

## ABSTRACT

**Title of Thesis:** FROM YOU I GET THE STORY: Tracking spirituality through the three iterations of The Who's *Tommy*.  
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### ABSTRACT:

In the late 1960s, Pete Townshend, lead guitarist and composer for British rock band The Who, discovered the teachings of Indian spiritual leader Meher Baba. Inspired by these teachings he wrote the concept album for the first successful rock opera: *Tommy*. The smashing success of this album led to its adaptation into a major Hollywood film directed by Ken Russell in 1975 and its adaptation into a Broadway musical directed by Des McAnuff in 1992. This thesis examines how each adaptation contributes to the Westernization, generalization, and sanitization of the spirituality inherent to the original concept album as well as how these adaptations reflect the conflicting objectives of their lead artists.

FROM YOU I GET THE STORY:  
TRACKING SPIRITUALITY THROUGH THE THREE ITERATIONS OF  
THE WHO'S *TOMMY*.

by

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## I. Introduction: “See Me, Feel Me”

In 1967, Pete Townshend’s friend, an illustrator named Mike McInnerney, lent him a copy of Charles Purdom’s book *The God-Man*, a biography of Indian spiritual leader Meher Baba.<sup>1</sup> It took almost a full year before the lead guitarist of The Who picked up the book and read it, but it would become the inspiration for what is arguably the most famous album by The Who: *Tommy*.<sup>2</sup> This album followed the new trend of concept albums popular at the time, but was the first to successfully create a rock opera. The album was adapted into a major Hollywood film in 1975 and a Broadway stage musical in 1992. Townshend wrote *Tommy* as a response to his observation that many in his generation, including himself, were searching for a spirituality different from what they knew. In his book *Hinduism and the 1960s*, Paul Oliver traces the increased interest in Eastern religions that arose in the West in the 1960s, focusing primarily on Hinduism. He asserts that the parents of the baby-boomer generation grew up in the pre-war society characterized by, “social conformity, class differences, a relative absence of individual freedoms and a general lack of educational and other opportunities, except for the children of rich families.”<sup>3</sup> However, as their children, the baby-boomers, matured during the post-WWII period, they began to reject this type of society and search for alternative ways of life. Whereas Christianity had provided the moral framework for their parent’s generation, the baby-boomers began to question this limited, rigid paradigm. Oliver posits that the young people of the 1960s wanted:

<sup>1</sup> Pete Townshend, *Who I Am: A Memoir* (London: HarperCollins, 2012), p.158)

<sup>2</sup> Townshend, 204.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Oliver, *Hinduism and the 1960s: The Rise of a Counter-Culture*. (Oxford: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014) p. 31)

The freedom to pick and choose from a wide range of religious practice and experience... When they practiced within a particular tradition they typically wanted to try to find a direct experience of the world, the universe or the divine, rather than simply the knowledge that they had complied with certain religious injunctions. This need for a subjective spiritual experience attracted them to mystical approaches such as Kabbalah or Sufism, and to Eastern religions such as Zen Buddhism or Hinduism.<sup>4</sup>

Pete Townshend was not unique from his generation's impulse. Townshend had looked for spiritual guidance and found his answer in the teachings of Meher Baba, an Indian spiritual leader, and his search influenced the album *Tommy* considerably. In the original album, the character of Tommy is modeled after Meher Baba to be a guru to the society around him. Townshend uses the album as a didactic tool to reflect the teachings of Meher Baba, while also critiquing the superficial search for spiritual answers in his generation.<sup>5</sup> This critique is shown through the people and society around the protagonist Tommy. The album achieves Townshend's objective through an allegorical narrative of the main character Tommy's journey to enlightenment and subsequent failure to pass on his wisdom. The Indian spirituality of Meher Baba's teachings that inspired *Tommy* flow through the text of the album.

*Tommy*'s quick and overwhelming popularity resulted in its adaptation into a major motion picture a few years later and a Broadway musical after a little over two decades. The resulting film and musical could not purely adapt the album into another

<sup>4</sup> Paul Oliver, *Hinduism and the 1960s*, 32.

<sup>5</sup> Townshend, 200.



format. In handing over the album to film director Ken Russell and stage director Des McAnuff, Townshend allowed for adaptations that were subject to the artistic visions of these artists as well as the constraints and opportunities afforded by the mediums of film and theater. As *Tommy* changes form, moving from album to film to Broadway stage musical in different decades, the characterization and objectives of the title character change dramatically, which cause the spirituality within the piece to become Westernized, generalized and then sanitized. Originally modelled as a guru in the style of Meher Baba in the concept album, Tommy is reinterpreted as a “Christ-like” Messiah for the film and then as an autistic boy turned rockstar who strives for normalcy in the Broadway musical. Tommy’s shift from guru, to messiah, to rockstar/everyman, is symptomatic of the fundamental move away from the album’s original intent to use rock and roll to introduce Western listeners to Eastern spirituality, specifically the theology of Meher Baba. The film’s decision to cast Tommy as a Christian, messianic Savior instantly Westernizes the piece, erasing Baba’s influence and rewriting the allegory to reflect Christian theology. In rewriting Tommy as an accidental celebrity, the musical in turn sanitizes religion from its adaptation of *Tommy* and creates a noncontroversial, universalist story targeted to nostalgic, aging, baby-boomers, who in the 1990s have become purveyors of the status quo rather than its critics.

While religion is a central theme in the film, director Ken Russell pulls on his own complex relationship with Catholicism rather than Meher Baba’s teaching as the spiritual inspiration for the cinematic adaptation. As a highly visual, not-so-subtle director, Russell’s film is overflowing with Catholic iconography. Christian iconography is more familiar and recognizable to the Western world than Eastern theology, so the

film is able to forcefully assert its own reinterpretation of *Tommy*. Russell's visual storytelling tells the audience what to see and how to interpret it, steering his audience more forcefully towards his realization of *Tommy* over the solely auditory, more enigmatic original album. Russell uses his visual medium to provide the audience with an angelic-looking Tommy with long, curly, blonde hair and piercing blue eyes played by The Who's lead vocalist Roger Daltrey. Russell costumes Daltrey as Jesus in one hallucinatory scene and frames Tommy as a messiah rather than a guru throughout the film. Contradictory to Townshend, Russell is less interested in Tommy as a teacher or spiritual guide. He constructs his Tommy as a messianic savior brought to the people to save them from themselves. This is a Westernized departure from the album which originally introduced Tommy as a guru who achieves enlightenment through an intense meditative process and emerges to guide his followers toward seeing the Truth instead of the illusion of the world around them.

The musical lets go of spirituality entirely. The production design of the stage musical draws on the fashions of the 1960s and the concert style of The Who to create a retro aesthetic and evoke reminiscence in its baby-boomer audience. The musical was produced in the in early 1990s when there was a 1970s revival. In a 2002 New York Times piece titled, "The 70's Are So 90's. The 80's Are The Thing Now" Simon Reynolds begins his article with, "AND now, the 80's. It was probably inevitable. The pop music and fashion industries depend on recycling their own history, and the retro styles of the 1960's and 70's had been strip-mined to the point of exhaustion. Anyway, pop cult revivals tend to arrive punctually after roughly 20 years -- just long enough for a

period to acquire the charm of remoteness.”<sup>6</sup> Des McAnuff’s musical of *Tommy* took advantage of the 1970s revival in the 1990s. The clearest indicator that this was a calculated decision is that the musical was renamed *The Who’s Tommy*. The Who’s name was pointedly included in the title of the musical as a marketing ploy to grab the attention of rock and roll fans and baby-boomers who were not typical theatre goers. The intention of the Broadway musical was to attract the notably populous generation of the baby-boomers who were ripe in the early 1990s for a 20-year retrospective of the late 1960s. The Broadway musical was not concerned with the specific spiritual teachings that made *Tommy* unique. Instead it saw *Tommy* as a relic of the 1960s, purely a vehicle for rock and roll and nostalgia, and therefore an ideal cash cow for Broadway. All the evidence of spirituality was gutted. The flair and flash of the 1960s was kept and exaggerated while the musical became a vehicle for a completely new nostalgic and secular message about teenage years and personal identity. Even the glowing New York Times review of *The Who’s Tommy* admits, “Both the story and its point are as simple as ‘Peter Pan’... As played by Michael Cerveris with the sleek white outfit, dark shades and narcissistic attitude of a rock star, the grown-up Tommy is nearly every modern child’s revenge fantasy come true: the untouchable icon who gets the uncritical adulation from roaring crowds that his despised parents never gave him at home.”<sup>7</sup> Rich opines that the “primal theme” that has made *Tommy* timeless is the “piercing voice” it gives to “the eternal childhood psychic aches of loneliness and lovelessness.” This review exposes that as a

<sup>6</sup> Simon Reynolds, “The 70’s Are So 90’s. The 80’s Are The Thing Now.,” *The New York Times*, May 5, 2002, National edition, sec. 2, p. 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/05/arts/the-70-s-are-so-90-s-the-80-s-are-the-thing-now.html>)

<sup>7</sup> Frank Rich, “Review/Theater: Tommy; Capturing Rock-and-Roll and the Passions of 1969,” *The New York Times*, April 23, 1993, National edition, sec. C, p. 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/23/theater/review-theater-tommy-capturing-rock-and-roll-and-the-passions-of-1969.html>)

baby-boomer himself, Frank Rich is not immune to the nostalgic manipulations of the Broadway musical.<sup>8</sup> His review extolls the show's innovative projections that "recreate in black-and-white the London of the blitz, then spill into the vibrant Pop Art imagery of pinball machines, early Carnaby Street and Andy Warhol paintings" and the choreography that "advance[s] from wartime jitterbugging to the 50's sock-hopping of early rock-and-roll movies to evocations of the mod antics of "A Hard Day's Night" and its imitators in the 60's."<sup>9</sup> The musical's Tommy reminds the baby-boomers of their young adulthood and taps into supposedly "every child's" revenge fantasy. He is generalized into the iconic American teenager to appeal to a wide audience of the young and middle-aged, the theatre-goer and rock and roll fanatic. The only reference to anything spiritual in the review is a snide reference to "Ken Russell's pious, gag-infested 1975 film adaptation" to which the Broadway production bears no resemblance Rich writes.<sup>10</sup> With its own mass appeal objective, the theatrical adaptation strays the furthest from the album. It rewrites much of the story and even gives *Tommy* an alternate ending.

The album is an intriguing cross-cultural, cross-theological experiment, but this uniqueness is lost as additional Western artists contribute to the evolution of this piece in different mediums. *Tommy* loses its specific ties to Meher Baba's teachings, so it becomes more generic. Marketed to the broadest possible audience, Tommy becomes the everyman, or rather every teenager, and his search for the Ultimate Reality is watered down to wanting to be normal and just like everyone else. This desire to be normal not only negates the value placed on Tommy in the album and the film for being unique, it

<sup>8</sup>"Columnist Biography: Frank Rich," The New York Times (The New York Times Company, May 24, 2004), <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/ref/opinion/RICH-BIO.html>

<sup>9</sup> Frank Rich , "Tommy; Capturing Rock-and-Roll and the Passions of 1969," p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Rich , "Tommy," 1.

also a complete departure from the message given consistently to young people through popular culture that it is better to be different and not like everyone else.

In the musical the line-up of songs from the previous versions were reordered, new songs added, and the events of the story altered to focus on the character's journey as one that focuses on his trauma and erases the spirituality. Whereas in the previous two iterations, Tommy's inexplicable loss of his senses and the miracle of their return are connected to his increased spiritual awareness, in the stage musical his loss and regaining of his senses is entirely connected to him coping with trauma. Townshend uses Tommy's loss of his senses as an opportunity for the awakening of his soul (*atman*), a metaphor inspired by Townshend's lessons from Meher Baba.<sup>11</sup> Consistent with many Indian spiritual beliefs, Baba saw the giving up or lack of a sense as a way to disrupt one's perception of the world and therefore an opportunity to see past *maya*, the illusion of the universe.<sup>12</sup> This is supposedly an initial step towards achieving enlightenment in Indian religious traditions. Townshend develops this concept into Tommy's non-physical "deaf, dumb, and blindness" that allows him to transcend and "become aware."<sup>13</sup> In the stage musical, Tommy claims no special spiritual knowledge. In fact at the end of the musical, Tommy tells his followers, "The point is not for you to be more like me. The point is... I'm finally more like you."<sup>14</sup> Removing the spiritual context from the story and reinterpreting Tommy as a normal boy who loses his senses and ability to speak as a

<sup>11</sup> Meher Baba, *God Speaks: The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, 2011), p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Benjamin Purdom, *The God-Man: The Life, the Journeys and Work of Meher Baba with an Interpretation of His Silence and Spiritual Teaching* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1964), p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Townshend, Pete. "I'm Free." I'm Free – (The Who. Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969. <https://genius.com/The-who-im-free-lyrics>).

<sup>14</sup> Pete Townshend, *The Who's Tommy: The Musical*, ed. Rita D. Jacobs (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 46.

result of trauma has resulted in Tommy being identified as a child with autism. This makes Tommy's abuse, sensationalization, and "miracle cure" less comfortable and problematic. It frames the condition that makes Tommy "not normal" as autism and implies that this condition can be fully and miraculously cured. James McGrath notes in his book *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity* that autism "did not become widely mentioned in relation to Townshend's narrative until the 1990s, when *Tommy* became a Broadway musical, directed by Des McAnuff (1992)."<sup>15</sup> While McGrath attributes this to growing cultural consciousness about autism, in reading interviews with Des McAnuff and the dramaturgy notes for the musical, it becomes clear that framing Tommy as an autistic child was a conscious choice. At the most basic level, this is an almost fundamental reversal of the Indian religious traditions that inform the original concept album where Tommy's loss of his senses serves as a metaphor for his ability to see past the illusion (*maya*) of the universe. But so too does this reversal remind us that as the spiritual inspiration in each iteration changes, the meaning behind Tommy's loss of his senses and greater message of the story changes as well. Tommy's story mutates from that of a spiritual leader whose message is first sought after and then rejected by his disciples in both the album and the film to that of a man overcoming his childhood trauma, attempting to be like everyone else, and reconciling with his mistaken followers and his family in the musical.

<sup>15</sup> James McGrath, *Naming Adult Autism: Culture, Science, Identity* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), p. 97.

## II. Origins and Cultural Context

### Concept Albums

In the same year that Pete Townshend's friend lent him Purdom's biographical introduction to the teachings of Meher Baba, The Beatles released their 1967 concept album *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club*, which popularized the form and set a trend that would include other concept albums such as The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* and The Who's *The Who Sell Out*. *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club* invited its listeners into a fictional evening club for a performance by the club's house band. Conceptually, the fictional house band of "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club" allowed The Beatles to break away from the sound and style of their previous albums. The Who responded by writing *The Who Sell Out* as a pirate radio broadcast complete with commercial jingles and advertising spots written by them. These first few albums were unique and gimmicky. They gave each band a device through which to experiment and expand their sound. While these albums had a unifying theme, Townshend had greater aspirations. He wanted to push the genre of the concept album further, and Meher Baba provided the inspiration. Instead of constructing an exterior frame to explain the performance style of the music, Townshend wanted to use the music to tell a story, like an opera. Pulling on the counterculture's interest, as well as his own interest, in Eastern spirituality, The Who's *Tommy* would tell the story of a spiritual guru whose theology and teaching methods imitated that of Meher Baba, whose intention it was to "awaken" his students to the

reality of God.<sup>16</sup> In telling this story, Townshend would also attempt to convey and propagate Baba's most basic principles.

### **Eastern Spirituality Not Sitar**

The Who was not unique in looking to the East for inspiration. However, as the band's lead composer, Townshend was unique in looking to Eastern spirituality for conceptual material rather than pageantry. Other rock bands of the 1960s had already looked to the East for different instrumental sounds, fashion, and song lyrics. A subgenre of rock and roll nicknamed "raga rock" was born out of Western rockers' interest in Indian music and their attempts to play their guitars like sitars. George Harrison of The Beatles even acquired sitar and learned how to play it. The Beatles movie *Help!* filmed a few scenes in an Indian restaurant in Twickenham, England. During the filming of these scenes in April 1965, an Indian musical group played in the background. Intrigued by the sound, lead guitarist of The Beatles George Harrison wandered over to explore. A few days later on Oxford Street in London, Harrison purchased an inexpensive sitar. Because of his interest in the sitar, a few of Harrison's non-Beatles friends, including David Crosby of The Byrds, referred him to Ravi Shankar's music.<sup>17</sup> David Crosby, later one of the founding members of Crosby, Stills & Nash, was obsessed with the music of Hindustani classical musician Ravi Shankar and had already been inspired to incorporate elements of Indian music into his own songwriting. In the song "Why" (1966) by The Byrds, David Crosby and Jim McGuinn used their guitars to imitate the patterns and

<sup>16</sup> Meher Baba, *God Speaks: The Theme of Creation and Its Purpose*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Sufism Reoriented, 2011), p. x.

<sup>17</sup> Joshua M. Greene, *Here Comes the Sun: The Spiritual and Musical Journey of George Harrison* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2006), p. 61.



sound of the sitar.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in “Heart Full of Soul” Jeff Beck of the English band The Yardbirds uses his electric guitar to emulate the sound of the sitar. The Beatles took it a step further. While recording *Rubber Soul*, their sixth studio album, later that same year, John Lennon was struggling with recording his song “Norwegian Wood (This Bird Has Flown).” Lennon asked Harrison to try out his new sitar on the song. This would be the first of quite a few of their songs to include Indian instruments. The incorporation of Indian sounds onto Western rock music spawned this sub-genre of “raga rock.” While Pete Townshend was following the 1960s counterculture trend of looking to India for musical inspiration, his interest was focused on how India’s spirituality could provide material for the story of *Tommy*. He had higher aspirations as to what a concept album could accomplish if fused with complex religious concepts as opposed to eclectic foreign sounds. Townshend eschewed sitars and the gimmicky devices of previous concept albums, including The Who’s own *The Who Sell Out*. He constructed *Tommy* to seriously experiment with using the rock and roll album as a medium for an allegory that would offer meaningful artistic exploration of Eastern religious thought. *Tommy*’s inspiration and concepts can be attributed to Meher Baba, but the music of the album is entirely Western rock and roll. The Who did not use Indian instruments or attempt to emulate their sound in the recording of the album,

### **The Spirituality of Meher Baba**

Moved by Purdom’s book, Townshend began to visit Meher Baba spiritual centers and started following the leader’s teachings. Meher Baba is often referred to as an “Indian spiritual leader.” This moniker alone implies the ambiguity of his religious

<sup>18</sup> William Echard, *Psychedelic Popular Music: A History Through Musical Topic Theory* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017), p. 53.

identification. Meher Baba was born Merwan Sheriar Irani in Pune, India in 1894 to a Persian Zoroastrian family.<sup>19</sup> At the age of 19, he met Hazrat Babajan, a Sufi mystic who became the first of Meher Baba's five gurus he would later call his five Perfect Masters.<sup>20</sup> Meher Baba is also considered a Perfect Master by his followers. "Perfect Master" is a loose English translation for the Sanskrit term "sadhguru." According to ShreeSwami.org:

Sadgurus[sic] or Perfect Masters are in reality, the seers who have realized the Absolute or have reached the highest realm of spiritual attainment, are present forever in the whole universe whether in an embodied or in an unembodied state. They can operate in gross, subtle, or mental world. They have been actually chosen to execute the Divine Mission and for that, free from individual ego, work together for the execution of the Divine Mission. A Sadguru[sic] is the one who leads the created to the creator.<sup>21</sup>

This last line is consistent with Meher Baba's own declaration that he was an "Avatar or God-Man... one who comes from God as the Awakener."<sup>22</sup> There is no requirement for the religious identification of a sadhguru. Meher Baba's five Perfect Masters align with a variety of religious traditions. While they each ascribed to certain texts, oral traditions, and stories, they did not strictly adhere solely to these sources. They accepted students from a variety of backgrounds, aiming to lead their followers towards spiritual knowledge, not towards conversion to any one way of understanding the universe.

Meher Baba took a vow of silence on July 10, 1925. He didn't speak out loud for the remainder of his life. He stopped writing two years later in 1927.<sup>23</sup> Baba had written a number of books communicating his teachings. The most well-known of these works is

<sup>19</sup> Charles Benjamin Purdom, *The God-Man*, p. 15-16

<sup>20</sup> Purdom, 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> "Dattavtars - Sadgurus of Datta Linage," Dattavtars (ShreeSwami.org), accessed January 12, 2020, <http://www.shreeswami.org/dattavtars/>

<sup>22</sup> Purdom, *The God Man*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Townshend, 202.

*God Speaks*. In this short book, Baba lays out his vision of the universe. In the preface to the first edition of *God Speaks* two of Baba's followers write:

Meher Baba's pronouncements have always been without sectarian purpose or bias. He has often made direct statements to the effect that he appreciates all "isms" (Sufism, Vedantism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, etc.), religious and political parties for the many good things that they seek to achieve, but does not and cannot belong to any of them. He regards Absolute Truth as including and transcending them all, and his function as being detached from all these divine paths, awakening the followers of these divine paths to their real meaning and true spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Meher Baba considered his purpose to "awaken" others. He has been given the title "The Awakener" by his followers. This "awakening" was not to sway his followers to take up a new religion or worship of himself, but to lead his followers to the Absolute Truth and, thus, enlightenment. He called himself an Avatar or "God-man," the origin of Charles Purdom's book title. As he was enlightened, he had become one with God and an avatar of God like other famous sadhgurus before him. Baba's drive to awaken his followers, his stories about the Perfect Masters, and his vow of silence can clearly be seen as points of inspiration for Pete Townshend in his construction of *Tommy*. Tommy uses the term "aware" instead of awake, but he declares to his followers "I became aware this year" in reference to his miraculous regaining of his senses. Meher Baba and Hazrat Babajan chose not to speak and Tommy chose to not see, hear, or speak in order to commence a spiritual journey. In the final song on the album, Tommy becomes a guru to his followers attempting to teach them how to begin their own journey. His disciples struggle to follow him spiritually and eventually reject him.

<sup>24</sup> Baba, x.

Though Townshend planned to travel to India with friends to meet the spiritual leader, Meher Baba died in February of 1969 before this trip could be completed.<sup>25</sup> With the dream of meeting his spiritual leader deferred, Townshend imagined an interaction between a Perfect Master and his disciple in a narrative poem entitled “The Amazing Journey.” This poem became the basis and focal point for the original concept album *Tommy*. The evidence that Townshend’s first iteration of *Tommy* was a poem shows that Townshend had considerable literary aspirations for his project to spread Meher Baba’s teachings through his art. Because Townshend’s talent undeniably lies in music rather than poetry, it is no surprise *Tommy* became The Who’s fourth studio album. Townshend’s literary aspirations found fulfillment in writing *Tommy* as a rock *opera*. In their introduction to an interview in 1969 with Townshend about *Tommy*, *Rolling Stone* journalists Rick Sanders and David Dalton declare, “At long last, *Tommy* is with us. Pete Townshend’s been talking about doing his opera for years. And now we have a double album set that’s probably the most important milestone in pop since Beatlemania. For the first time, a rock group has come up with a full-length cohesive work that could be compared to the classics.”<sup>26</sup> Townshend had written shorter pieces for a projected larger opera that never came to fruition. The long awaited *Tommy* fulfilled his aspiration to write the first successful full-length rock opera album. Townshend’s own journey writing *Tommy* began with his initial poem in which his devotion to Meher Baba is evident. The poem “Amazing Journey” is a first-person narrative about a man lost on a spiritual journey until his Master appears before him to be his leader and his guide. After

<sup>25</sup> Townshend, 233.

<sup>26</sup> Rick Sanders and David Dalton, “Townshend On ‘Tommy’: Behind the Who’s Rock Opera,” *Rolling Stone* (Penske Business Media, LLC., July 12, 1969), <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/townshend-on-tommy-behind-the-whos-rock-opera-99396/>).

writing the poem, Townshend began to write songs, developing the idea further. He chose the name for Tommy because “the middle letters were OM which was aptly mystical, and it was an English name associated with the war and heroism.”<sup>27</sup> He looked to the teachings of Meher Baba to build out the character, “Tommy became deaf, dumb, and blind when I realized that there was no way to get across musically or dramatically the idea of our ignorance of reality, as I had learned it to be from reading Meher Baba... I decided that the hero had to be deaf, dumb, and blind, so that seen from our already limited point of view, his limitation would be symbolic of our own.”<sup>28</sup> Tommy’s “deaf, dumb, and blindness” are central to the story and underlying philosophy within *Tommy*. How he loses his sense, lives without them, and eventually regains them are the central metaphor through which Townshend elucidates Baba’s specifically Eastern Indian spirituality.

<sup>27</sup> Barnes and Townshend, *Story of Tommy*, p. 30.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

### III. Loss of the Senses: “Tommy, Can You Hear Me?”

In the original album, Pete Townshend models Tommy after the teachings of Meher Baba making Tommy’s loss and subsequent restoration of his sight, hearing, and ability to speak the central metaphor for his journey through illusion to Absolute Truth and enlightenment. The lyrics “That deaf, dumb, and blind kid/Sure plays a mean pinball” and “Tommy, can you hear me?/Tommy can you see me?” are some of the most familiar from all three iterations of *Tommy*. Although Tommy goes through the same journey of becoming “deaf, dumb, and blind” to regaining his senses when his mother smashes the mirror, the outcome of Tommy’s journey through this loss and restoration shifts in each iteration of *Tommy* which causes Tommy’s objective and characterization to shift as well. Townshend’s original intent in the album was to use Tommy’s condition as a symbolic reflection of the listener’s own limited point of view.

Townshend’s central metaphor for *maya* versus truth sets up a complex challenge for the film. While Ken Russell has the entire visual medium of film at his disposal, film itself is a medium for visual illusions. It creates additional layers of illusion onto this world Baba already claims to be one of *maya*. There is dissonance in the very attempt to represent Tommy’s singular ability to see through *maya* with a medium that is fundamentally based on creating illusions and escape into this compounded layer of illusion. Russell, in particular, as a surrealistic director uses film’s ability to convincingly portray the bizarre and fantastical. While the very medium of film contradicts the underlying principle behind the album, Russell only builds onto this contradiction by introducing an abundance of Catholic iconography into the film. This blatant iconography

literally transforms Tommy into a Christ figure. Through its psychedelic sequences and general extravagance, the film becomes a caricature of the illusory nature of film radically changing the protagonist and core concept of *Tommy*.

Theatre is just as much a vehicle for illusion as film and the musical changes the storytelling of *Tommy* even more than the film. The Broadway musical stages Tommy's loss of his senses as a literal response to trauma that results in temporary autism. The musical uses Tommy's autism as a device to show how he is different from everyone else. While his condition is staged literally as autism, the musical also uses it as a metaphor for teenage angst and loneliness. Surrounding Tommy with elaborate spectacle of the 1960s belabors this metaphor to the audience. If Meher Baba's insists that this physical world is illusion, then nostalgia is wistful longing for a past version of this illusory world based on imperfect and selective memory. By creating this nostalgic look to the past, the musical further contradicts the essential theme of the album by encouraging it's audience members to lose themselves within the illusions of theatre and their own memories.

How Tommy's "deaf, dumb, and blindness" is characterized in each iteration reflects how *Tommy* is reconstructed to create a new unique interpretation of *Tommy* for each medium, as well as how each medium wants its audience to respond to its interpretation. Pete Townshend's album is introductory and artistically illuminating of Meher Baba's teachings. Therefore, the album shows Tommy's loss of his senses as what allows him to journey through illusion to Absolute Truth, setting him up to be a guru in the style of Meher Baba when he regains his senses. Ken Russell's retains the didactic nature of the album but Westernizes the message to one much more traditional. In the

film, Tommy's unreceptive states allows him to reunite with his deceased father and achieve spiritual knowledge. Paired with the Catholic iconography of the film, this constructs a version of Tommy as a Christ-like Messiah. The Broadway musical is more interested in its storytelling as a form of escapism for its audience. In the musical, Tommy's state is more pointedly staged as a result of the murder that occurs in the beginning. His ensuing journey towards becoming a pinball champion is given more attention than the spiritual awakening from which this inexplicable talent is supposed to derive. Pinball and the flash and flair of the 1960s that accompany it are heightened to provide the audience with a few hours escape into the past and down memory lane for the older audience members. Tommy's internal journey becomes one of the typical teenager's identity crisis, designed to encourage identification from the audience. Like the film, this provides another illusory escape for the audience, contradicting Townshend's original intent and Baba's teachings.

### **Album**

The poem "The Amazing Journey" begins with the main character literally waking up on a Tuesday morning and attempting to get out of bed. While the character's spirit feels fine, his head and his heart are in pain, making him unable to rise from the bed. This story mimics that of Meher Baba's reaction to his lessons with his first Perfect Master Hazrat Babajan. "Hazrat" is the Muslim equivalent of sadhguru. Like the narrator of the poem, Baba's journey towards his "awakening" began confined to his bed. Townshend uses Baba's own story to inspire that of Tommy's "amazing journey" because it was how Townshend himself was introduced to this concept of "awakening."



In writing an album meant to introduce Westerners to this topic, he draws on his own moment of discovery.

In *The God-Man*, Purdom relays Meher Baba's story of meeting this first Perfect Master. Meher Baba was a young college student at the time. While riding his bicycle one day, he saw an old woman sitting beneath a neem tree. Their eyes met, and she beckoned him over. When he came over, she stood and embraced him. They sat together in silence for a time, as she had also taken a vow of silence. Meher Baba would return to see her every night for nearly a year. In January of 1914, it is said that at the end of his usual visit, Hazrat Babajan kissed his forehead, bestowing a *barakah* unto him.<sup>29</sup> In Islam, a *barakah* is a powerful blessing. Both Purdom's book *The God-Man* and the introductions to Meher Baba's own *God Speaks* attribute Baba's God-realization to this moment. Purdom writes that after the kiss, Baba returned home and went to sleep. Within ten minutes Baba began to experience a transformation. For Baba the process of "awakening" was not a slow or gentle process. It came with discomfort and a loss of the senses. Unlike stories of the Buddha, who serenely achieved Enlightenment alone beneath a bodhi tree, Baba's enlightenment started like an illness:

He began to experience extraordinary thrills, as though he were receiving electric shocks; joy mingled with pain, and he lost his body consciousness. The first person to discover Meher in this condition was his mother. She found him lying with wide-open, vacant eyes. She called to him, and he sat up. He could not speak. Thinking he was seriously ill, she made him lie down again. For three days he lay in this condition; his eyes were open, but he saw nothing. On the fourth day Meher began to move about and was slightly conscious of his body. So he remained for nearly nine months. He had no knowledge of his own actions, and what he did was in response to no prompting of his mind. He was totally unconscious of the world.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Purdom, 18-19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

This description of Baba's initial experience as one of "extraordinary thrills," "electric shocks," and "joy mingled with pain" through which he loses body consciousness is imitated in the lines in "The Amazing Journey" poem and the chorus of the song "Amazing Journey" on the Tommy album "Sickness will surely take the mind/Where minds can't usually go." Baba is then described with wide, vacant eyes, unable to see or speak, and unconscious to the physical world. For all intents and purposes, Baba is "deaf, dumb, and blind" during this time, which is exactly how Townshend describes the main character Tommy in the album. This moment is pinpointed as Baba's own "awakening." His disciples think of it as when he became spiritually conscious. Townshend draws on Baba's moment of Awakening, elongating this period of being mostly unconscious to the world for the majority of Tommy's adolescence.

There are noticeable echoes of this unconsciousness and awakening in Townshend's poem "The Amazing Journey," echoes which in turn reverberate in the album *Tommy*. In the poem, Townshend's main character is, like Baba, confined to a bed, unable to eat or sleep:

At twelve my mum brought dinner,  
At four my mum brought tea,  
At eight my mum brought supper  
And ten o'clock brought sleep  
And sleep brought moods and yearning  
To travel just once more,  
That one amazing journey  
I slept through once before.<sup>31</sup>

Like Baba's mother, the narrator's mother tries to coax him out of bedridden unconsciousness to no success. Despite his physical body's suffering, his mind, however,

<sup>31</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy* (Middlesex, UK: Eel Pie Publishing LTD. , 1977), p. 27-29.

goes on what Townshend dubs “the amazing journey.” This is the name of the poem, and “Amazing Journey” also becomes the name of the fourth track on the album, during which Tommy retreats from the world after witnessing a murder.

In the song directly before “Amazing Journey” titled “1921” on the album, Tommy’s father, who went missing during the war, returns. It is implied that upon this return Tommy’s father kills the man his wife has been with during his disappearance. The parents then tell Tommy, “You didn’t hear it... You didn’t see it... You won’t say nothing to no one... Never in your life.”<sup>32</sup> Tommy responds between these lines saying that he did hear it and see it, but “I won’t say nothing to no one... Never tell a soul what I know is the truth.”<sup>33</sup> This number is followed by “Amazing Journey,” in which the third stanza, which also serves as the chorus, is the same as the third stanza of the poem. This is Tommy’s amazing journey. Like Baba during his moment of awakening and the narrator in the poem, Tommy is becoming unconscious to the physical world, unable to respond to his mother’s calls. The first line of the song “Amazing Journey” states that Tommy is now deaf, dumb, and blind. “Deaf, dumb, and blind” is how Tommy is characterized as appearing to the outside world while he is on his amazing journey. However, the lyrics also inform the listener that “He’s in a quiet vibration land/Strange as it seems/His musical dreams/Ain’t quite so bad//Ten years old/With thoughts as bold/As thought can be/Loving life and becoming wise/In simplicity.”<sup>34</sup> Tommy may seem “completely unreceptive” to those around him, but the lyrics of “Amazing Journey” describe a deep,

<sup>32</sup> Pete Townshend, “1921,” 1921 - The Who (Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969), <https://genius.com/The-who-1921-lyrics>)

<sup>33</sup> Pete Townshend, “1921.”

<sup>34</sup> Pete Townshend, “Amazing Journey,” Amazing Journey - The Who (Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969), <https://genius.com/The-who-amazing-journey-lyrics>)

meditative state in which Tommy is learning and gaining wisdom not unlike Baba's own awakening.<sup>35</sup>

Pete Townshend's knowledge of Meher Baba's story is drawn from Charles Purdom's book, Meher Baba's writings, and from what he hears from fellow disciples. However, it is important to note that the physical attributes of blindness, deafness, mutism, or general isolation consistently appear in Indian stories in relation to enlightenment. In his own journey, Meher Baba encountered Hazrat Babajan who took a vow of silence. The third master Meher Baba encountered was Tajuddin Baba who committed himself to an asylum for much of his life to escape people. The fifth master Meher Baba encountered, Upasni Maharaj, locked himself in a cave for a year when he was twenty.<sup>36</sup> Purdom recounts an event when a blind girl's parents come to Meher Baba and ask him to cure her blindness. Baba told the girl's parents that he did not perform miracles and, "The eyes of man see things that are not worth seeing and that which is Real is not seen by physical eyes. My instructions will help her to see inwardly what alone is worth seeing."<sup>37</sup> It is a belief in Indian spiritual traditions that giving up one's senses, abilities, or interactions with others allow one to begin to see past *maya* and therefore begin a journey towards enlightenment. This quotation from Baba himself shows that he is not interested in curing sight because he believes physical sight allows people to be tricked by *maya*. Townshend's choice for Tommy to be blind literalizes this belief that an inability to see, elective or not, allows for an opening of the soul (*atman*) to the Ultimate Reality.

<sup>35</sup> Townshend, Pete. "Go to the Mirror." Go to the Mirror - The Who. (Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969). <https://genius.com/The-who-go-to-the-mirror-lyrics>).

<sup>36</sup> Purdom, 19-23.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 294.

In another anecdote, Baba visited the Industrial Home for the Blind. When one of the men asked Baba why he was so unfortunate to be blind, Baba replied, “You do not know your good fortune. All are born blind, even those who think they can see. They do not see the real, any more than you, but you do not see the false either: it is your desire to do so that binds you. Do not ask for physical sight, but to be given the true Sight that will enable you to see the only thing that Is. Think of me constantly.”<sup>38</sup> In Baba’s theology, overcoming the illusion of the world (*maya*) is imperative, so anything that distracts or disrupts the senses helps someone to see past this illusion. In Baba’s own experience, his everyday consciousness was disrupted by Babajan’s barakah. For Tommy witnessing a murder and his parent’s cover up disrupts his, thus far, ordinary way of interacting with the world. He gives up his sight so he does not have to deny seeing what happened, but this also keeps him from seeing all other parts of the physical world that would distract him from seeing “only the thing that is” or Absolute Truth.

Townshend’s character Tommy, however, is not only blind. He is deaf and dumb as well, which fully isolates him from the outside world. In the song “Christmas,” Tommy’s parents worry that because he is deaf, he has not heard about Jesus or his teachings. Without this knowledge, they are worried that Tommy can never be saved. His parents lament, “And Tommy doesn’t know what day it is/ He doesn’t know who Jesus was or what praying is/How can he be saved/From the eternal grave?”<sup>39</sup> Tommy’s parents are worried that Tommy does not have the teachings of a spiritual leader, Jesus, to help guide Tommy’s eternal soul. What they don’t know, is that while on his

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 348.

<sup>39</sup> Pete Townshend, “Christmas,” Christmas - The Who (Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969), <https://genius.com/The-who-christmas-lyrics>).

“Amazing Journey,” Tommy is being guided by “a tall stranger...his eyes are the eyes that transmit all they know.” This leader or guide is leading Tommy to his own awakening. Knowing that today is Christmas or how to pray is menial in comparison to being shepherded towards enlightenment by his own Perfect Master. Tommy is free from dealing with his parents’ pestering and worrying because he is isolated in his inner mind with his guide.

It is important to note here that the album states specifically that Tommy’s loss of senses is not physical. In the song “Go to the Mirror!” Tommy’s parents have dragged Tommy to a doctor they think can cure him. The doctor sings, “He seems to be completely unreceptive/The tests I gave him show no sense at all/His eyes react to light the dials detect it/He hears but cannot answer to your call.../There is no chance, no untried operation/All hope lies with him and none with me.../No machine can give the kind of stimulation/Needed to remove his inner block.”<sup>40</sup> The doctor regretfully informs Tommy’s parents that his deafness and blindness are not physical. He also tells them that it is up to Tommy to remove his inner block. This is an important moment because it reinforces that Tommy’s condition is metaphorical and not a physical disability. It also pushes the audience to interrogate their own “limited point of view” and inner blocks, what they are choosing to see and hear or resisting to see and hear. This makes Tommy’s eventual “Miracle Cure” all the more “miraculous” as it is spiritual through his own doing and not medical.

Before going to the Doctor, Tommy’s parents had previously taken him to “The Hawker” and “The Acid Queen” in attempts to cure his “deaf, dumb, and blindness” to

<sup>40</sup> Pete Townshend. “Go to the Mirror.” Go to the Mirror - The Who. (Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969). <https://genius.com/The-who-go-to-the-mirror-lyrics>).

no avail. Tommy's condition cannot be cured by Western organized religion, street drugs, or a medical professional. Townshend uses each of these moments to underline the mystical nature of Tommy's condition. While the characters of The Hawker and The Acid Queen and their intentions are somewhat vague on the album, the film fleshes out these characters more fully and their tactics for trying to cure Tommy. The film's depiction of these characters as well as Tommy's condition as a whole, constructs a different and much more specific portrayal of Tommy than was possible through the medium of a music album.

### **Film**

In only providing the music and lyrics, the album allows for vagueness and room for interpretation about Tommy, his journey, and his interactions with other characters that all echo Townshend's interest in Eastern spirituality and the teachings of Baba. This created challenges for the film. The plot had to be fleshed out and a few songs added to clarify plot and characters. Russell's film adaptation therefore created a more complex storyline for the film *Tommy* than had existed for the album. Then there was the added challenge of representing a spirituality unfamiliar to the Western audience as well as to the director himself. Ken Russell's response to this challenge was in reality not to accept it. Russell's main artistic assertion was to model Tommy after Jesus Christ, the best-known figure in Western culture. Even for the 1960s and 1970s Ken Russell was considered a provocative and psychedelic director. His style was highly visual and he added a number of bizarre and fantastical sequences to the film. However, despite how vivid Russell's directorial choices were, they were not innovative or loyal to the source material, the album. He did not aim to portray the specific type of spirituality that made

the album *Tommy* so unique. He resorted to Western spirituality to tell the story instead, which resulted in a very different story than was intended by the album.

Russell developed the script himself and is credited for the screenplay. He stated *Tommy* “deals with a pretty big thing, false Messiahs, true Messiahs, man being God, God being man, whatever. That’s what interests me. It is a recurring theme in my films. I mean, all my films are very Catholic, but people never mention it.”<sup>41</sup> This isn’t to say that the film is Catholic propaganda. Russell continued to say that he left Catholicism both because, “I wasn’t good enough to continue and I also didn’t believe in a lot of it, the more I thought about it.”<sup>42</sup> Regardless of Russell’s own personal feelings about Catholicism, as a director his preoccupation with Catholicism and messiahs led him to tell a story very different from Townshend’s unique allegory. Unlike Townshend’s novel, mystically Eastern story, Russell’s version wound up being too familiar. The film became a rereading of the passion play with Tommy as Christ. The Who’s score became just a soundtrack as the film’s visuals took over to tell arguably the most familiar religious story in the Western world. When listening solely to the concept album Townshend’s influences from Meher Baba are quite clear, but in watching the film, the direct descent from Meher Baba to *Tommy* is completely disrupted by Russell.

In the film, the audience witnesses the murder along with child-age Tommy, however, in the film, the new lover/stepfather kills Tommy’s father as he returns from being MIA during WWII. After his mother and stepfather tell Tommy that he must not tell anyone the truth of what happens, they take him to a carnival. As “Amazing Journey” begins to play, Tommy reacts to nothing despite being surrounded by bells, whistles,

<sup>41</sup> Barnes and Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 93.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.



flashing lights, and disco balls. This would have been an impressive introduction to Tommy's decision to pull back from the illusions of physical world, literally represented by the bells and whistles of an arcade. "Amazing Journey" allows the audience to witness Tommy's internal actions as he become unresponsive to the outside world. Unable and unwilling to show this journey as the Baba-esque meditation it is intended to be, Russell's quick insertion of Catholic iconography takes the film in a different direction. At the arcade, Tommy stares straight ahead with wide, vacant eyes. When his mother and stepfather take him on an airplane carnival ride, we see Tommy in his mind's eye with his father in the cockpit of a British WWII fighter jet plane.<sup>43</sup> Tommy's father was an RAF pilot in WWII before being shot down and disappearing. The film has placed the character of Tommy's father in for the spiritual guide/leader/master that was referenced in both the poem and the previous iteration of "Amazing Journey" on the album. Tommy does not react to anything in the real world where he is at a carnival, but he is joyful and interacting with his father in his mind's eye. The focus on Tommy's father as his spiritual guide parallels the father/son dynamic central to Christianity. This "Amazing Journey" sequence continues on to frame Tommy's father as a God-like figure.

After getting into a fight with each other, Tommy's mother and stepfather leave him alone as they each storm off. Young Tommy stumbles through the arcade alone. He stops to stare into a funhouse mirror. In the mirror, he sees his father, always in his RAF uniform, holding a circle of light like the sun. The first image of the movie is Tommy's father standing on a mountain, a silhouette against the setting sun. As Tommy sees his father through the mirror holding the light, the lyrics "His eyes are the eyes that/Transmit

<sup>43</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*. (1975; London, England: Columbia Pictures Industries, Inc., 2003. Apple TV.)

all they know/The Truth burns so bright/it can melt winter snow/A towering shadow so black and so high/A white sun burning the earth and the sky.”<sup>44</sup> The camera takes the audience through the ball of light into outer space, where the ball of light acts as a pinball knocking against a number of RAF planes that are oriented like crosses. When the pinball of light hits a plane, it turns into a wooden cross with a red poppy, like those used at the beginning of the movie to serve as grave markers for missing soldiers, and zips away. As the planes fly towards the camera, the center plane comes closer. Tommy’s father is standing against the plane with his arms held out against the wings, like Jesus on the cross. The sequence then returns to child-age Tommy as he dances with abandon through space. He is then dancing and smiling in the middle of a maze of funhouse mirrors until his mother and stepfather appear.<sup>45</sup> Tommy turns to look into the mirror and returns to his unresponsive state. In changing the situation of Tommy’s father’s return and the murder, Ken Russell turns Tommy’s father into a martyr and his stepfather into a villain. He also introduces religious imagery to introduce and outline Tommy’s father, foreshadowing Tommy’s own future as a spiritual figure.

Russell use of Catholic imagery only increases from here. The song “The Hawker,” which features legendary guitarist Eric Clapton, comes to life in a cathedral. This song is the first in which Tommy is an adult, played by The Who lead vocalist Roger Daltrey. The other three members of The Who are shown playing their instruments wearing the vestments of acolytes. Clapton is shown at stone pulpit playing an electric guitar. He wears a white robe with a newspaper-like print. Clapton then walks down the aisle playing his guitar, flanked by two of The Who acolytes. They lead an enormous

<sup>44</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

statue of Marilyn Monroe in her iconic *Seven Year Itch* pose being carried to the front of the cathedral. The acolytes carrying the statue swing incense thuribles and wear Monroe masks and wigs. The congregation is mainly comprised of people with disabilities.<sup>46</sup> Clapton sings about the Monroe statue, “she brings eyesight/ to the blind... Every time she starts to shake,/The dumb begin to talk...Oh she’s got the power to heal you, never fear/Just one word from her lips/And the deaf can hear.”<sup>47</sup> Congregants line up to receive the Eucharist, except in this church the wine and wafer have been replaced with pills and Johnny Walker Red Label. The congregants line up to touch the statue’s feet. Tommy’s mother has brought him here for healing, but when they come up to touch the feet of the statue, it falls over and shatters.<sup>48</sup> Tommy remains unresponsive. Ken Russell’s construction of corrupted organized religion is contradictory because it shows that the people need to be saved from the corruption. However, Tommy, the figure who is foreshadowed to save them, is being made in the image as the same savior who inspired the Catholic church.

Tommy’s stepfather steps in to try healing Tommy by taking him to a drug-addicted prostitute nicknamed The Acid Queen, played by the also legendary Tina Turner. This sequence turns especially psychedelic. After dragging Tommy upstairs to an attic room, The Acid Queen dons a shiny silver medieval-looking helmet with an exceptionally long needle-like spike extending from the top and a red cape. When the red cape is removed by her attendants, the helmet is connected to a shiny silver Iron Maiden device with syringes in place of spikes. The attendants lead Tommy into the device and

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 38-39.

<sup>48</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

enclose him. The syringes pull out blood and then push it back in. The device opens to reveal Tommy's father who then morphs into Tommy. Tommy is now naked apart from a loincloth and is pinpricked with blood. The device closes and opens again, this time Tommy has a crown of red poppies reminiscent of Jesus' crown of thorns in addition to his loincloth. His face is dripping with tears and blood. He is impaled with a number of poppies up and down his body, each dripping blood.<sup>49</sup> He is the very picture of the crucified Christ. He holds silver balls in his hands and his mother lies at his feet wailing, like Mary weeping at the feet of Jesus on the cross. The device closes again. Tommy's stepfather eventually comes to rescue him from The Acid Queen. The abuse that Tommy's body endures is used to highlight his unresponsive state in the physical world and occasionally provides a brief glimpse into his mysterious journey within his mind. As an illusion itself the film is unable to truthfully illustrate a spiritual journey, so these moments become convenient interludes for Russell psychedelic, iconographic spectacles.

The album draws directly on Meher Baba's own awakening experience to help us understand Tommy's state of unresponsiveness as a way of seeking the truth and achieving enlightenment. Townshend's didactic album, which framed Tommy as a guru like Meher Baba, is manipulated by Russell to mold Tommy into a Christian savior. This will alter how Tommy is portrayed later in the film after he regains his sight, hearing, and speech. Ken Russell's decision to costume Tommy as Jesus and frame his amazing journey as interactions with his father changes the type of spirituality in which Tommy participates and eventually brings to his followers. Tommy's time spent without his sight, hearing, or ability to speak is presented as imagined time communicating with his father,

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

like Jesus at Gethsemane, rather than as a personal meditative journey towards enlightenment, like that of Meher Baba. In this way, Russell's film aims to be didactic like Townshend album, but the lesson it aims to impart is the same as an Easter themed Sunday school lesson.

### **Musical**

Des McAnuff's Broadway musical deviates even further from the original source material in terms of connecting Tommy's state of being "deaf, dumb, and blind" to his spiritual state. Tommy's story stops being an allegory and his loss of senses is no longer a metaphor for seeing past *maya*. Tommy's condition becomes a literal condition, which McAnuff stages as autism. In the musical, the murder scene reverts back to the father killing the lover like originally laid out in the album. Right after the murder, during "Amazing Journey," Tommy stares into the mirror, seeing an older version of himself in the mirror as his guide.<sup>50</sup> Tommy is taken directly to a doctor's office after his parents realize he has become unresponsive. The consultation of medical professionals is sought immediately in the musical, whereas the doctor is the last entity consulted in the album and the film. The doctors and nurses lead Tommy in and out of multiple doors, supposedly running him through a gamut of tests. The final doctor simply shakes his head, implying there is nothing to be done.<sup>51</sup> This is during the instrumental song "Sparks" so there is no further information in the lyrics on Tommy's condition at this time. However, the immediate consultation with medical professionals as opposed to spiritual leaders or shady drug dealers establishes to the audience that Tommy's condition

<sup>50</sup> "THE WHO'S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 1 Broadway," YouTube Video, 47:54, Posted by Ben McGinley, May 24, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_rkIOKclWs&t=18s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_rkIOKclWs&t=18s).

<sup>51</sup> "THE WHO'S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 1 Broadway," [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T\\_rkIOKclWs&t=18s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_rkIOKclWs&t=18s).

is medical and literal rather than metaphysical and metaphoric. McAnuff's use of different aged Tommys as the guides Tommy sees through the mirror frames Tommy's loss of his senses and his turn to the mirror as a retreat into an autistic state as a response to a trauma incident. This shifts Tommy journey in the musical to being one of solely coping with trauma and isolation instead of a journey towards spiritual fulfillment.

The link between Tommy's condition and his mastery of pinball is especially different from the album with the absence of Tommy's spiritual journey. The scene in which Tommy discovers pinball is given more time and attention than the previous two iterations. The song "Sensation" which originally marked Tommy's regaining of his senses on the album, is moved up the song list to highlight his introduction to pinball and the instant attention it draws. His status as a "sensation" happens earlier in the musical and narrated by Tommy instead of the other pinball champion he dethrones. The fact that Tommy narrates his own discovery of pinball shows that he is still aware of the world and paying attention to it. He is locked in his mind wanting to rejoin the rest of the world rather than electing to ignore it or see past it.

After Tommy has played with a pinball machine for the first time, his parents take him to a psychiatrist's office. This is Tommy's second consultation with a medical professional in the musical. The psychiatrist and his assistant encourage Tommy to interact with a number of musical instruments, but he remains unresponsive like before.<sup>52</sup> In a dramaturgy note, the production dramaturg Chad Sylvain writes that autism was not considered an official diagnosable illness in Britain until 1943. He continues, "Tommy's first visit to the doctor might very well have baffled his examiners, since only the most

<sup>52</sup> Pete Townshend, *The Who's Tommy: The Musical*, ed. Rita D. Jacobs (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1993), p. 71.

advanced specialist would have the knowledge necessary even to attempt diagnosis of his problem.”<sup>53</sup> His note discusses how during the 1950s Tommy’s parents would have struggled to determine his illness and to cope with it due to lack of awareness about autism. Tommy’s visit to the psychiatrist’s office is used to demonstrate the extent of Tommy’s inability to communicate, as many nonverbal children are able to communicate or interact through music. The diagnosis of autism gives Des McAnuff a reason for Tommy’s unresponsiveness and an opening to turn Tommy’s spiritual journey into a teenage identity crisis. This new internal struggle makes Tommy more relatable to the Western Broadway audience.

Like Ken Russell, Des McAnuff opted to stage Tommy’s “deaf, dumb, and blindness” in a way that was recognizable to his audience. However, McAnuff’s objective was not to be pedagogical like Townshend or Russell. Instead, he wanted to provide a three hour escape from the world for his audience. His conspicuous choice to stage Tommy as a person with autism is such a dramatic change to the narrative exposition of the story set forth by the album and the film that it causes the rest of the story to diverge significantly from the album and the film.

### **Conclusion**

Pete Townshend’s original album explores the ability of rock and roll to serve as an allegorical medium. Moreover, he puts forth the rock and roll concept album as a mechanism for spiritual exploration and possibly the beginning stages of enlightenment for its listeners. Ken Russell’s body of work is rife with Catholic iconography. Despite his own personal critiques of Catholicism, the strong Catholic presence in his work

<sup>53</sup> Pete Townshend, *The Who's Tommy: The Musical*, p. 46.

demonstrates the fundamental hold Christianity maintains on art and culture in the Western world. Whether a result of laziness or zealousness, Russell's film *Tommy* retreads the classic Biblical story of Christ's passion. Though audacious with his visuals, he remains artistically safe by simply reminding his audience of a story they have undoubtedly heard before rather than introducing them to something new or, as was the case with the album, something that runs countercultural to the dominant Western models of spirituality and enlightenment. Des McAnuff forgoes any experimentation, playing it safe within the world of American Broadway theater. McAnuff recreates the experience of the lonely outcasted teenager, albeit with the identification of autism as the isolating factor. He opts for spectacle and gimmicks, much like the concept albums of Townshend's contemporaries. The musical *The Who's Tommy* becomes a vessel for baby-boomer nostalgia and fodder for Broadway's broad appeal marketing. Just as they use Tommy's "deaf, dumb, and blindness" to serve their own visions, so too do Russell and McAnuff manipulate Tommy's reemergence into the physical world. Tommy's period of isolation dominates the first half of all three iterations until the climatic smashing of the mirror that releases him from it. While Tommy's state in the first act foreshadows the type of leader he will become, the smashing of the mirror crystalizes the archetype and introduces his new objective for the second act.



#### IV. SMASH THE MIRROR: “And Freedom Tastes of Reality”

The device of the mirror is critical to the first act of all three iterations of *Tommy*. Townshend used a mirror on the album to represent the illusion of the physical world and as the barrier between Tommy’s isolated state and the rest of the world. However, the mirror is not used in this same way in each iteration. Ken Russell uses mirrors as portals through which Tommy can commune with his father. Des McAnuff constructs an enormous mirror with the silhouette of a wardrobe as a central set piece. This mirror as well as others that fly in are also used as windows into Tommy’s psyche. Different versions of Tommy at different ages appear within the mirrors. In all three iterations of *Tommy*, Tommy regains his ability to see, hear, and speak after his mother smashes the mirror. The sound effect of a mirror being smashed is heard on the album towards the end of “Smash the Mirror,” a climactic moment after which Tommy sings his own first full song, “Sensation.”<sup>54</sup> In the film Ken Russell adds an impressive visual component. Tommy’s mother throws him through the mirror, which shatters into multiple fragments around him. In the musical, Tommy’s mother smashes the mirror with a chair cueing a blackout underscored by shattering sound effects and a musical reprise. In addition to the visual effects, the film and the musical reorder the songs following the smashing to change Tommy’s reactions to reuniting with the physical world and the people in it. While Tommy’s mother smashes the mirror in every iteration allowing Tommy to regain his senses, the relationship between Tommy and his mother as well as the events leading up to the smashing differ. The circumstances of the mirror smashing lead to the reveal of Tommy’s state of being as his mind reunites with his body which alters Tommy’s

<sup>54</sup> Pete Townshend, “Smash the Mirror,” *Smash the Mirror - The Who*. (Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969). <https://genius.com/The-who-smash-the-mirror-lyrics>).

subsequent rise to popularity as a spiritual leader as opposed to a pinball wizard. The film uses this moment to push Tommy forward as a Messiah, whereas the musical makes some big alteration to the song order and script to make Tommy a confused teenage celebrity. The mirror smashing climax marks the moment when the three iterations begin to diverge significantly from one another in how they show Tommy interacting with his followers and his eventual fate.

### **Album**

In the original album, Pete Townshend uses a mirror as a metaphor for *maya*, or illusion. A *Rolling Stone* interview with Pete Townshend about the completion of the album published July 12, 1969, stated, “one of the central themes of *Tommy* is the play between self and illusory self. It’s expressed by Tommy (the real self) who can see nothing but his reflection (illusory self) in the mirror.”<sup>55</sup> Townshend himself explained, “There had to be a loophole so I could show this. The boy has closed himself up completely as a result of the murder and his parents’ pressures, and the only thing he can see is his reflection in the mirror. This reflection – his illusory self – turns out to be his eventual salvation.”<sup>56</sup> A mirror is perfect metaphor for *maya* because what we see in the mirror looks exactly like the world we live in, but we know it isn’t real or tangible. The reflection of himself is the last bit of illusion Tommy is holding onto. He has followed his spiritual guide and is so close to enlightenment, but he has not been about to detach from this last piece of illusion. When Tommy’s mother smashes the mirror in a fit of rage, this frees Tommy to come back to the physical world. Tommy is like a bodhisattva, enlightened and wanting to help others.

<sup>55</sup> Rick Sanders and David Dalton, “Townshend On ‘Tommy’”

<sup>56</sup> Sanders and Dalton.

On the original album, “Sensation” is the song that follows “Smash the Mirror.” This placement of the song highlights the double meaning of “sensation.” Tommy is the sensation because he has regained his senses and he has emerged into the physical with an inexplicable “vibration” or ineffable quality that draws people to him. He also is presumably experiencing sensations he hasn’t felt in a long time or ever before due to regaining his senses. These sensations that Tommy is feeling as well as the “vibrations” he is sending out to the people around him are also evidence of his transcendence to a high plane of awareness. In his book “God Speaks,” Meher Baba writes, “On the fourth plane the soul is fully conscious of infinite energy. It is the very same infinite energy which is the shadowy aspect of that infinite power of God. Here the soul is equipped with full power... On the fourth plane there are no occult powers. They are divine powers.”<sup>57</sup> Townshend uses Meher Baba’s teachings to demonstrate Tommy’s increased spiritual awareness and abilities now that he has overcome the last bit of *maya* that was the mirror.

In “Sensation,” the very presence of Tommy is enough to draw people’s attention. People hold their breath and stop kissing their lovers to worship him. He sings, “I leave a trail of rooted people/Mesmerized by just the sight/The few I touched now are disciples/Love as One I Am the Light.”<sup>58</sup> His presence draws crowds and gains him a following of disciples. The objective of “Sensation” is to rally followers. This song makes it feel as though he has been released unto the world with tremendous energy and purpose to help people. He tells them “Send your troubles dancing, I know the

<sup>57</sup> Baba, 44.

<sup>58</sup> Townshend, Pete. “Sensation.” Sensation – (The Who. Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969.) <https://genius.com/The-who-sensation-lyrics>)

answer/I'm coming." These lyrics set Tommy on an optimistic trajectory to teach and become a guru to the disciples attracted to him.

### **Film**

In his film, Ken Russell uses Tommy's moth-like attraction to mirrors to show the audience Tommy's real self and his illusory self in the mirrors. However, though Ken Russell visually represents Townshend's concept of Tommy's illusory mirror-self, he reliably interjects Christian symbolism to further his own artistic vision for *Tommy*. He places Tommy's father within the mirror, making the mirror a portal through which Tommy can commune with his father. Tommy's interactions with his father in his visions detract from the pure duality of Tommy's illusory self and real self set up by Townshend. Russell furthers his vision of Tommy as a Christ figure when he illustrates the importance of the mirror and its eventually smashing to Tommy, but shows Tommy's release from his unresponsive state as a second birth. When the mirror shatters and Tommy is released, he falls through the narrow opening of the now empty mirror frame into a pool of water. He then emerges through the surface of the water to see the sun.<sup>59</sup> Tommy appears to have been born again into the world. Russell switches the position of "Sensation" and "I'm Free." After Tommy falls through the mirror, he sings "I'm Free" in the film. This new ordering implies that Tommy condition was less elective and that he was trapped. He celebrates his freedom, but also references false Messiahs in his bid to gather followers. Tommy's immediate reference to false Messiahs once he has been reborn into the world closes the loop on Russell's heavy handed foreshadowing of Tommy's messianic fate while he was in isolation. After reveling in his new freedom, Tommy baptizes his mother

<sup>59</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

in the ocean. Baptism is a uniquely Christian rite, and Russell uses this baptism imagery to establish Tommy as a messiah in the most Christian sense. In writing the screenplay for the film, Russell develops the character of Tommy's mother as even more central to Tommy's life than she was in the album. After Tommy's mother is redeemed and baptized anew, she becomes Tommy's first follower and strongest supporter.

The roles Ken Russell develops for Tommy's parents help to mold Tommy into a Christ-like figure in the minds of the audience. Tommy's father exists only in a transcendental space where he guides Tommy, like the relationship between the Christian god and his son Jesus. Tommy's mother has a more complicated relationship with Tommy. Ken Russell enriches the character of Tommy's mother to create a foil for Tommy and show their intertwined journey in coping with Tommy's unresponsiveness until it pushes his mother to a literal breaking point with her smashing his mirror. As Tommy is a unique and rare figure of spiritual enlightenment, every character is a foil to Tommy. However, Tommy's mother, Mrs. Walker, is specifically employed to highlight Tommy's singular characteristics. Although she tries to be a good mother, Mrs. Walker is also shown as materialistic, easily manipulated, and predominantly concerned with her corporeal existence than her spiritual condition. Her journey through excess and greed through the first half of the film contrasts with Tommy's meditative stares into the mirror and lead her to the climactic moment of smashing the mirror. Her materialism also makes her the perfect candidate for Tommy's first conversion.

In the film, Tommy's engagement with the mirror is the most obvious before and after he is mistreated by other major characters. Tommy is seen in front of the mirror with his mother and stepfather before they hesitantly leave him with his delinquent

Cousin Kevin and then again before they leave him with Uncle Ernie, played by The Who's drummer Keith Moon. Cousin Kevin physically bullies Tommy, taking advantage of Tommy's deaf, dumb, and blindness. Uncle Ernie also takes advantage of Tommy. It is implied in his song "Fiddle About" that he sexually molests Tommy. After these incidents, Tommy stares in the mirror seeing multiple versions of himself, sometimes holding the ball of light. Tommy's mother had previously questioned "Do you think it's alright to leave the boy with..." both Cousin Kevin and Uncle Ernie.<sup>60</sup> After the Ernie incident, Tommy's mother questions whether it is alright to leave Tommy by the mirror. Once again Tommy's parents conclude that it is alright as they ignore him, clearly coping with hangovers from their previous nights out. At this moment, Tommy's multiple mirror selves unite to lead Tommy out of the house and to his first pinball machine.

Tommy's obsession with mirrors first confuses and then enrages his mother. Townshend and Russell added a new song for the film that comes a few songs before "Smash the Mirror." The new song "Champagne" was written for Ann-Margret who played Mrs. Walker, Tommy's mother, in the film. By the scene in which Mrs. Walker sings "Champagne," Tommy has become wildly famous for playing pinball making his family exceptionally wealthy. Mrs. Walker sings about all of the wealth and fame Tommy has achieved so that they can now have "Caviar breakfasts everyday" with "Champagne flowing down like rain."<sup>61</sup> However, even though she indulges in the riches of Tommy's fame, she feels that she can't enjoy it because "What's it all worth when my son is blind?/He can't hear the music/Nor enjoy what I'm buying."<sup>62</sup> Whereas earlier in

<sup>60</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 75.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

the film, Mrs. Walker was grasping at straws to heal Tommy, she has now reached the end of her rope. Drunk on champagne, in this scene she has been watching television, mostly advertisements, and reveling in everything she can now afford. Towards the end of the song, news footage of Tommy winning yet another pinball tournament appears on the television with Tommy smiling blandly with an unfocused stare at the camera.

Consumed with guilt and drunken rage, Mrs. Walker begins to question the worth of their wealth. She moves from writhing in material-based pleasure on her bed to sitting on the floor directly in front of the television. She tears off her shoes and throws them at the TV while singing, “His life is worthless,/Affecting mine,/I’d pay any price,/To drive his plight from my mind!”<sup>63</sup> She smashes at the buttons on the TV remote trying to change the channel and escape the image of Tommy. Despite her best attempts, the image continues to flicker back to Tommy’s face. Tommy’s voice sings through this chaos his refrain “See me, feel me, touch me, heal me” until his mother launches her champagne bottle through the television set, smashing the screen and foreshadowing the smashing of the mirror.<sup>64</sup>

Tommy’s visit to the doctor’s office directly after this scene only drives his mother further towards hopelessness. The doctor tells her that nothing is physically wrong with Tommy, so no operation or machine can cure him. Mrs. Walker has been talked into letting the Hawker, the Doctor, Cousin Kevin, and Uncle Ernie care for or try to cure Tommy to mostly negative effects. Mrs. Walker dresses her son and leads him out of the office. As their chauffeur drives them home in a flashy red sport convertible, Mrs. Walker returns to drinking. She pleads with Tommy, “Tommy can you hear me?/Can you

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

feel me near you?/Tommy can you see me?/Can I help to cheer you?”<sup>65</sup> Tommy smiles, maybe enjoying the wind on his face, but responds in no other way.

Back at home, Tommy is dressed simply in a sweater and pants in all white. His mother has changed into an ostentatious red dress with plenty of costume jewelry to accessorize. In a drunken rage, she is dancing and flailing about around Tommy. Tommy stands still, gazing into the mirror. Mrs. Walker has been unendingly patient with her son and has held out hope for his recovery. However, in this moment, she snaps. She stands directly in front of the mirror waving her arms and tossing her hair, before moving towards him to grab his shoulders and shaking her hair in his face.<sup>66</sup> She tries to cover up the various mirrors with the nearby curtains, singing, “You don't answer my call/With even a nod or a wink/But you gaze at your own reflection!/You don't seem to see me/But I think you can see yourself/How can the mirror affect you?”<sup>67</sup> Having learned from the doctor that nothing is wrong with Tommy’s senses, she thinks that Tommy is ignoring her or choosing not to see or hear her. Hurt and enraged she tries to force Tommy to respond by yelling, running around the room, and grasping him all over from his feet up to his face. Finally, towards the end, she grabs her nearby liquor bottle and feints hitting the mirror with the bottle while singing, “Do you hear or fear or/Do I smash the mirror?” When Tommy doesn’t respond, she grabs him, and singing the line again, pushes him through the mirror. The mirror shatters as Tommy falls through it, landing on his back in a swimming pool.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>66</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

<sup>67</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 91.



In the film, the song “I’m Free” was moved up in the song list to this moment when Tommy reunites with the physical world. The song “Mother and Son” was written for the movie and added after “I’m Free” to give Tommy and his mother a moment to reunite and catch up. Tommy’s mother tells him about his pinball fame and wealth. Tommy responds that he is healed and that pinball was just the beginning. He sings “Pinball! What I see now before me/Is far beyond the game,/Beyond your wildest dreams!/Those who love me/Have a higher path to follow now./And you, dear mother, too/Must be prepared!”<sup>68</sup> Tommy’s consciousness has returned to the physical world ready to lead his followers on a more demanding journey than watching him play pinball. His mother is his first convert. Mrs. Walker finds Tommy lying on a rock by the beach after he smashed through the mirror. As Tommy tells her she must be prepared, he caresses her face. She is still wearing her red dress and showy jewelry. He quickly grabs her large sparkly earring and throws it into the ocean. Shocked, she stares as he snatches her other earring, necklaces, bracelet, and rings, tossing them all into the ocean. He even plucks off each of her fake, long, red fingernails and tosses them as well. The scene cuts to Tommy and his mother standing in the water as he dunks her into the water, baptizing her. They smile beamingly at each other as she rises up out of the water. Tommy then takes off running down the beach and his mother follows. In the following scene, Tommy’s mother has given up all her jewelry and is wearing the simple uniform of Tommy’s followers. She even wears a headscarf to cover her hair.<sup>69</sup>

The conversion of his mother demonstrates the power of Tommy’s magnetism. Within one scene, Tommy’s mother gives up her flashy possessions to follow Tommy’s

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>69</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

ascetic example. Tommy has lived in isolation from the rest of the world. Mostly unable to physically interact with the physical world, he eschewed material goods and turned inward for comfort and answers to life's questions. Widowed by WWII, Mrs. Walker's main concern was surviving and providing for her child. As their life settled after the murder, she began to take more pleasure in dressing up and wearing makeup. Tommy's pinball success allows for her desire of material goods to go into overdrive. When Tommy "awakens" and returns to full consciousness, his mother is the first he sways with his Messiah-like energy. In the first half of the film, Mrs. Walker's materialism and desperation provide a foil for Tommy's isolation and detachedness, but when Tommy awakens, she rushes to support him and adopt his way of life. The relationships between Tommy and his parents in the film, set up his release through the mirror smashing as a second coming of a messiah.

Russell changes the function of the mirror in *Tommy* in a way that alters how the audience understands Tommy's loss of his senses. Rather than using a mirror and Tommy's illusory self as the last vestige of maya to which he clings, Russell uses the mirror as gateway to another place where Tommy can be in communion with his father. In the film, Tommy sees something in the mirror his mother, and others, cannot see. Russell's version of the mirror suggests that Tommy sees something true and real in the mirror, which is in fact the opposite of Townshend's essential metaphor. Townshend shows the mirror as a trick that reflects the world deceptively, backwards and in mirror-image. Much like a mirror, film imitates life, so it can never be a fully truthful representation. In Meher Baba's philosophy the silver screen and the mirror are barriers between two different versions of illusions. Whereas perhaps Russell hopes to find a sort of truth

through art, Baba would call any form of representation of this world a compounded illusion. If art imitates life, and life is illusion than so too is art.

### **Musical**

In the musical, the mirror is an enormous set piece located center stage in the setting of Tommy's home. It takes up a large amount of space and is hefty enough that teenage Tommy is introduced by dropping down onto it. He enters after the youngest Tommy walks to the mirror after the murder scene.<sup>70</sup> Teenage Tommy drops down onto the top of the mirror and informs the audience that young Tommy is now "deaf dumb, and blind." In the musical, Tommy doesn't look into the mirror to see a parent, nor does he look in the mirror to see himself as he is. He looks into the mirror to see another version of himself. When he is a child, he looks into the mirror to see himself as a young adult. When he is a young adult, he looks into the mirror to see his younger selves. These different versions of Tommy are not confined to the mirrors though. They are able to move outside of the mirror and even interact with the other Tommys when the mirror is not on stage. This demotes the importance of the mirror as a device. Tommy's desire and ability to see different versions of himself both within and without the mirror reveal his internal identity crisis. The combination of the Tommy who is unresponsive to characters around him and the version who is singing and being ignored by those same characters demonstrates Tommy's loneliness and isolation, which are the main themes of the musical. While the smashing of the mirror has the same effect in the musical as it the previous iterations, the mirror itself loses some importance as a metaphorical device in the first act.

<sup>70</sup> "THE WHO'S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 1 Broadway."

In the musical, Des McAnuff reverted back to the original arrangement of the father returning to kill the stepfather that was established in the original album. Ken Russell had changed this arrangement to elevate Tommy's father to a martyr or even God-like figure, but McAnuff wanted to humanize Tommy's father and allow the audience to be sympathetic to his journey.<sup>71</sup> Because Tommy's father lives and returns to being Tommy's parent in the musical, the burden of Tommy's condition is felt not quite equally but almost by both parental figures. In the film, the emotional weight of Tommy's condition is carried solely by his mother, while his stepfather looks on, either apathetically or annoyed. In the musical, Tommy's father is the driving force behind Tommy's visits to the doctors and the Acid Queen. Tommy's mother is more patient with his condition, but they eventually both reach their breaking point.

The song "I Believe My Own Eyes" was written by Townshend and added to the musical before "Smash the Mirror."<sup>72</sup> After the visit to the Doctor, Mr. Walker has lost hope. Tommy continues to stare into the mirror and respond to his parents' questions. Tommy's father initiates the song singing, "This can't continue./It makes no sense./ We're getting nowhere./I've lost all my confidence."<sup>73</sup> He fears that Tommy needs a type of love and attention they are not capable of providing. He also worries that coping with Tommy has put a strain on their marriage. Tommy's mother seems to struggle internally as her husband sings, but she eventually concedes. She joins into the song, singing, "I'd like to declare/This devotion and care/Is the life to live./That nothing has changed/And that time isn't passing us by/But I have to say here/That, for us, there's a clear-/Cut

<sup>71</sup> Townshend, *The Who's Tommy*, 32.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

alternative.”<sup>74</sup> Mrs. Walker leads Tommy to sit on the couch. The Walkers sing together standing behind the couch as they sing the final verse, “Let’s believe our own eyes./Know we’ve come to the end:/All our patience is gone./Let’s admit we intend.../To believe our own eyes.”<sup>75</sup> Unlike in the previous iterations, Tommy’s caregivers verbally declare that they are giving up on being able to cope with Tommy’s condition. Mr. Walker kisses Mrs. Walker and walks off stage after the last line of the song. Alone with Tommy, Mrs. Walker repeats this last line to herself, “To believe our own eyes.” As she begins to walk away, Tommy stands and returns to the mirror. The lights change abruptly from a deep blue wash to a harsh yellow. The music shifts to the opening of “Smash the Mirror” as Mrs. Walker storms back into the room.<sup>76</sup>

Mrs. Walker has shifted suddenly from discouraged and hopeless to furious. The decision to give up on Tommy in the previous song has spurred her into a desperate final attempt to capture Tommy’s attention. Unlike Ann-Margaret’s portrayal of Mrs. Walker’s booze-driven spontaneous decision to smash the mirror, in the musical Mrs. Walker struggles with the decision. Her focus is more on trying to make eye contact with Tommy than destroy the mirror. She finally picks up the kitchen chair and after a few hesitant swings, drives it into the mirror. This action cues a black out. Shard-like light gobos flash in the blackout and a distorted refrain of “You didn’t hear it/You didn’t see it/You won’t say nothing to no one/Ever in your life” rings out. Lights rise back up on Tommy kneeling by the spot where the murder occurred. He then runs back to the now shattered mirror before making eye contact with his mother.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>76</sup> “THE WHO’S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 1 Broadway.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Stunned by Tommy's sudden change, Mrs. Walker runs off stage. The opening bars of "I'm Free" begin to play as Tommy enjoys being able to see his house around him. The musical reorders the songs even more than Russell. In the musical "Sensation" plays when Tommy plays pinball for the first time. It uses the term "sensation" to highlight Tommy's inexplicable ability to play pinball while "deaf, dumb, and blind" and how this makes him a sensation to those witnessing this phenomenon. The rest of the lyrics lose the specificity of their meaning derived from the original placement of the song. Setting "I'm Free" after the mirror smashing enforces the musical assertion that Tommy has been trapped within himself, in an autistic state. "I'm Free" is this Tommy's celebration of his freedom and restoration of his senses. The musical version of "I'm Free" sung after the mirror smashing features a significant lyric change that reveals a blatant and purposeful shift in the underlying theme of the musical in comparison to the previous two iterations and foreshadows the new and altered ending of the musical. In the original lyrics, featured on the album and in the film, Tommy sings, "I'm free/I'm free/And freedom tastes of reality/ I'm free/I'm free/An' I'm waiting for you to follow me."<sup>78</sup> In the musical, the lyric is changed to "I'm free/I'm free/And freedom tastes of reality/I'm free/I'm free/And freedom lies here in normality."<sup>79</sup> Normality and reality are equated in this version of the song. The musical equates reality and normality in a move that contradicts Baba and puts forward its own juvenile idea that freedom lies in being normal. On the album "freedom tastes of reality" is a reference to the Indian spiritual idea that seeing past illusion to the Ultimate Reality results in freedom from the endless birth-

<sup>78</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 94.

<sup>79</sup> Pete Townshend, *The Who's Tommy*, 114.

death cycle.<sup>80</sup> Tommy has achieved awareness of the Ultimate Reality and is now gathering followers so that he might pass on his knowledge. Meher Baba ascribed to the Hindu duality of illusion and reality. For Baba, the awareness came once, “the fully involved consciousness of this soul realizes the reality of the infinite, eternal state of the Self.”<sup>81</sup> Thus, spiritual freedom comes from recognition of reality and rejection of illusion.

The musical iteration of Tommy associates freedom with normalcy. He sings, “But you’ve been down this path before/While I was waiting at the door/This place is sacred as a temple.”<sup>82</sup> This Tommy feels that everyone has been able to walk a normal path in life while he has been excluded, “waiting at the door.” He elevates mundane settings like his house to that of a sacred temple because he had been unable to appreciate them. In the musical version of this song, Tommy does not call out to followers or claim to have knowledge that others need. His recession into himself was a prison in which he suffered. He emerges with an appreciation for the world as it exists, not with any special spiritual knowledge or clarity. Previous iterations of this song claimed that previous Messiahs had tried to give humans the real Truth, but “no one had the guts to leave the temple”<sup>83</sup> Tommy claims the path is simple which is how he rallies followers. This section is cut out of the musical version of “I’m Free.” All references to messiahs or spiritual truths are erased. Unlike Pete Townshend’s album, McAnuff’s musical is not telling the audience there is a Truth out there within some religious thought. It does not

<sup>80</sup> Baba, 39

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Pete Townshend, *The Who’s Tommy*, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Townshend, Pete. “I’m Free.” I’m Free – (The Who. Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969. <https://genius.com/The-who-im-free-lyrics>).

want to encourages its audience to leave the theatre and go off searching for truth and meaning. It is not in Broadway's best interests to have people disappear on religious pilgrimages. Instead Broadway wants its audience to feel distracted and entertained at the theatre. This is best accomplished through telling the audience that meaning can be found in their everyday lives. If people enjoy the show and maintain their regular lives, they might just come back to the theatre and by more tickets to be distracted and entertained again. The musical very purposefully moves the theme of *The Who's Tommy* away from that of its spiritually-obsessed predecessors into more secular territory.

### **Conclusion**

The framing of the climatic smashing of the mirror and the following song in each iteration of *Tommy* reveals the lead artist's vision for the characterization of Tommy once he regains his senses. Pete Townshend on the original album frames Tommy's release as an awakening like that of Meher Baba. The awake Tommy is set forth as a guru ready to teach others and lead them to their own "awareness." In the film, Ken Russell expands the roles of Tommy's parents to frame Tommy as a messiah and portray his release from the mirror as a second birth or baptism into the world. Des McAnuff backs away entirely from any spiritual symbolism. He presents two parents stressed and hopeless over the condition of their son. The smashing of the mirror is a final act of their desperation and Tommy's joy comes from the normality that is the result of his new freedom. This progression from Indian spiritual undertones in the album to blatant Catholic imagery in the film to almost scientific secularization in the musical becomes even more clear when Tommy creates his "Holiday Camp."



## **V. Tommy's Holiday Camp: "We're Not Gonna Take It"**

Tommy's holiday camp is different in every iteration. Each holiday camp setting reflects each Tommy's style of leadership and serves as a different type of critique or affirmation about society. The album's Tommy is a guru, the film's Tommy is a messiah, and the musical's Tommy turns out to not be a leader at all. He is a child star who doesn't know how to deal with his fame. The holiday camp is the setting for the finale of the piece when Tommy comes into conflict with his followers. Because Tommy is framed as a different type of leader in each iteration, the appearance and function of each holiday camp changes. In the album, Tommy tells people to follow him and then welcomes them into a new home to stay. Following in the tradition of gurus, the space could be imagined as one of Meher Baba's spiritual centers or ashrams. In the film, Tommy's holiday camp evolves into a full spiritual center designed to look like a British holiday camp with a gift shop. Tommy's family is more clearly involved in running the camp and their greed and corruption is clear. In the musical, "Tommy's Holiday Camp" appears to be the name of his traveling pinball concert, not a specific place at all. After a disaster at the concert, Tommy bring his fans to his parent's home. Tommy's disciples' expectations are set at the holiday camps. By establishing a base, Tommy increases his authority as a spiritual leader. When his followers then feel discouraged, exploited, and duped because they don't achieve enlightenment, salvation, or any kind of answer, they turn on Tommy and riot. On the album, this moment provides a space for Townshend to critique other members of his generation whose search for spirituality is trendy not committed. In Russell film, this moment is staged to mirror the peoples' turn against Jesus before his

crucifixion. The musical changes this moment entirely, using it to reassert Tommy's endorsement of normalcy and reconciling his with his fans and family.

### **Album**

After gaining nationwide attention for regaining his sense, Tommy starts traveling around and speaking to the people. He tells them that he is now free and "freedom tastes of reality." Tommy has seen past illusion to the ultimate reality and he wants others to follow him on this same journey. However, Tommy promises his followers, "If I told you what it takes/To reach the highest high/You'd laugh and say nothing's that simple."<sup>84</sup> He promises simplicity and invites everyone to come to his house to learn from him. Disciples come in droves. Tommy expands his house into a "holiday camp," which is modeled after both post-war British holiday camps and South Asian ashrams. The promise of simplicity, the droves of people flocking in for enlightenment, and the mood and music of a British summer holiday camp come together in the final three songs on the album. These final three songs follow "I'm Free." The first, "Welcome," shows Tommy's new objective to gather followers to his house to learn from him. In "Tommy's Holiday Camp," the voice of Uncle Ernie, from the horrifying "Fiddle About," is the guide into Tommy new center they have created to make room for all the new disciples. With his high-pitched and manic voice, Uncle Ernie is in no way a pious or reverent disciple. Instead, Uncle Ernie's role appears to be as Tommy's business partner. There is a distinct tone shift between the sound of "Welcome" and "Tommy's Holiday Camp." The tempo and music of "Welcome" sound similar to Pete Townshend's song "Parvardigar" he released in 1972, a few years after Tommy. "Parvardigar" is a prayer

<sup>84</sup> Townshend, Pete. "I'm Free." I'm Free – (The Who. Genius Media Group Inc., May 23, 1969. <https://genius.com/The-who-im-free-lyrics>).

Meher Babe wrote in 1953 that Townshend put to music twenty years later.<sup>85</sup> Both songs feature an acoustic guitar intro with a calming melody. These songs are meant to sound devotional without mimicking music of any specific faith. The calming welcoming sound of “Welcome” is felt more once it is interrupted by the jaunty sound of the pipe organ and Uncle Ernie’s raucous voice in “Tommy’s Holiday Camp.” The shift in tone also suggests that the piety expressed by Tommy in welcoming his follower has not carried through into his spiritual center. Tommy’s holiday camp sounds more earth-bound than transcendental in its concerns. One can’t help but think of such gurus as the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who hosted The Beatles at his ashram along with many other celebrities and toured with The Beach Boys before coming under suspicion, or Bhagwa Shri Rajneesh, the leader of the troubling Rajneesh movement who was also known as the Rolls Royce Guru. There is a double critique of the counterculture followers of the 1960s who flocked to these ashrams throwing away their money to the most popular spiritual leader for easy spiritual advice and the gurus themselves and/or the teams around them that made money off this spiritual desperation.

The finale number “We’re Not Gonna Take it” follows Tommy’s fall from public popularity. The song flips back and forth from Tommy’s perspective and his followers’ perspective and contains refrains of themes heard previously in the album. Tommy tells his gathered disciples that he “became aware” this year. If they want to become aware too, they have to follow his regimen of playing pinball wearing blindfolds and ear plugs with a cork in their mouths. Here we also see a snippet of Meher Baba’s teachings peeking through when Tommy sings, “Hey you getting drunk/So sorry, I got you

<sup>85</sup> Townshend, *Who I Am*, 335.

sussed/Hey you smoking mother nature/This is a bust... Cause you ain't gonna follow me/Any of those ways/Although you think you must.”<sup>86</sup> Baba was very strict that his followers not partake in drugs or alcohol, as these things distracted one from pursuing enlightenment. According to his memoir *Who I Am*, Townshend found this directive somewhat difficult to follow consistently while being a rockstar.<sup>87</sup>

After Tommy gives his directions, we hear Tommy’s followers begin whispering “We’re not gonna take it” over and over, but these whispers grow in volume until they are shouting. The voices shout “We’re not gonna take it” along with the lines “don’t want no religion... we forsake you... let’s forget you better still.”<sup>88</sup> Through the commotion of the angry disciples turned mob, Tommy’s childhood theme of “See me, feel me/Touch me, heal me” returns. Tommy sang this during “Christmas” when his mother called to him and during “Go to the Mirror!” when the doctor told his parents there was nothing physically wrong with Tommy. The return of this theme signals that Tommy is retreating back into himself where no one can communicate with him. The music begins to quicken under Tommy’s child-like vocals and another refrain takes over. The third theme heard in the doctor’s office is Tommy’s interaction with the mirror. Tommy’s voice sounds older and he sings, “Listening to you, I get the music/Gazing at you, I get the heat/Following you, I climb the mountain/I get excitement at your feet/Right behind you, I see the millions/On you, I see the glory/From you, I get opinions/From you, I get the story.”<sup>89</sup> Like “Welcome,” this melody sounds somewhat devotional, and the lyrics are addressed to a wise or even omniscient being. Tommy is perhaps returning to follow the spiritual

<sup>86</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 120.

<sup>87</sup> Pete Townshend, *Who I Am*, 278.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 120-121.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, 129.

leader he found on his amazing journey after retreating into himself the first time. Tommy's followers have forsaken him, so he retreats inward again. He has reunited with his spiritual guide to continue his own journey. Even though Tommy has been rejected by his followers, the music is triumphant, indicating that Tommy's journey towards enlightenment and release continues.

### **Film**

The film expands the building of Tommy's following, his "holiday camp," and his family's involvement in it. After Tommy regains his senses, he goes on tour, gathering followers by playing pinball and preaching to large frenzied crowds. A young girl obsessed with Tommy is injured during one of his gatherings in which the crowd loses control. Tommy proceeds to gather more follower's during "Sensation," paragliding around and drawing people from all different walks of life. He brings them all to his house during "Welcome," but soon there are too many people to accommodate. His stepfather tries to keep the crowds out, complaining to Tommy, "There's more at the door/There's more at the door/There's more..."<sup>90</sup> When Tommy tells him to build an extension and spare no expense, he gets a sly look on his face and a glint in his eye.

Tommy's stepfather films a T.V. spot in which Tommy's mother is proselytizing for her son's growing congregation. Though Tommy's mother seems sincere in front of the camera, Tommy's stepfather smirks behind the camera. He sticks miniature versions of Tommy's emblem, a Christian cross with a shiny silver pinball on top overlapping the fourth arm., into a world map. He sings, "Tommy camps in every city/Millions flocking in like sheep/What they want ain't cheap/'S a pity/But who am I to upset their dreams?"<sup>91</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

<sup>91</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 109.

Russell emphasizes the contrast between Tommy, and even his mother's, intentions to bring enlightenment to his disciples and the unbridled greed of Tommy's stepfather and Uncle Ernie.

In the next scene, Uncle Ernie is driving an enormous organ that drives like a car leading buses full of devotees up to the new holiday camp. Uncle Ernie's once black teeth glint gold as he grins and laughs. He plays the organ with his socked feet as he waves his arms about as if conducting the crowd.<sup>92</sup> Lyrics have been added to this version of "Tommy's Holiday Camp." On the album, Uncle Ernie welcomes the campers and sings, "The camp with the difference/Never mind the weather/When you come to Tommy's/The holiday's forever, ha ha!" which is repeated twice. In this film version of the song, Uncle Ernie is hawking merchandise. He urges the crowd to buy Tommy t-shirts, stickers, records, pics, and badges and their own "Tommy mirrors to smash." Uncle Ernie and Tommy's stepfather have turned Tommy's spiritual center into an irreverent theme park. Uncle Ernie cries, "Have your money ready/Buy your way to heaven/That comes to one pound seven/Bless you love."<sup>93</sup> In addition to selling promotional items, they are also making money hiking up the prices for the blindfolds, earplugs, and corks Tommy requires his followers to have. As this capitalist chaos unfolds outside, the interior of Tommy's walled camp is serene.

Tommy sits cross-legged on a massive silver pinball, gently backlit by the sun. He leads a group of people in wheelchairs through silent gestural exercises. This is reminiscent of Eric Clapton's Monroe church from the beginning of the film. Outside, anger begins to build as devotees are disillusioned by the price of goods. This

<sup>92</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

<sup>93</sup> Richard Barnes and Pete Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 116-117.

dissatisfaction makes its way inside and a mob forms. A mob of Tommy's disciples wearing their Tommy t-shirts and wielding their pinball crosses march through the camp chanting, "These pricey deals don't teach us/Your freedom doesn't reach us/Enlightenment escapes us/Awareness doesn't shape us."<sup>94</sup> They surround an oblivious Tommy as he is welcoming new followers and giving them instructions. Everyone follows along putting on their dark glasses and ear plugs, and putting the corks in their mouths. They are led to pinball machines by Tommy's family members and their friends who now work for the camp. They play pinball, but their frustration bubbles up again. They chanted "We're not gonna take it" as they smash the pinball machines with their pinball crosses and their boots. Tommy stands unmoving atop the giant pinball arms outstretched as the mob advances upon him. They attack his mother and stepfather, stabbing his stepfather and bashing his mother over the head with a glass bottle as Tommy tries to pull her away. Loud sirens scare the mob. They retreat and scatter.<sup>95</sup>

Beaten, bloodied, with his Tommy t-shirt torn to shreds, Tommy crawls out from underneath the massive pinballs. As Tommy returns to his "See Me, Feel Me" refrain, he finds his mother's body and carries it over to his stepfather's, uniting their hands. The music builds as he runs through the burning wreckage of his holiday camp. He stumbles out of the camp, discarding his t-shirt and dives into the water as "Listening to You" begins to play. He swims away from the camp and climbs up to a waterfall where he joins in the singing. He sings in an upward direction, looking to the sky as he continues his climb up the mountain. Summiting the mountain, his face is bathed in a warm glow as the sun rises. He continues to sing to the sun as the camera pans out and he is backlit, arms

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 120-121.

<sup>95</sup> Russell, Ken, dir. *Tommy*.

outstretched by the sun. Tommy's voice is heard alone for the final line of the song "Listening to you."<sup>96</sup> This final image of Tommy silhouetted by the sun and atop a mountain that is outside the gates of his holiday camp draws on images of Jesus being crucified at Golgotha. The film does not linger on Tommy's rejection, the finale is still triumphant, like the finale of the concept album. It mimics the image of Tommy's father silhouetted by the sun from the beginning of the film, so it implies that, like Jesus, Tommy reunites with the spirit of his father. Though the album and the film draw inspiration from different spiritual traditions, they interpret Tommy's desire to build a following and a gathering place for these followers similarly and contrast this benevolent desire with the greed of his family members and the superficiality of his followers. The most significant change made to the musical in comparison to the preceding film and album is the ending. The musical has already set course for a new trajectory once the shatter mirror releases Tommy without spiritual awareness and with an objective to be "normal."

### **Musical**

The second act of the musical rearranges the order of the song list quite a bit, changing the course of the story as set out in the first two iterations. After the smashing of the mirror, Tommy runs away from his parents while singing "I'm Free." Uncle Ernie sells the story of Tommy's "Miracle Cure" to the newspapers. This cues a reprise of "Sensation" which is performed much earlier in the musical than on the album or in the film. "Sensation" is performed by Tommy when he plays pinball for the first time, after Cousin Kevin has left him in front of the machine as a joke. Tommy sings it as he

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.



discovers the game, auguring his own rise to fame for playing the game. This lead his parents to take him to a psychiatrist and look for cures in the Hawker and the Acid Queen. The hit song “Pinball Wizard” is not heard for another four songs after “Sensation,” making Tommy’s rise to fame because of his inexplicable pinball prowess. “Sensation” is thusly associated with Tommy’s pinball talent, not with his captivating spiritual allure after the return of his senses.

Tommy glides back onstage reclining on a pinball machine as the ensemble sings about his “Miracle Cure.” He reprises “Sensation” with news reporters as his backup singers. The news reporters interview his parents and Cousin Kevin, who now works security detail for Tommy, as Tommy plays pinball. Tommy is then drawn into a one on one interview with a female talk show host. He is wearing an all-white suit and mirrored sunglasses.<sup>97</sup> This imitates the all-white boiler suit ensemble Pete Townshend himself used to wear as The Who rose to fame in the late 1960s. Pete Townshend can be seen wearing it in iconic images of The Who playing at Woodstock in 1969. The Who played through the entire *Tommy* album during this performance. Their set had been delayed so late that they played the final songs as the sun rose.<sup>98</sup> Tommy’s interview with the talk-show hostess is that of a Rockstar or celebrity, not a guru. The interview leads Tommy into a very short reprise of “I’m Free” to assemble a gathering for an ultimate showing of pinball. “Pinball Wizard” is reprised for an epic pinball concert.

Tommy climbs up on to a pinball machine that moves like a mechanical bull. It bounces and shakes as stage fog rolls in and lights flash. Tommy wears a type of motorcycle helmet to simulate being “deaf, dumb, and blind” still. As the instrumentals

<sup>97</sup> “THE WHO’S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 2 Broadway.”

<sup>98</sup> Townshend, *Who I Am*, 262.

begin to rise to a climax, Tommy copies Pete Townshend signature single arm windmill gesture as if the pinball machine is an electric guitar. In an interview with the director Des McAnuff, he says, “essentially, the pinball machine is really a Stratocaster, or the electric guitar... When Tommy blows up the pinball machine, that’s very much, for me, Townshend bashing the guitar.”<sup>99</sup> McAnuff drew inspiration from Pete Townshend to construct a rockstar image for Tommy, quite different from the Jesus-inspired image of Roger Daltrey as Tommy in the film.

Tommy plays pinball with increasing fervor until the machine explodes in an eruption of fireworks and smoke. Tommy hops off the machine to survey his adoring fans in the audience as the machine sinks down through a trapdoor. Tommy turns and climbs onto a large silver platform upstage with a standing mic and turns to face upstage. The stage is reconfigured to look as though Tommy is onstage facing adoring fans upstage while his back is to downstage where the real audience sits.<sup>100</sup> Uncle Ernie sings “Tommy’s Holiday Camp” and hawks merchandise. In spoken dialogue after the song, he says, “This is your chance! Tommy’s Holiday Camp is coming to your town. At eight tonight – Tommy, live on stage! You lucky people!”<sup>101</sup> This suggests that “Tommy’s Holiday Camp” is the name of Tommy’s pinball concert, not a retreat he has created. This assumption is supported by placement of “Sally Simpson” as the following song.

“Sally Simpson” was completely rewritten for the musical and the character changed to an older girl and a groupie. Pete Townshend rewrote the song with the major change of adding a desire to go backstage to Sally’s aims. Townshend said, “Her target is

<sup>99</sup> Townshend, *The Who’s Tommy*, 44.

<sup>100</sup> “THE WHO’S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 1 Broadway.”

<sup>101</sup> Townshend, *The Who’s Tommy*, 140.

to be with Tommy, even though she's not particularly enamored with him; she's really enamored with fame and success."<sup>102</sup> In the film, Sally is a young girl with a youthful infatuation with Tommy, who seems to be drawn by his sublime demeanor as well as his handsome face. The musical version of Sally is drawn more to Tommy's fame and celebrity. In her desperation to grab Tommy's attention, she climbs the platform to Tommy, but then falls off and is beaten by Cousin Kevin's mob of security. Tommy jumps down to stop them and cradle an unconscious supine Sally in his arms.<sup>103</sup> Tommy declares to the audience and the surrounding security, "I've had enough. I think I'm going to go back home now... But... you can all come if you like. Yeah. You've all got families, right? Come and be a part of mine for a bit. See what it's been like for me."<sup>104</sup> This leads him into singing "Welcome." Unlike in the album or the film, Tommy's drive to invite his followers, or in this case fans, to his home is not so that he can teach his methods to becoming "aware," instead, he wants his followers to see what his life has been like, even before he regained his senses.

Tommy sings as he helps Sally up from the floor and takes the nightsticks away from the security guards. The stage transforms to his parents' house.<sup>105</sup> Unlike in the film, Tommy hasn't seen his parents since the smashing of the mirror, so they have not been involved in his rapid rise to stardom. Press teams and news cameras have followed the crowds into Tommy's house. He settles on the couch with Sally Simpson. Video feed of them is displayed on screens placed all around the stage. A new song added for the musical called "Sally's Question" starts with Sally asking Tommy, "How can we share

<sup>102</sup> Townshend, *The Who's Tommy*, 144.

<sup>103</sup> "THE WHO'S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 2 Broadway

<sup>104</sup> Pete Townshend, *The Who's Tommy*, p.147.

<sup>105</sup> "THE WHO'S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 2 Broadway.

the great sights you are seeing?/Hear all the glorious music you hear?”<sup>106</sup> Tommy shakes his head and look startled as microphones are shoved into his face from every direction. Sally follows up, “How can we be a small part of your being?/Why do you seem so alive when you’re near?/Tell us. Tell us now. How can we me more like you?”<sup>107</sup> Tommy’s response is a complete shift away from the narrative set out by the previous iterations. Tommy responds:

Why would you want to be more like me? For fifteen years I was waiting for what you’ve already got[...] All this. In my dream I was seeing it, hearing it, feeling it. Those are the true miracles and you have them already[...] The point is not for you to be more like me. The point is... I’m finally more like you. I can’t be who you want me to be.<sup>108</sup>

Tommy reveals that he does not believe he has any unique knowledge or abilities, but is trying instead to be like everyone else. The revelation causes a dismayed uproar in the surrounding crowd.

This leads into the beginning of “We’re Not Going to Take it” that has been rewritten and flipped around. Instead of drawing in followers and telling them to be like him, Tommy sings, “You wanna be like Tommy?/I’m glad you’re not, I hope that’s clear,”<sup>109</sup> trying to discourage them. The crowd sings back “we’re not going to take it” in anger and Tommy continues, telling them, “Don’t let Uncle Ernie make you play/On Tommy’s old machine.”<sup>110</sup> Here, Tommy is not as naïve as his film counterpart. He

<sup>106</sup> Townshend, *The Who’s Tommy*, 151.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 153.

knows Uncle Ernie has been profiting off him, and discourages anyone from copying anything about him. He tells the crowd, “You don’t need to claim/A share of my pain.../You’re normal after all.”<sup>111</sup> Tommy values normalcy which shocks and angers the crowd, so they storm away off stage. Tommy is left alone with his parents, Uncle Ernie, and Cousin Kevin as the child version of him reappears in the mirror. Older Tommy and younger Tommy sing “See Me, Feel Me” together and Tommy turns to look at himself in the mirror again. The stage lights dim to spotlight the two Tommys. They reach out to one another as the music begins to quicken and shift into “Listening to You.” Their hands touch cueing a quick blackout in which younger Tommy disappears. Older Tommy turns back to his family, singing “Listening to You” to them. Cousin Kevin rebuffs him, but Uncle Ernie embraces him followed by Tommy’s mother. Tommy’s father is unsure at first, but then grabs Tommy’s hand and joins him in his singing. The rest of the family joins in, even Cousin Kevin. The rest of the cast returns to the stage to sing, joining in together more as a finale/curtain call than affirmation that Tommy’s followers have forgiven him. The rest of the cast walk off stage, leaving the two younger Tommys gazing through mirrors frames offstage right and left and the older Tommy gazing through a frame out into the audience as the curtain lowers.<sup>112</sup>

In a twist to the storyline entirely unique to the musical production, Tommy reunites and reconciles with his family and possibly even his once-followers. He rejects the crowd’s worship of him, telling them to appreciate their normalcy. The musical erases Tommy’s claims to spiritual actualization and secularizes Tommy’s loss of his sense and his special ability to play pinball without his senses. The musical obscures the religious

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, 151.

<sup>112</sup> “THE WHO’S TOMMY - VERY RARE - Closing Night ACT 2 Broadway

elements fundamental to the previous two iterations changing the theme and message of the narrative put forth by the first two iterations, and not for the better. Townshend wrote *Tommy* as a part of a countercultural movement in the West in the 1960s. As a product of this countercultural movement, *Tommy* promoted a turn away from Western religious paradigms and an exploration of alternative spiritual traditions. The musical's rewritten ending is a complete betrayal of counterculture movements' most basic intent, which is to encourage people to reject prevailing social norms. Tommy reveals that being normal is what he has been striving for his whole life and pushes his fans to appreciate their own normalness and how well they fit into society. He becomes a poster child for conformity, counterculture's worst nightmare.

### **Conclusion**

The holiday camp or final setting of each iteration of *Tommy* reveals each artist's objective in making or remaking *Tommy*. Townshend's wrote Tommy as a guru in the album and modeled his holiday camp after Meher Baba's ashrams. In the album, Tommy's follower's fail to grasp Tommy's teachings and achieve enlightenment themselves. While they reject him, the return of the "See Me/Feel Me" theme and its shift into "Listening to You" implies that Tommy has pulled away from the physical world again and possibly rejoined with his Master or become a Master himself. The film recreates the passion of the Christ story so that Ken Russell can exorcise his doubts and struggles about true and false messiahs while remaining in the realm of Western religion. The musical makes the holiday camp the site of disaster for Tommy. Being different is a struggle for him when he is isolated and when he is famous. He returns home to reject his fame and learn to live normally with his senses. Conformity and nostalgia for the past are

the goals of the Broadway musical. Unlike the countercultural impulse that created the original album, the musical comes full circle in promoting conformity and nostalgia. The Who's first major hit "My Generation" featured the line, "I hope I die before I get old," a pithy jab at the horrid prospect of becoming part of the status quo, the antithesis of nostalgia. One can only imagine the horror with which The Who of "My Generation" fame would view Broadway's *The Who's Tommy*.

## VI. WHAT'S THE DEAL WITH PINBALL?: "How Do You Think He Does It?"

"Pinball Wizard" was not in the original plan for *Tommy*, although it is the most well-known song from the album. Townshend had completed the rest of the album, but The Who's producer Kit Lambert worried it was too heady and pretentious. He brought in music journalist Nik Cohn for an early review session. After listening to the album Cohn confirmed Lambert's fears that the album was humorless. Townshend and Cohn had become friends playing pinball in the arcades and Cohn was writing a pop novel entitled *Arfur: Teenage Pinball Queen*. Townshend teasingly asked Cohn if he would give the album a better review if Tommy gained his disciples through being a pinball champion. Cohn responded, "Well in that case of course it would get five stars – and an extra ball." Townshend wrote the song "Pinball Wizard" the next day, using terms he had heard from Cohn like the title term and "mean pinball."<sup>113</sup>

While pinball entered into the concept late, it serves as an interesting visual depiction of Tommy's relationship with the physical world. Tommy is on the brink of enlightenment by the time he runs into a pinball machine. The rival pinball player, who narrates the song, sings that Tommy, "Stands like a statue, becomes part of the machine/Feelin' all the bumpers, always playin' clean/Plays by intuition, the digit counters fall/That deaf, dumb, and blind kid sure plays a mean pinball... Ain't got no distractions, can't hear no buzzes and bells/Don't see no lights a-flashin', plays by sense of smell."<sup>114</sup> Tommy beats the reigning champion to become the pinball wizard. According to the narrator, Tommy's blindness and deafness prevent him from being distracted by the flashing lights and dinging bells on the machines. Like in the mirror metaphor,

<sup>113</sup> Townshend, *Who I Am*, 235.

<sup>114</sup> Barnes and Townshend, *The Story of Tommy*, 73.



Tommy is not being distracted, by those things that are meant to distract us. Instead, he is able to see past the illusions, the “bells and whistles” or “smoke and mirrors,” and achieve his goal, which in this case is winning at pinball. His fellow pinball players notice his mastery and supernatural skill and are some of the first to become his disciples. They lead him into the arcades and to the machines just to see him play. Pinball provides a bit of humor and fun to the rock opera, but it also contributes a useful metaphor for Tommy’s “Awareness” building Tommy up as a messiah to the common people. Winning at pinball while being “deaf, dumb, and blind” is enough of a miracle to grab people’s attention. When he then seemingly cures himself and starts teaching others to play, he becomes an even bigger sensation. Pinball becomes the medium for his teaching in both the album and the film. In the musical, Tommy’s skill at pinball is given even more importance. It remains the center of Tommy’s celebrity even after the smashing of the mirror, unlike in the previous iterations when pinball takes a backseat to Tommy’s newfound “awareness.” The pinball props and effects and Tommy’s Pete Townshend-style pinball wizard persona feed into the musical’s nostalgic design. Overall the pinball aspect of *Tommy* was always a commercial element. It was meant to make the album less pretentious and more fun, and it gave Elton John a spectacular cameo in the film. Townshend was able to integrate the song creatively into the album in a manner consistent with the overall message. At the end of the day, though, it’s just a great song, one of The Who’s, if not rock and roll’s, top charted songs of all time.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The smashing success of The Who's *Tommy* in 1969 makes it no surprise that this work would eventually be adapted into a major motion picture in 1975 or even a Broadway musical almost 30 years later. *Tommy* introduced a unique character into Western popular culture that fused the beliefs of Indian spirituality with Western-style rock and roll. However, each adaptation contributed to the devolution of Tommy as a character. As new artists worked with Pete Townshend and took over the direction of the piece, the portrayal of the title character changed, as did his aspirations. While the Tommy of the album was modeled after Meher Baba, as time progressed, Townshend allowed his collaborating artists to alter the title character to serve their own artistic visions, compromising the original vision of the album. As Ken Russell and Des McAnuff were not only decidedly not followers of Meher Baba, they were also, presumably, not experts on Indian spirituality. Therefore, their interpretations of *Tommy* steered far from its original inspirations.

While the film and musical strayed into another realm far removed from Meher Baba's teachings, it is necessary to ask if Townshend's original album conformed to Baba's teachings to begin with. Baba's books and pamphlets were meant to help his followers find a path towards enlightenment, but eventually one must give up all such instructional materials to find a way to see past *maya*. Aren't all material goods just distractions getting in the way of our enlightenment? So while Townshend's album is unique in using rock and roll to introduce Westerners to Baba's teaching, rock and roll itself is a distraction keeping us trapped within this world of illusion, albeit an incredibly

enjoyable distraction. Thusly, while the film and the Broadway musical are dismaying in their interpretations of *Tommy*, the original album itself would not be immune to critique according to Meher Baba's own teachings.

So what happened to Pete Townshend that he allowed Ken Russell and Des McAnuff to Westernize, generalize, and sanitized *Tommy* into the film and musical they each created, respectively? Was it the money offered by a major Hollywood studio that convinced him to hand *Tommy* over to Ken Russell? And what about the Broadway musical, was it the money or did he just get old and succumb to his own nostalgia for *Tommy*? Like most of the spiritually curious baby-boomers, the very ones he critiqued in *Tommy*, Townshend returned to his normal life, unenlightened. Those who fully rejected society in order to find true spirituality have been forgotten by society like Tommy's followers forgot him.

*The Who's Tommy* is set for a Broadway revival in 2021 with Des McAnuff at the helm again. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, McAnuff stated:

Tommy is the antihero ground zero. He is the boy who not only rejects adulthood like Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*, but existence itself. He becomes lost in the universe as he stares endlessly and obsessively into the mirror at his own image. This gives our story a powerful resonance today as it seems like the whole world is staring into the black mirror. The story of Tommy exists all too comfortably in the 21st century. In fact, time may finally have caught up to Tommy Walker.

It is yet to be seen how McAnuff will reinterpret *Tommy* for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If his original Broadway production is any indicator, it will be another step closer to capitalist conformity and many steps further away from Meher Baba's Eastern spiritualism.

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