Films/David McGillivray v Dave Downing

DEAF, DUMB 'N' DAZZLING

A deviant dilettante or the only director in the British cinema? Ken Russell strikes again, courtesy of the rock revolution.

Tommy is the sort of film that makes me glad I haven’t been exactly free with the word ‘masterpiece’ over the past few years. Because I submit that Tommy really is a masterpiece, and this is why (a) it is faultless, (b) it is the best realisation to date of a superior musical play, and (c) it is the best film to date by the most exciting director working in British films today, Ken Russell.

Crammed with exquisite gags and torments, TOMMY must have been surely destined to fall into Russell’s hands from the day it was written. Townsend’s vision of the film project was, of course, a realisation. The only surprise in the resulting work is the quality of Russell’s visual interpretation. Restrained is not the word one would immediately associate with him, but nevertheless, there is in Tommy little of the hysteria that distinguished his classical musical films, and it’s highly unlikely that anyone is going to protest that it’s a film anything out of Townsend’s music that wasn’t poking through the surface anyway.

This is not to say, of course, that Russell has hinged himself on the production value. Indeed he has done everything that would be expected of a director let loose with Robert Stigwood’s cheque book, and every penny shows on the screen in what resembles a tightly edited made-for-television film of Tommy’s life. It’s impossible to detail every memorable scene; sumpuously photographed by Dick Bush, brilliantly scored by Townsend, practically every image has a power of its own. But occasionally the talents of everyone concerned combine to produce an effect which either sends a shiver up the spine or a lump to the throat... or both. The faun-hood scene in which Tommy joins a congregation of genuine blind men and cripples at the plaster feet of Marilyn Monroe’s statue may sound trite and opportunistic, but to the sheer horror each of the deformed people with which it’s filmed (coupled with the monstrous implications involved) produces a cathartic effect that’s difficult to describe.

Not one of the other major scenes is marred by this disappointment. Russell handles each of them with individual care. All in all, Tommy is an unforgettable experience that comes startlingly close to “tearing your soul apart” or however the publicity campaign terms it. Despite even the considerable disadvantage of not being able to see the film in full on the big screen (as opposed to the quintessential of the Leicester Square Theatre), I’m sure that I was moved to the brink of an unnamable mystical experience by at least twice during the performance. This, I might add, had nothing to do with Tommy’s simple spirituality reaching out for me. It was more concerned with the pleasure that comes from deep involvement with any work of art.

Roger Daltrey acts naturally as Tina Turner impales him

yet this week is being publicised as a Gary Glitter spectacular that gives fans the chance to “see Gary as you’ve never seen him before!” This is presumably a reference to one shamefully staged “screen test” sequence in which Mr Glitter duffs up a couple of scanty girls with a few limp-wristed kung fu chops. For the rest of the hour he saunters through a recording studio, up the Eiffel Tower and across the stage of the Rainbow Theatre in a manner that is all too familiar.

Mahler On Ice

You’re making an 8mm home movie with your friends. You have no sound synchroniser on your cheap Soviet camera, and for a soundtrack you’re going to have to make do with a record. The lack of dialogue will handicap your attempts at narrative so you’re either going to have to be very good with the words everyone knows already. Or if you’re Ken Russell, both.

Not that Tommy was made on a shoestring. In fact the glossy cheesiness of it all suggests more of a bootstrapping. Obviously promoter Stigwood’s endless repackaging of Cream and Hendrix hasn’t hit the gross he hoped for.

Still a budget isn’t everything. Witness the US budget in Indonesia. What really comes across in Tommy is Russell’s ineptness as a film-maker. The cleanness of Townsend’s music has been flattened into a one-dimensional parody of rock-as-image-as-business. The parody itself is pursued through a parade of cinematic images for which the word hackneyed might well have been invented — rock as religion (remember Privilege?), the assault of commodity society (baked beans coming out of the TV), plus the usual assortment of Freudian cliches filmed in the Lake District.

The lack of subtlety, however, pales before the gaping spatial emptiness of the film. Russell, like his recent collaborator Farrow, has driven his crusade against nastiness to the point where his work is indistinguishable from the real thing. Except, of course, to the blinkered believer, sitting back and ignorant of the motivations they tend into every hack gesture. ‘Look, there’s Russell as a cripple at the holiday camp!’ Yeah, isn’t irony prized?

Not one shred of life surfaces in Tommy, not one moment of belief in anything beyond the boxoffice power of imagery that can stimulate without connecting to any real chord in anyone. The film possesses all the Euro-revelry of the best TV ads, and the flatulent romanticism of the worst, which it more often resembles. I can only hope that after he’s finished getting Rick Wakeman to rewrite Lizzi for the silver screen he’ll lay off Dark Side Of The Moon. I can just see the last scene — a telephoto time-lapse eclipse rising above Lake Windermere, and, silhouetted against the looming clouds, four naked asylum patients wheeling a mobile EMT machine after Robert Powell in an RAF uniform, as he skips along humming Mahler’s 11th Symphony.