Rock star Pete Townshend, left, in his yard in Summer, England, 1969, surrounded by gifts for his newborn daughter, above, left to right: the Who performing Tommy at the Fillmore East in 1969; Tina Turner as the Acid Queen in the 1975 film version of Tommy; also from the film: eye view of Ann-Margret as Tommy's mother; Ann-Margret with Jack Nicholson, the Specialist.

If rock can cross over to the Broadway of the nineties, Tommy's day is due—some would say overdue. The principal producer—with the Pace Theatrical Group—of the $6 million Broadway version is the new-blood, baby-boomer syndicate Dodger Productions, which is responsible for the super Broadway revival of Guys and Dolls (as well as Broadway's The Secret Garden and Into the Woods). Producer Ed Strong of the Dodgers, as the group is known, is a 44-year-old Harvard graduate. 'My freshman year was Sgt. Pepper, and I graduated to Tommy,' he recalls, sounding happier with the latter. But he's no sentimentalist. The cult of Tommy was shrewdly researched and developed last summer at the nonprofit La Jolla Playhouse in southern California, just as the Dodgers did with Roger Miller's Big River. Tommy's tryout proved so successful it was extended for an additional seven weeks. 'But the nature of the gamble is different for Broadway,' Strong adds. 'We've been told we were out of our minds before! The challenge of Broadway and Tommy is the balancing act of winning the theater audience and not losing the rock following.'

Pete Townshend's co-adapter is 40-year-old Des McAnuff, the artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse (he won a Tony Award for his direction of Big River). McAnuff first heard Tommy when he was in high school, where he played in a rock band. 'Tommy became an icon of our generation when we were celebrating just the notion of being young,' he says, sounding nostalgic. 'It takes the phony adult world of Holden Caulfield one step further—to complete tune-out.'

McAnuff has nevertheless rooted the action of Tommy in a specific time (from 1941 to 1963) and place, toned down the messianic drug trips and psychedelia, and, with set designer John Amone and 25 performers, given the sixties a high-tech MTV rebirth. But Tommy...
of surreal destruction. He’s still married to the girl he met 30 years ago at Ealing Art School in London. He studied there with R. B. Kitaj and was influenced by the avant-garde, auto-destructive experiments of the Austrian Gustav Metzke. “He was a weird little guy,” Townshend noted. “He used to build these sculptures that fell down—deliberately.” Ron Wood of the Stones and Freddie Mercury of Queen were Townshend’s contemporaries at Ealing. Today Townshend lives quietly by the Thames in Twickenham in a home built in 1710 that was once the residence of Alfred, Lord Tennyson. (Townshend’s 24-year-old daughter, Emma, is studying for a Ph.D. at Cambridge; his 22-year-old daughter, Amina, is studying languages at Exeter University; he also has a three-year-old son, Joseph.) Why do British rock stars seem to end up as sedate country gentlemen? “I don’t think we end up that way,” Townshend said. “I think we start that way! I’ve always lived by the Thames. I like it!” John Entwistle, the Who’s bass guitarist, bought a grand estate in Stow-on-the-Wold, Gloucestershire—not a lot of land particularly, but the main house is surrounded by about 14 cottages. Very nice. Roger Daltrey, lead singer of the Who, bought his Tudor house with 600 acres in Sussex immediately after the success of Tommy. He’s an avid trout farmer. I think he just wants free fish.”

For the past decade, Townshend has worked as an editor at Faber & Faber, commissioning books on music and art. In 1985 he published his semiautobiographical stories, Horse’s Neck, and in 1989 he adapted The Iron Man, a fable by England’s poet laureate Ted Hughes, into an album and musical-theater piece. “I’m too old and far gone to change the rules of rock anymore,” he said. “I leave that to the kids with ghetto blasters. But I can channel what I know into theater! Dylan proved you can write a rock song about anything. It’s a fascinating time for me. I’m getting a kick out of working on Tommy again, which was the music of this 24-year-old kid, who was me.”

Perhaps I ought to say that 25 years ago, when Tommy was in the making, I knew Pete Townshend. We had a mutual friend who was his mentor and the driving force behind the original Tommy album. Kit Lambert, who went on to own a palazzo in Venice and spend ten years on heroin, was the flamboyant co-manager of the Who. He was a wired, generous genius of rock and roll, the upper-class, Oxford-educated embodiment of the louche and self-destructive Sebastian Flyte of Brideshead Revisited. Townshend is the son of an accomplished musician who played the saxophone in a band; Lambert was the son of Constant Lambert, the bohemian composer and co-founder of Sadler’s Wells Ballet. Kit Lambert (whose godfathers were Sir William Walton and Sir Frederick Ashton) conceived the operatic form of Tommy with Pete Townshend and gleefully named it rock opera. When Lambert died virtually destitute in 1981 at age 43, Townshend led his memorial service at St. Paul’s Covent Garden, where the London Symphony Orchestra played the overture to Tommy.

“Kit made it happen,” Townshend said. “We talked endlessly about how absurd, pretentious, and dangerous Tommy was! I miss him. I miss the fun. But something else was going on. Kit never felt that his father got the recognition he deserved. Tommy was his revenge against the classical-music establishment. He felt the Who could usurp and taunt and radicalize the establishment, particularly the Covent Garden Opera people. Both of us actually dreamed of performing Tommy at Covent Garden. It should have been done there. I would have been able to wave to Kit in the Royal Box.”

The idea of a rock opera began literally as a joke. Townshend had written a short spoof opera as a birthday present for a friend of Keith Moon’s. Lambert heard it and thought it wasn’t such a crazy idea. Then, when the recording of the Who’s album A Quick One fell ten minutes short, Lambert suggested they fill in the space with a song cycle that he proudly announced as the first rock miniopera in the world.

And Tommy itself? “It came about because the Who was fin—

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Tommy, a parody of protest and of false gods, is basically the story of a young boy who is traumatized by witnessing his father shoot his mother’s lover. Sworn to secrecy, he becomes deaf, mute, and blind. He is treated with contempt, sexually molested by an uncle, and battered by a cousin. “These issues haven’t gone away,” says McAnuff. The young boy then discovers a single talent: He becomes a pinball wizard and acquires a fanatical following. “As rock stars do,” Townshend adds. Tommy undergoes a miraculous healing and is returned to reality.

Townshend was at work on the libretto and the new music for the Broadway production when I met him, a middle-aged rock icon, in the minimalist bleak chic of his suite at the Royalton Hotel in New York. He’s 48 now. What happened to the renowned line “Hope I die before I get old” from the Who’s anthem, “My Generation”? “Well, it almost happened a couple of times,”Townshend replied. “Luckily, I had my collapses in public. I could get treated.”

He was fortunate to survive. (Keith Moon, the Who’s drummer, wildest of them all, died in 1978.) Townshend has battled successfully against drug and alcohol addiction, though his hearing remains partially damaged. (The Who’s decibel level is in the Guinness Book of World Records.) Inevitably he’s mellowed since the days on the road when he made the Stones look bourgeois by smashing his guitar to pieces onstage in a frenzy.
ished,” said Townshend, taking us by surprise, as he often does. “We were floundering in *Sgt. Pepper* time. We’d lost grip of our audience. We weren’t getting the hits. There was damage in the band, too. We were exhausted, and we were broke. It cost us more than we earned when we smashed up our equipment. I remember saying to Kit, ‘We’ve got to do something or we’re going to lose everything, the whole machine.’ He said, ‘Make a statement. Do a rock opera.’ By the time we completed it, we’d spent every penny we had and borrowed every penny we could. And all the signs were that it was going to get completely and utterly slaughtered. But *Tommy* saved us.”

*Tommy* was improvised in the recording studio. Pinball wasn’t even in the original version. The result of an inspired pinball game in Soho between Townshend and a rock critic, the song “Pinball Wizard” was slotted in later. There wasn’t a score or a libretto (they were written down *after* the recording). “I’ve never written a score,” said Townshend, “though I can read music. I’ve always used tape machines. The tape is the score.” And the libretto? “It was a large piece of cardboard! There wasn’t a story in the traditional sense; it was a collage of ideas written on a piece of cardboard, with song titles and lyrics and bits of text. Kit Lambert used to say, ‘Oh, Pete, for God’s sake! All opera is *nonsense*. If the story can be understood at all, it simply won’t be opera!”

Lambert’s partner and co-manager of the Who was Chris Stamp, the working-class son of a tugboatman (and brother of actor Terence Stamp). He is now 50, a film producer living in Manhattan. He has kept his hair and his broad cockney accent. “I thought it was magic to do a huge extended piece,” Stamp recalls. “When I was seventeen, I was a stage manager for the Sadler’s Wells Opera. I’d heard Wagner and Mozart up the wazoo! That’s why I didn’t laugh at the whole idea of *Tommy*. The big risk was presenting opera to a rock audience. Rock was still in its infancy in those days. The point is, we thought rock and roll could achieve anything. That’s how we felt in the sixties.”

“Right behind you I see the millions,” goes a *Tommy* lyric. “On you I see the glory/From you I get opinions/From you I get the story.” But what’s the message? “When we took *Tommy* on the road,” Townshend explained, “we found that the kids sensed another story. It was the ongoing soap opera of the Who. Our hero, Tommy, is worshiped for doing something as shallow as playing pinball. The Who became heroes by playing rock and roll. On one level *Tommy* is about icons and hysteria and the danger of making naive boys into some kind of heroes. Eleven kids were crushed to death during a Who concert in Cincinnati. So the Who became *Tommy*’s story. The group was the context. Will that crazy guy on the drums kill himself? When do they split up? What happens next? Who dies first?”

And the real story within *Tommy*? “The cipher to *Tommy* was adolescent rage,” said Townshend. “It was rooted in the inarticulate desperation of our first fans, and maybe of myself. At the same time, I followed the teaching of the Indian master Meher Baba. [He still does.] A lot of *Tommy* was also based on Sufism, which interested me. So what I wanted to do was to tell the story of a boy who is on a spiritual journey but who doesn’t succeed. And I tried to create a metaphor to demonstrate it, which is that we are all as deaf, dumb, and blind to our own potential as the character Tommy is in the rock opera.”

And now? “Right now, it’s about finding out what happened at the end.” Townshend said, and laughed. “We never really had an ending. And if we could find it, we’d know where this poor sap has to go to get there!” Then he told me this story:

A year or so ago, when *Tommy* was first discussed as a Broadway show, Townshend went to see his mother, who lives in Spain. He was troubled by gaps in his early childhood. His mother and father had split up when he was four years old. He was left in the care of an indifferent grandmother. His father didn’t visit him for two years. His mother had a lover.

“What I discovered in returning to *Tommy*,” Townshend said, “was that in all its vagueness, it’s a story about a real person and a real family. I discovered that Tommy’s awful neglect and traumas, the terrible abuses, the lovers, the murders—emotional murders—all of those things actually happened. They happened to me. I saw them as a young child. I saw the adult world at its worst. And I saw it at its best, because my parents finally got back together again. But I saw an ending. And so I do have an ending to *Tommy*. Which is that one forgives one’s awful parents for everything they’ve done. Because if you don’t, you’ll spend the rest of your life going fucking crazy.”

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