

# They play the silver ball: Blackfriars presents 'Tommy'

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**By: L. David Wheeler**

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Rochester, N.Y. - For a show whose main character spends most of its length blind, deaf and mute, it's a bit ironic that "The Who's Tommy" is a large-scale feast for the senses, with a constant barrage of visual and auditory stimuli — on several levels, often simultaneously.

Which isn't lost on John Haldoupis, who's directing the Blackfriars Theatre production of the classic rock opera starting this Saturday and promises "a real visual punch," with a sensory input he likens to a freight train.

"The show is really a sensory thrust of music and sound and light — an irony in a way is that this person is devoid of that," Haldoupis said of the title character.

Haldoupis, who's also the stage and costume designer, has several small LED display screens set up around the perimeter of the stage backdrop — screens that double as one of the show's more frequent motifs: mirrors. There'll be a lot going on at all times, he notes, with projected imagery throughout evoking past and present, and the confused muddle they've become for Tommy.

The stage translation of The Who's 1969 pioneering concept album, the story — which has played on Broadway and in touring productions, plus a movie starring The Who's Roger Daltrey in the title role — is familiar by now: Tommy, played (as an adult) by Dan Howell in the Blackfriars show, is deprived of sight, hearing and speech by a childhood trauma he witnesses in a mirror — his father killing his mother's lover — followed by his parents' reinforcement that he saw nothing, heard nothing and would say nothing. His parents (played by Janine Mercandetti and J. Simmons) desperately search for ways to cure him, and he's victimized by a series of sketchy relatives, before it turns out that he's an intuitive pinball wizard despite his handicaps — apparently with an affinity for the mirrored surface of the silver ball. Even when free of catatonia, he finds himself in another cocoon — that of celebrity — when he becomes an unwitting messianic figure among people looking for direction, who turn on him when he won't play their game.

Haldoupis is particularly fascinated by those later scenes of the play — the formation of a cult of celebrity, and how people build up idols and tear them down when they don't match their expectations. It's relevant in newer ways in our current "Idol"/YouTube/Facebook culture that's realized Andy Warhol's maxim about everyone's 15 minutes of fame in ways that Warhol — or the Who's chief writer Pete Townshend — could barely have imagined.

It's a small theater for such a production — the four tiered rows seat in the neighborhood of 125, and the first row's mere feet from the small stage. That's a plus for Haldoupis: He's appreciated the show's scale in larger venues, but thinks the Blackfriars show has the advantage of intimacy.

"This is 'Tommy' up close and personal ... nobody's farther than four feet from anybody!" he said. "I saw 'Tommy' on Broadway twice, but I couldn't tell you what people are doing with their faces."

It's the final show of the 2010-11 season for Blackfriars — and the last Rochester show for 1998 Fairport High School graduate **Janine Mercandetti**. A frequent presence on the Blackfriars stage ("A New Brain," "Shipwrecked," "Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris," "Zorba," "Debbie Does Dallas"), **Mercandetti** plans to seek her future in Los Angeles at the end of the summer.

"It's going to be bittersweet," **Mercandetti** said of her departure. "I think all big change is bittersweet."

Mrs. Walker, she thinks, is a great role to go out on.

"I think one of the things I like is the emotional range," **Mercandetti** said. "She goes from moments of great joy to moments of complete despair. And I get to take on some challenging acting as well as some challenging singing." (Indeed, Haldoupis notes, in a narrative and vocal sense, the mother's as much the prime character as Tommy himself.) "And if you really look at the characters," she added, "they're probably the worst parents in the world. ... They really cause Tommy's situation and spend the rest of the play trying to undo what has happened."

The show's a challenge to rise to, she noted: They're doing a musical written for 35 people with fewer than 20. And then, of course, there's the music, much of which has attained iconic status — "Pinball Wizard" and "See Me Feel Me," after all, are classic-rock staples.

"The music is well-known, people love the music," **Mercandetti** said. "People come to see the show, and they expect to hear the music. We have to rise to that level."

And with the vast part of the narrative carried through the songs, noted Dan Howell of Greece, who plays the lead role of Tommy, it can be a challenge to convey the intricacies of characters' emotional reactions, responses and interactions. "It's a challenge, to work these moments in with subtle movements — the small movements, to make these (emotions) come through with what we're doing and not just what we're singing."

Both **Mercandetti** and Howell describe their "Tommy" characters as dream roles.

"When I was a kid, my parents used to listen to 'Tommy' a lot; they were big fans of the Who," Howell said. "Every car trip we took, it was one of the albums we listened to. It was always on the list of things I wanted to do."