

Lee rises to rock star status in “The Who’s TOMMY”

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Time moves forward – or does it? That’s the question explored in “The Who’s TOMMY,” a rock musical now playing at the Village Theatre in Issaquah and Everett. As young Tommy Walker grows up during the course of this musical, he cannot leave behind the effects of a domestic murder that he witnessed at age four. Although he has suppressed the memory of this traumatic event, Tommy exists in a nearly catatonic state throughout his childhood and teenage years, and is vulnerable to sexual abuse at the hands of his Uncle Ernie during this time.

Michael K. Lee, the New York-based Korean American actor who stars in the role of Tommy, reports that he went through “an intense rehearsal process” in preparation for this role. “This is a very, very unique show,” Lee says. “It’s not for everybody, but for those people who do ‘get’ it, they get it in a big way.”

Lee admits he was not originally one of those people. “I have to admit that I was in the camp of people who didn’t ‘get’ it at all,” Lee says. But because live theatre performance is “without question” Lee’s favorite kind of acting job, he says, “I came to this show with an open mind and heart.”

Tommy’s ascent from these dark caverns of trauma begins when he becomes a neighborhood celebrity for his newly-discovered pinball machine talents at the age of 20. Lee says that this particular part of the plot evokes strong reactions from Asian American audiences.

“I’ve had Asian American friends come up to me and express just how awesome it is to see an Asian ‘brother’ up there on stage in the lead, as a rockstar,” Lee says. He reports that Asian American audiences have felt “a lot of pride,” and have said to him, “It’s great to see the Asian American guy go through the hero’s journey.”

Tommy’s mother celebrates as Tommy emerges into stardom, but she still cannot fathom her son’s attachment to the mirror in which he originally

witnessed the murder so long ago. Even Tommy doesn't understand why he feels so compelled to gaze into the mirror, where the image of Tommy's four-year-old self calls to him endlessly.

Although "The Who's TOMMY" foregrounds a character who is trapped in the deadened stasis of unchanging time, in contrast, the medium of live theatre offers the potential for unpredictability. Lee says, "No one performance is ever going to be exactly the same as another. THAT'S exciting!"

Lee reports that he has worked in television and film, and says, "I love the final products, as they last forever." But his preference for live performance remains. Working in film, "you can't get a real sense of how your performance is or was until the project is edited and finished and can be seen," Lee says. "I don't like the stop and go nature of the shooting process of film and TV, and at the end of the day, it's a director's medium."

Music, however, has been much more of an influence on Lee's work since his early childhood. "My parents were instrumental in introducing all types of music" to Lee and his two older siblings, he says. "We studied classical music, but my parents would take us to the theater, to the movies, to the opera, to the symphony."

Rock music was also a large part of Lee's youth. "My mom was great in letting me also explore rock 'n' roll music on my own, which I, like so many young kids, took to immediately," he says. "I found that I loved movies, I loved rock 'n' roll, I loved musicals. I found that storytelling with the element of music added to it really spoke to me. That's why musicals ... and particularly rock or pop musicals ... appealed and still appeal to me so much."

Lee's interests motivated him to become active in various kinds of performance. "Growing up, I found that any opportunity I could have to help with some sort of musical storytelling I would try and be a part of," Lee says. "That included musicals, orchestras, rock bands, a cappella singing groups. Anything and everything."

As a professional actor who has also begun a performing career in Korea, Lee still continues to enjoy the influence of other contemporary musicians. "I enjoy storytelling musicians so much, like Billy Joel, Elton John, Bon Jovi, and even Barry Manilow," he says.

Lee plans to augment his performing career with future projects developing musicals, directing theatre, and writing music. He trained on the violin, and still plays the piano. "I've recently started writing songs of my own, which I hope to put down on a new album soon."

Lee reports no particular barriers to his success on the basis of his Korean American heritage. "The struggles I've had in this business can be related to by most Asian performers, if not all performers of color," Lee says. "The difficulty lies in the fact that there just isn't as much work for all of us as there are for white performers."

Despite these challenges, Lee happily counts the lead character in "The Who's TOMMY" as his fifth stage role in Seattle. Young Tommy Walker demonstrates, both in song and in silence, how individuals can find themselves trapped in a traumatic memory that they have never been able to comprehend or transcend. But this emblematic character also presents a model for self-understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

Lee says, "I've come to a place where this "Tommy" has become a very special show for me." He says this is particularly true for him because "the message of our show knows no cultural boundaries."

Referring to a major song in "The Who's TOMMY" that highlights Tommy's journey out of being emotionally frozen in time and into the openness of possibilities for the future, Lee says, "In every way, it's been an 'Amazing Journey.'"

"The Who's TOMMY" runs through June 24 at Francis J. Gaudette Theatre, 303 Front St. N., Issaquah, and June 29 – July 15 at the Everett Performing Arts Center, 2710 Wetmore Ave., Everett. www.villagetheatre.org