dead* (Larry David, co-writer —

1979). For the 1981-82 season, he was an artist-in-residence at the New York Shakespeare Festival's Public Theater, where he directed *Mary Stuart*, by Wolfgang Hildesheimer (1981), *How It All Began*, by John Palmer (1981), Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part 1* (1981), and his own musical *The Death of Von Richthofen As Witnessed From Earth* (1982). In 1983 McAnuff was named artistic director of La Jolla Playhouse, a position he held until 1994. During his tenure, La Jolla Playhouse established a worldwide reputation for presenting new and challenging work by playwrights and directors, including Bill Irwin, Robert Woodruff, Peter Sellars, Lee Blessing and Geoff Hoyle. He has directed over 20 productions at La Jolla. In addition to *The Who's Tommy*, McAnuff has directed productions of several productions that have subsequently moved to Broadway, including the musicals *Big River* (1984) and *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* (1995 Broadway revival), and the Lee Blessing plays, *A Walk in the Woods* (1988) and *Two Rooms* (1993). He is a recipient of two Tony Awards for Best Director (1985 — *Big River*, 1993 — *The Who's Tommy*). As a member of Dodger Productions he has shared a host of Tony and Obie Awards; some Dodger productions include *Guys and Dolls* (1992 Broadway revival), *Pump Boys and Dinettes*, *The Secret Garden*, *Into the Woods*, *Jelly's Last Jam*, *The Gospel at Colonus*, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1996 Broadway revival), and *The King and I* (1996 Broadway revival). McAnuff is a contributing editor to American Theater Magazine.

## About The Who's Tommy

Three members of The Who — Pete Townshend, Roger Daltry and John Entwistle — started playing together since 1962 (Keith Moon, the drummer joined in 1964). In 1965, their early releases, "I Can't Explain" and "My Generation," established them as band that could produce Top 40 hit tunes. On their second album, Townshend, by that time the band's principal songwriter, put together the nine-minute "A Quick One While He's Away," notable as an experiment in using seven musical segments to form a longer narrative — something few Rock bands at the time were trying. Inspired by his studies of the writings of the Indian guru Meher Baba, Townshend wrote a long stream-of-consciousness poem called "Amazing Journey" in 1967. Using the poem as a foundation, Townshend began to chart out the story of a journey from deprivation to enlightenment. He and other members of the band began composing and collecting material for the as-yet-unnamed project: "She's a Sensation" was written about someone Townshend met while on tour in Australia; "Glow Girl," a 1968 unused song, contained the line "It's a girl, Mrs. Walker, it's a girl"; "Sally Simpson" was written after a New York concert with The Who and The Doors ended in a riot; Entwistle contributed songs for Cousin Kevin and Uncle Ernie. In 1968, after Daltry announced The Who would soon begin recording a Rock opera, Townshend gave an interview in Rolling Stone magazine and outlined the band's plans to record a Rock opera called *Deaf, Dumb and Blind Boy*. Recording the project took six months. In March 1969, "Pinball Wizard" was released as a single in Britain and quickly got extensive radio play there and in the United States. In May 1969, The Who performed *Tommy* in Britain and the U.S.; the first U.S. performance, on May 16, 1969, at New York's Fillmore East, ended abruptly with the evacuation of the theater because of a fire next door. The album quickly attained a Number 4 place on Billboard's charts and sold 500,000 copies. Even though many mainstream critics blasted the

album, younger rock fans excitedly embraced the album, which Townshend conceived as a whole piece, but whose songs all could stand on their own.

As a top-selling album, *Tommy* provided The Who with acclaim and financial security. The four-member band performed *Tommy* throughout the U.S. and Britain during the remainder of 1969. Highlights of that tour included a dawn performance at the Woodstock Festival and a sold-out six-night run at the Fillmore East. In 1970, they toured *Tommy* in European opera houses; in June 1970, in what Townshend called the “final performance” of *Tommy*, they became the first rock group to perform at New York's Metropolitan Opera House.

Many performances of *Tommy* (without The Who) followed in the next few years. In 1971, Les Grands Ballet Canadiens staged a dance version of *Tommy*, using the album as accompaniment; the Seattle Opera Association presented a version with Bette Midler performing Mrs. Walker and the Acid Queen; other productions occurred in Los Angeles, Atlanta, London and Leicester. In 1972, a symphonic version of *Tommy* was recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra and Chamber Choir and featured vocalists Ringo Starr, Steve Winwood and Rod Stewart; the album almost out-sold The Who's original recording in America. In December, 1972, an all-star version of *Tommy* was performed in London featuring Peter Sellers, Marsha Hunt, David Essex and the London Symphony Orchestra. In 1975, director Ken Russell's all-star film version of *Tommy* was released; it starred Roger Daltry, Ann-Margaret, Oliver Reed, Eric Clapton, Tina Turner, Elton John and Jack Nicholson, among others. Russell's over-the-top film brought The Who to new heights of stardom: Daltry began a successful career as a movie actor and the band members all began to record more as soloists.

After the drug overdose death of drummer Keith Moon in 1978, The Who began to tour and record less. The Who retired after a farewell tour in 1982, but regrouped in 1989 for a 25th anniversary tour which culminated with performances of *Tommy* in Los Angeles and New York; these performances, which benefited several charities, featured Phil Collins, Billy Idol and Patti LaBelle, as well as Townshend, Entwistle and Daltry. In 1990, The Who was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

As early as 1984, PACE Theatrical Group had approached Townshend about buying international theatrical rights for *Tommy*. In 1991, Dodger Productions became partners with PACE in approaching Townshend, who was recovering from a broken wrist sustained in a bicycle accident. After discussions with director Des McAnuff, a member of Dodger Productions, Townshend agreed to collaborate on an authorized theatrical version of *Tommy*, to be directed by McAnuff and with a book co-written by himself and McAnuff. It would have its first production at the La Jolla Playhouse, in La Jolla, California, where McAnuff was artistic director. Townshend and McAnuff decided music and lyric changes would only occur if they were absolutely necessary (Townshend wrote one new song, “I Believe My Own Eyes”); they also realized in order to maintain the integrity of the music, there should be very little dialogue. The work of the designers now became very important because much of the story would unfold through visual information, provided by sets, movement, lighting, costumes, and still and video projections; the vast amount of cues, including sound, light, set and video cues, required new techniques for the use of multiple

computers. In almost every department, *Tommy* required the deployment of technology new to musical theatre but standard for rock concerts.

*Tommy* opened at the La Jolla Playhouse in July 1992, to reviews ranging from excitement to a belief the original power of The Who's 1969 recording had been softened. The production moved to Broadway and opened on April 22, 1993. The cast included Michael Cerveris as the adult Tommy, Marcia Mitzman as Mrs. Walker, Jonathan Dokuchitz as Mr. Walker, Paul Kandel as Uncle Ernie, Anthony Barrile as Cousin Kevin and Cheryl Freeman as the Gypsy Queen. Scenic designs was by John Arnone, while lighting was by Chris Parry, costumes by David C. Woolard, sound by Steve Canyon Kennedy, video by Batwin + Robin Productions, Inc. and projections by Wendall K. Harrington. The show was directed by Des McAnuff and choreographed by Wayne Cilento. *The Who's Tommy* broke box office records and went on to garner numerous awards, including five 1993 Tony Awards: Best Direction of a Musical (McAnuff), Best Original Score (Townshend, shared with John Kander and Fred Ebb, who received it for *Kiss of the Spiderwoman*), Best Choreography (Cilento), Best Scenic Design (Arnone), and Best Lighting Design (Parry). It also received six 1993 Drama Desk Awards, three 1993 Outer Critics' Circle Awards and two 1993 American Theater Wing Design Awards. The original cast recording was released by RCA Victor (#09026-61874-2) and received the 1994 Grammy Award for Best Musical Show Recording. The show closed on Broadway in 1995; a London production opened in February 1996.

## **About Rock and Roll (1950–1980)**

Rock and Roll is the name generally used to describe a popular musical genre — usually performed with a lead electric guitar or lead vocals with an electric guitar background, electric bass and drums, with a driving, “dance-able” beat — that developed in America in the 1950s. It grew out of Rhythm and Blues, a musical style itself developed from an older form — the Blues. The Blues, and the later Rhythm and Blues, were developed by African-Americans in the 20th century; the most common Blues form is a three lyric line/three musical phrase unit. The songs are usually in 12/8 meter and frequently employ a 12 or 16-bar form; there is no usual tempo for blues: they can be fast, medium or slow. Early blues were very expressive: many of the earliest performers used a variety of vocal and playing techniques that would be considered unskilled if judged by classical music techniques. But this music developed its own techniques, heavily influencing jazz and other music around the world.

By the late 1920s, radio was the broadcast medium reaching into countless American homes. However, in many respects, American society was racially segregated, and this meant the music played by a particular station depended on whether that station was considered a “black” station or a “white” station. The overwhelming majority of radio stations, and station play lists, divided along racial lines. By the late 1940s, African-American Rhythm and Blues groups were recording music based on the Blues and Jazz, but with more emphasis on dancing than Jazz. This music was heard and appreciated by blacks and whites. By the 1950s, white groups were playing the Rhythm and Blues hits of the black bands, and these new recordings began to get air play on the larger white stations. For the first time in American history, whites, in huge numbers, were dancing to



music whose black roots were extremely evident. This caused many Americans, generally older, conservative people, to denounce the new music as the beginning of the end of American civilization. This new music, dubbed Rock and Roll to distinguish it from the early and earthier Rhythm and Blues, continued to increase in popularity.

The most successful early Rock and Roll star was Elvis Presley, who continued the practice of recording songs of black Rhythm and Blues performers. His 1956 recordings of "Heartbreak Hotel," "You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog," and "Don't Be Cruel" became the first singles to reach the top of the three Billboard charts: the pop (white) chart, the Rhythm and Blues (black) chart and the Country chart. He was followed by numerous performers, both black and white, whose music combined black and white elements and, consequently, appealed to the entire country. Rock and Roll became the defining popular music of America from the 1950s to the present.

In the 1960s, Rock music became identified with the many social and political movements sweeping North America and Europe. Lyrics began to address social issues and the instrumentation of Rock and Roll bands began to include the newly developed electronic keyboards and synthesizers. English bands, including the Beatles (whose first hit records in 1964 reflected the influence of the early 1950s Rock and Roll hits), The Rolling Stones, The Who, and The Animals brought new vitality and songwriting freshness to Rock. By the mid-1960s, San Francisco, a city known for its tolerance of unorthodox lifestyles, became a center of a kind of Rock music based in Country music and Blues and characterized by greatly increased volume levels and instrumental sound distortion (such as guitar amplification feedback). Rock concerts became spectacles, where one would expect to see a light show in addition to hearing the music, which was frequently performed by virtuostic musicians. Important performers of this music included Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jefferson Airplane, and The Byrds.

By 1966, the Beatles music had absorbed many of the innovations of this California style of Rock; they began to use more exotic instrumentation and their songs began to exhibit a large stylistic range, expanding the expressive possibilities of Rock music. Some musicians, including the Beatles, the Grateful Dead, Simon and Garfunkel, Iron Butterfly and The Who began releasing "concept" albums, which were meant to be experienced in larger units than just a 2 or 3 minute song.

In the 1970s, rock had developed many different styles in addition to those which developed in the late 1950s and 1960s, including heavy metal (influential bands include Aerosmith; Black Sabbath; Alice Cooper), jazz-rock (bands include Miles Davis's various 1970s bands; John McLaughlin's groups; Blood, Sweat and Tears; Chicago), art rock (performers include Frank Zappa and The Mothers of Invention; Brian Eno), and southern rock (bands include ZZ Top; The Marshall Tucker Band; The Allman Brothers Band).

## Critical Acclaim

The first-ever Broadway production of “Tommy” has a lot of explaining to do. While Pete Townshend’s original 1969 recording with The Who was immediately terrific as music, its plot line and theme indulged a hippie-era vagueness. Meaning it was essentially a psychedelic period piece — the first “rock opera” for an age of experimentation. Which also means that a current stage version has to connect a staggering number of disparate dots if it has any prayer of finally rendering the work coherent. Fortunately this production performs that feat with a vengeance. Director Des McAnuff has crammed his saga with especially useful video screens, back projections, cavernous mirrors and pantomiming actors to create the first fully linear “Tommy” — one that conveys its complicated tale and murky themes with surprising clarity, speed and joy. Doors and windows are forever descending and swinging open while furniture whisks off the stage with such swiftness it suggests not just the work of a theatrical troupe but of the world’s most efficient moving company. As bustling as it all appears, information is imparted along the way with exacting terseness. Such theatrical flourishes could easily prove disastrous for rock-oriented “Tommy” fans. But even McAnuff’s most stagy flairs prove enjoyable.

— Jim Farber, *Daily News*, April 23, 1993

What goes around comes around — or so they say — and The Who’s “Tommy,” billed in 1969 as the “first rock opera,” has certainly been around. But, fine-tuned to a faretheewell in a brand- and glitziy new shape by Des McAnuff, “The Who’s Tommy” came around to the St. James Theater last night in blazing triumph, and Broadway — or so they might one day say — will never be the same again. This second coming of a rock legend is piquantly the first time genuine hard-core rock has been on Broadway — other shows have tried, but here at last is the real turtle soup, not the mock. Make no mistake, there is no middle-aged spread to McAnuff’s production, which is as taut and time-breaking as the day after tomorrow. This is a musical breakthrough. And an irony. For a score once thought downscale rock, hanging around The Who’s neck like a haunting albatross, has been transmogrified into Broadway’s pinball wizard, opening a 25-Year-Old gateway to a potentially new world.

— Clive Barnes, *New York Post*, April 23, 1993

“The Who’s Tommy” is the latest musical work to have the dust blown off it and to get a rousing ’90s tune-up, and like last year’s “Guys and Dolls” and “Crazy for You,” it’s going to pack them in for a long time to come. Unlike those shows, however, this one should also tap (along with *Their Generation*) the vast younger audience Broadway lusts after, the one that won’t care a fig about the naysayers the musical undoubtedly will spawn. Seeing — not to mention hearing, feeling and touching — is believing: “Tommy” is the best rock ’n’ roll show — sorry, opera — ever produced on Broadway. It’s also a triumph of stagecraft. When, for one wisely fleeting moment, designer John Arnone transforms the entire St. James Theater into a spinning, flashing, ringing pinball machine, you know the wizards offstage have every bit as much prowess as the one on. “Tommy” is a hugely entertaining show.

— Jeremy Gerard, *Variety*, April 26, 1993

The Broadway musical has never been the same since rock-and-roll stole its audience and threw it into an identity crisis. For three decades, from the moment when “Meet the Beatles” usurped the supremacy of such Broadway pop as “Hello, Dolly!,” the commercial theater has desperately tried to win back the Young (without alienating their elders) by watering down rock music, simulating rock music and ripping off rock music. A result has been a few scattered hits over the years, typified by “Hair” and “Jesus Christ, Superstar,” most of which have tamed the rock-and-roll revolution rather than spread it through Times Square. Until now. “Tommy,” the stunning new stage adaptation of the 1969 rock opera by the British group The Who, is at long last the authentic rock musical that has eluded Broadway for two generations. A collaboration of its original principal author, Pete Townshend, and the director, Des McAnuff, this show is not merely an entertainment juggernaut, riding at full tilt on the visual and musical highs of its legendary pinball iconography and irresistible tunes, but also a surprisingly moving resuscitation of the disturbing passions that made “Tommy” an emblem of its era. In the apocalyptic year of 1969, “Tommy” was the unwitting background music for the revelation of the My Lai massacre, the Chicago Seven trial, the Charles Manson murders. Those cataclysmic associations still reverberate within the piece, there to be tapped for The Who’s generation, even as the show at the St. James is so theatrically fresh and emotionally raw that newcomers to “Tommy” will think that it was born yesterday.

— Frank Rich, *The New York Times*, April 23, 1993

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