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The Who's Tommy

At the Yale Cabaret: You'll need to see it.

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Tuesday, June 24, 2008

By Christopher Arnott



Erik Pearson Photo

The Who's Tommy

Through July 5 at the Yale Cabaret, 217 Park St., New Haven.
summercabaret.org

(203) 432-1567 ,

More on *Tommy* next week, but know this now: You'll need to see it, so smash the mirror already. You may not agree (though I do, strongly) that The Who's bloated 1969 opus—especially as revised for Broadway musical theater, the script version used here—needs to be returned to sing-song roots-rock sparseness for it to make any real dramatic sense.

What's important is that Mike Donahue and a frenzied cast (several of whom similarly overhauled *Little Shop of Horrors* for the school-year Yale Cabaret last year) have set tough aesthetic goals—punk fury's a lot harder to pull off credibly on stage than lush pop stylings—and succeeded beyond all hopes. That's in no small part due to the show's frontman [Chad Raines](#), who fronts the band and assumes the title role in the show's second half.

Yes, there are plot holes and rushed interpretations of key plot points, but the blur is in service of letting Tommy rock. A Gary Glitter quote is interpolated (not an out-of-reach reference, since Glitter toured with The Who's *Quadrophenia* in the '90s) and a non-*Tommy* Who number (I won't spoil it by revealing which one, but it's another refreshing slap-down of a too-pompous rock composition), adding to the necessary irreverence. The written-for-Broadway love ballad "I Believe My Own Eyes," as much a bane of *Tommy* purists as "Champagne" was when Ken Russell's 1975 film version was released, still sticks out like a sore thumb, but at least it's well sung. Raines has the best rock voice, but most of the cast belts out the tunes with honest fervor, shouting and spitting in non-theater rock fashion.

Staged only as much as it needs to be, here's a rock musical that comes down more on the side of a club set than musical theater, returning the piece not only to its working class roots but the bar-band roots of the stadium band which created it. A camp with a difference, indeed. It's one mean pinball. ▢

■

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