

arts

Rockin' the night away

THEATER REVIEW

'TOMMY THE MUSICAL'

By Pete Townsend and Des McAnuff

Directed and choreographed by Russell M. Maitland

Through June 19

Courthouse Center for the Arts, West Kingston

BY DAVE CHRISTNER

The Who's rock opera, "Tommy" is a slash, dash, take-no-prisoners, mind-bending blend of British invasion rock 'n' roll and classic American blues with a story that makes "La Boheme" look like Mary Poppins. Director/choreographer Russell M. Maitland turns this unrelenting collage of loosely related happenstances spanning 25 years into a coherent, even if not entirely plausible storyline that rocks the Courthouse Center for the Arts like a small tremor. Twenty-three actors, many in multiple roles, perform brilliantly — singing, dancing and changing costumes more often than a chameleon changes color in a Crayola factory — and keep the action flowing at a rapid-fire pace through some 20 scenes in two acts.

On the eve of World War II, Captain Walker (Matthew Smolko) meets, romances and marries Mrs. Walker (Laura Scherf). The captain then parachutes into Germany, is captured and taken as a POW. Walker's brother, Uncle Ernie (Douglas Hummel-Price) is looking out for his pregnant sister-in-law and is there to hear the news that Captain Walker is MIA and presumed dead. Mrs. Walker gives birth to Tommy (played by Ben-

jamin Thornton at age 4; Andrew Faria at age 10, and by Allen Yanonne when mature). This is all in the first five minutes. Not to worry. Things pick up.

Mrs. Walker takes up with another soldier and at her 21st birthday celebration, agrees to marry him. As they embrace, Captain Walker arrives on the scene and Mrs. Walker flies into his arms. A fight ensues and 4-year-old Tommy witnesses his father kill his mother's lover. His parents tell Tommy he didn't see, hear, or feel anything; Tommy takes them much too literally, entering a catatonic state. His inner-self is then seen as a mirror image and is detailed by the mature Tommy who acts as narrator.

As pre-teen, Tommy is sexually molested by alcoholic Uncle Ernie and later taunted and bullied by Cousin Kevin (Adam Cavalieri) and his cadre of hooligans. In adolescence, he is introduced to pinball at a neighborhood center; in spite of his mental state, Tommy has an inherent gift for the game and becomes an international pinball sensation as shown in "Pinball Wizard." Still, he cannot break through his wall of silence and relates only to the alter-ego of his mirror image.

Captain and Mrs. Walker take Tommy to countless doctors seeking help. His father even hauls the kid off to a gypsy prostitute (Kendra Alati), who promises to provide a cure through the sex and drugs in her show-stopping number, "The Acid Queen." Not until Captain and Mrs. Walker accept Tommy's condition and Mrs. Walker starts breaking furniture, including the mirror

that Tommy has stared into for so many years, is the spell broken and Tommy is set free. Tommy sings "I'm Free," reprises "Pinball Wizard" and meets Sally Simpson (Maria Malanga) and life is changed forever. For who? That's for you to decide.

Yanonne is a marvel in the title role, owning the stage and delivering songs with his melodic tenor voice and perfect diction. Scherf's beautiful mezzo soprano delivers a range of emotions running the gambit from joy to despair in a variety of numbers. Smolko and Cavalieri both have strong voices and commanding stage presence. The costumes are every bit as creative and mind-bending as the music, and the set is a bit of wizardry in its own right, morphing from home to hospital and pretty much everything in between.

"Tommy" is another hit in a long string of them directed by Maitland. Unfortunately, Maitland has announced his resignation from his job as the Courthouse's executive director effective June 24. He will stay on to direct the show "Happy Days" in July. Since his arrival in 2007, Maitland has turned the Courthouse from an obscure outpost in West Kingston into a top theater venue. He will be missed.

Dave Christner is a South County playwright and novelist.

e Performances are Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m., Sun., 4 p.m. Tickets \$34 adults, \$30 CCA members & seniors, \$19 students. (401) 782-1018. www.courthousearts.org.

'Nature has its own wonderful strengths'

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icry segue into replacement? "The final effect I wasn't interested in controlling," China Blue says contentedly. "The psycho-emotional results are a nice component that I'm not intuitively trying

to design."

"Nature has its own wonderful strengths," she added with a wry smile.

A members reception for summer 2011 exhibits including "China Blue: Firefly Projects," "Trent Bursleson: Birds

and Other Metaphors," "Remembering the Ladies: Women and the Art Association of Newport" and "Things with Wings," will be Friday, June 10, from 5-7 p.m. at Newport Art Museum. Free for members; \$10 suggested donation for nonmembers.



The kids are all right.

Front left are Cary Michele Miller, Joanna Krupnick and Steve Gagliastro. Rear from left are Michael Gregory Johnson, Michael J. Borges, Lisa Yuen, Terrence Oliver, Caitlin McGinty and Nathan Chang. PHOTO BY MARK TUREK

WIN-WIN

THEATER REVIEW

'THE 25TH ANNUAL PUTNAM COUNTY SPELLING BEE'

Directed by Amiee Turner

Through June 19

Theatre By The Sea, 364 Cards Pond Road, Matunuck

BY JANINE WEISMAN

Victory has its thrill, agony its defeat. But sometimes the reverse is true and that's what we call I-R-O-N-Y.

Irony is what makes "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" such a great example of musical theater. It has a small cast and stripped-down setting, making it a financially viable production for almost any theater group to stage. But this show also has a genuine heart beating beneath its funny stories and laugh-out-loud moments as a group of exceptional adolescents learn lessons about growing up.

I'm happy to report that Theatre By The Sea captures that heart in a sparkling production of "Putnam County" to inaugurate its summer season back at the old barn in Matunuck. Director Amiee Turner and a solid cast get this intermissionless show right, giving us plenty of laughs and just enough heart-felt moments. The singing voices are all fine.

The story is about the competition between six smart kids, each with their own outer quirkiness and inner turmoil. There's the overachieving Asian girl Marcy Park (Lisa Yuen from the original Broad-

way company who is also the show's choreographer); the hyperactive Leaf Coneybear (Michael J. Borges); the sickly, allergy suffering William Barfee (Steve Gagliastro); nerdy Boy Scout Chip Tolentino (Nathan Chang); the intensely competitive daughter of two gay dads with their combined last names Loganne Schwartzandgrubenerrie (Joanna Krupnick); and the lonely little Olive Ostrovsky (Cary Michele Miller, last seen on the Matunuck stage in the title role in 2009's "Peter Pan").

The adults who organize the spelling bee have their own issues as well. Successful Realtor Rona Lisa Peretti (the statuesque Caitlin McGinty) was a former spelling bee champ who still relishes the memory of her victory; Vice Principal Douglas Panch (Michael Gregory Johnson) has some self-control and dietary issues; and "Comfort Counselor" Mitch Mahoney (Terrence Oliver) is there to hug disqualified contestants and hand out juice boxes to fulfill his community service.

Mitch Mahoney has to be among the most compelling characters in contemporary musical theater. As an African American man with a criminal record, he is also a pivotal character with a solo number "Prayer of the Comfort Counselor" that gives the spelling bee much needed perspective. Mitch confesses he'd like to beat up each child so they would know what pain really feels like and understand that losing a spelling bee is nothing compared to what else life will throw their way. And while the

role is written as a stereotype, Oliver grounds his performance in honesty. It's evident in the genuine smile he gives Yuen's exuberantly departing Marcy Park after she blows the word "camouflage" on purpose to free herself from the pressure of winning.

Oliver also fills in as different dads in vignettes that illuminate the backstories of the spelling bee contestants. He made a particularly good pairing with the tall McGinty as Olive Ostrovsky's parents, as both towered over the petite Miller for her touching number, "The I Love You Song," in which she dreams of being with her too busy father and physically distant mother who is at an ashram in India.

Miller and Gagliastro really connected as the final contestants, moments that show the growth of Olive's self-confidence and William Barfee's maturity and humility. Also Borges deserves a shoutout for his talent for physical comedy.

Each "Putnam County" performance has members of the audience called up onstage as contestants, lending an improvisational edge to each show. Johnson as the vice principal does a great job keeping things moving at the right pace, delivering words of varying degrees of difficulty and using them in hilarious sentences upon request.

e Performances are Tues.-Fri., 8 p.m. Thurs., 2 p.m., Sat., 4:30 & 8:30 p.m., Sun., 5 p.m. Tickets \$39-\$54. www.theatrebythesea.com. (401) 782-8587.