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Front Row Center: MSU Theatre's modern take on Who's 'Tommy'

Bridgette Redman
Performing arts

Students at Michigan State University are getting college credit for playing with a Nintendo Wii.

Granted, their "play" isn't just bowling with the controller or playing a rousing round of tennis. They're using the Wii as a medium to create art and find new ways to meld technology with on-stage performances.

The idea for the performance came to theater professor and director Rob Roznowski during Christmas of 2007 while playing Wii with his niece.



(Samatha Hecker)

Can you hear me? Ross Egan stars as Tommy in the MSU Department of Theatre's production of the Who's "Tommy."

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"I was boxing her and got so involved that I really wanted to knock my 11-year-old niece out," Roznowski said, explaining it was that intensity that gave him the inspiration to direct The Who's "Tommy," fast-forwarding it to the present day. "(Wii) was the greatest invention. I'm not a video enthusiast, but the physical involvement of it - what a major step forward that is. That's when it hit me."

"Tommy" focuses on a young boy who witnesses the murder of his mother's lover when his father comes home from being a POW in World War II. The boy becomes deaf, speechless and blind and undergoes further tragedies and misfortunes. In the original version, he becomes a pinball wizard and a celebrity.

In the MSU version, the father is a veteran of the Iraq War and Tommy is playing a video game when he witnesses the murder.

"Pinball is so untheatrical," Roznowski said. "Your head is down playing a game. We've opened up to so many great choreographic elements. You are part of the game using a kind of Wii-thing. The avatar is the ball. It's kind of a homage to the pinball with actors going through all these types of levels depending on the choreography."

Roznowski describes this show as the most ambitious thing the department has ever done. He and Kirk Domer, a set designer and fellow professor, storyboarded the entire musical a year ago and they've been working with the department of telecommunications to create a game for this production.

To create this game for the audience, the production will use nine different projectors and floating screens so the audience feels it is watching video games. Dan Marsh of the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies, and Media, created the Wii-like pinball game and a multi-screen video-projected world for the play.

Bridgette Redman's column appears Thursdays in What's On. Have a performing-arts event to promote? Contact her at bredman.lsj@gmail.com. Also, check out her blog at frontrowlansing.blogspot.com.

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Included in the crew of this show are people who have created cartoon sequences, game sequences and projections. It's a show that has stretched actors accustomed to working on stage to experience technology in a new way.

"(They'll be) working with new digital media in a way they've never been asked to before," Roznowski said. "They'll become living, breathing, projection screens. They're learning a new way to perform - something that is becoming more and more in fashion."

The production of the musical has fostered collaborations across the campus with students and professors from the College of Music, the Theater Department, the Department of Telecommunication, Information Studies and Media, and the College of Arts and Letters participating.

The musical, which Roznowski describes as an indictment of media and its creation of false celebrities, uses gaming to make the story deeper and richer.

"I think we're hoping to create a deeper story and a deeper understanding of why Tommy's trauma is related to gaming," Roznowski said. "The false celebrity status becomes a source of false security. It's not until he gives it up and goes home to his roots that he realizes what is most important."

• Show details: The Who's "Tommy," by the MSU Department of Theatre, 7:30 p.m. today, 8 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, repeating April 16-18, plus 2 p.m. April 19 in the MSU Concert Auditorium. Tickets: \$17.50 at 432-2000.



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