

The Wiz & The Who's Tommy

The Wiz

Charlie Smalls music, lyrics

William F Brown book **Amber Ruffin** adaptation

Marquis Theatre, New York 29 March 2024 – ongoing

REVIEWED ON 13 APRIL 2024



Kyle Ramar Freeman, Nichelle Lewis, Phillip Johnson Richardson and Avery Wilson ease on down the road; Deborah Cox plays Glinda; Wayne Brady as The Wiz

Bottoms may never have made a comeback, but other relics of the 1970s still hold a nostalgic appeal – even if there are elements of pop culture from that decade that require considerably more effort to translate to modern audiences. How much to update? How much to leave alone? That tension is at the heart of two Broadway revivals that both struggle to live up to (and transcend) their '70s origins – and the awkward memory of star-studded film adaptations.

The Wiz, a retelling of *The Wizard of Oz* originally billed as 'the super soul musical,' first premiered nearly a half-century ago and swept the 1975 Tony Awards, winning seven prizes, including Best Musical. The show revolutionised the depiction of African Americans in Musical Theatre, in part because it tapped the talents of Black artists both onstage and off. There had been other Black-themed musicals, but these had mostly been the product of well-meaning white creators: 1968 Tony winner *Hallelujah, Baby!* was 'a chronicle of the African American struggle for equality' with a book by Arthur Laurents and a score by Jule Styne with lyricists Adolph Green and Betty Comden. Even the 1974 Tony winner, a musical adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun*, owed its creation to an all-white writing and composing team.

The Wiz deliberately broke the mould, boasting not only an all-Black cast (including budding Motown star Stephanie Mills as Dorothy) but a score by Black composer Charlie Smalls that leaned on R&B and soul idioms to provide a new musical framework to tell a familiar, public-domain story.

Tunes like 'Ease on Down the Road' became actual radio hits, proof of how an updated approach to Broadway songwriting could still cross over into the mainstream.

Smalls's tunes, which range from soulful ballads to gospel-inflected calls to uplift, get only a modest update in the latest iteration of *The Wiz*, an affectionate but underwhelming revival that too often feels like it's easing down a road that it should be tearing up.

“Nichelle Lewis shows no hesitation in her multiple solos...with a bright, clear voice”

Amber Ruffin has streamlined and polished William F Brown's original book, updating some of the language to be less 'jivey' but still evoke the African American experience. Ozians are no longer called Munchkins, and Kyle Ramar Freeman's Lion isn't apprehended by a badge-wielding Mice Squad. Now we get references to karaoke, self-care and Lawry's seasoning – and the wicked witch Evillene

Production credits – The Wiz

Cast Nichelle Lewis, Wayne Brady, Deborah Cox, Melody A Betts, Kyle Ramar Freeman, Phillip Johnson Richardson, Avery Wilson *et al*

Direction Schele Williams

Choreography JaQuel Knight

Music direction Paul Byssaint Jr

Orchestrations, arrangements Joseph Joubert

Set Hannah Beachler

Lighting Ryan J O'Gara

Sound Jon Weston

Costumes Sharen Davis

Hair, wigs Charles G LaPointe

Projections Daniel Brodie

The Who's Tommy

Pete Townshend music, lyrics

Pete Townshend, Des McAnuff book

Nederlander Theatre, New York 8 March 2024 – ongoing

REVIEWED ON 23 MARCH 2024



admits her water phobia stems in part from what it will do to her silk press. Melody A Betts brings a guttural growl to Evillene's big number, 'No Bad News,' but weirdly she's also tapped to play the sweet Aunt Em in the monochrome-seeming opening scene. (The original

Broadway production cast two actresses, while Off-Broadway's Encores! revival in 2009 had LaChanze play both Em and good witch Glinda, a more natural Oz-world parallel.)

Nichelle Lewis projects a sweet innocence as Dorothy, and she shows no hesitation delivering her multiple solos (especially the curtain-closer, 'Home') with a bright, clear voice. But her singing (and that of several of the performers) is overpowered by the 19-member orchestra under conductor Paul Byssaint Jr. (It seems sound designer Jon Weston hasn't adjusted for the cavernous space of Broadway's Marquis Theatre.) When Lewis's voice isn't getting lost in the musical numbers, she herself seems to be receding into the background – she seldom seizes our attention even when she's speaking. The other supporting players fare better: Deborah Cox as the runway-ready good witch Glinda, Avery Wilson as the athletic Scarecrow and Wayne Brady as the shady Wiz. Phillip Johnson Richardson is a standout as the Tin Man, replacing the traditional tap routine with a more contemporary techno dance break.

Too often, though, this *Wiz* seems to skimp on magic. Director Schele Williams's production has played 13 US cities since last fall, lumbering onto Broadway with the look and feel of a touring production, with streamlined sets (by Hannah Beachler) and colourful projections (by Daniel Brodie) that feel decidedly low-fi and paint-by-numbers

PHOTOGRAPHY: Jeremy Daniel / Matthew Murphy and Evan Zimmerman



The Walkers (Alison Luff and Adam Jacobs) and young son Tommy (Olive Ross-Kline); Ali Louis Bourzgui (centre) in the titular role; Bobby Conte as Cousin Kevin

for the Main Stem. (Still, a hat tip to Beachler for putting a '227' address label on one of the brownstones when Dorothy first lands in Oz.) JaQuel Knight's choreography is heavy on hip-hop influences, particularly in the club-ready second-act opener, but even the Act One chorus of twirling tornados (costumes by Sharen Davis) remains, like the show itself, stubbornly earthbound.

The team behind *The Who's Tommy* faced a different challenge bringing the rock opera back to Broadway 55 years after the British band's concept album and 30 years after the original stage version. How do you present such dated material for audiences who may be unfamiliar with the post-World War Two reference points?

Des McAnuff, who directed and co-conceived the 1992 musical, has reimagined Pete Townshend's story as a more timeless fable about a boy whose battle with early trauma leads to some very specialised fame.

McAnuff treats the Nederlander Theatre like a glorified gamer's ideal screen, with floating windows and moving set-pieces and stylised projections that mimic the sensory overload of immersive VR games. Kids may not play pinball anymore (or use politically incorrect phrases like 'deaf, dumb and blind') but they know all about the allure of gaming.

David Korins's *Tron*-like set design, Sarafina Bush's costumes and Amanda Zieve's almost surgical lighting underscore the connection, while Peter Nigrini's projections are hit or miss: he provides some jaw-dropping stagecraft for an early scene of Tommy's father as a World War Two paratrooper (Adam Jacobs) leaping from a plane after leaving behind his pregnant wife (Alison Luff). Occasionally, though, Nigrini resorts to a kind of cliché-ridden

decorative wallpaper. (Do we need to see Lux soap boxes floating above Tommy's family's laundry room?) The primary directive seems to be to avoid the pause button at all costs.

Newcomer Ali Louis Bourzgui makes a charismatic impression as the grown-up

“It makes a strong case for how this music and story might endure for generations”

Tommy, at first a wounded and dazed bystander who gradually comes into his rock-star persona. With his soaring falsetto and fondness for tight, Steve Jobs-like turtlenecks, he more than owns the spotlight. He'd fit right in on a Twitch channel where he could divulge episodes from his miserable upbringing as he levels up.

McAnuff doesn't shrink from showing our hero's trigger warnings: his veteran dad,

thought to be killed in action, returns and shoots his wife's new lover dead in front of young Tommy – who takes the instruction to shut up about what's happened literally. (Two young actors alternate in the roles of Tommy at age four and 10, both donning unfortunate

wigs by Charles G LaPointe that suggest a brunette Harpo Marx.) Soon, the boy finds himself the prey of a paedophilic uncle (John Ambrosino) and a bullying cousin (Bobby

Conte) – only to belatedly open up when he discovers his gaming prowess.

Aside from Bourzgui, the rest of the cast makes less of an impression here – that's a departure from the star-studded original production, which marked the Broadway debut of future stars like Michael Cerveris (as Tommy) as well as ensemble players like Alice Ripley, Norm Lewis and Sherie Rene Scott. Christina Sajous belts seductively as the notorious Acid Queen, a junkie whom Captain Walker foolishly takes Tommy to visit in hopes of curing him of his troubles, but it's hard to compete with how Tina Turner owned that signature number in Ken Russell's star-studded 1975 movie.

No matter. There's a lot to enjoy here, starting with the driving guitar-forward rock score and a narrative that connects less with individual characters than with the larger issues of ingrained domestic trauma, isolation and the scrutiny of prying media. McAnuff's onstage use of mirrors, which could veer into cliché for their Freudian symbolism, retain a powerful pull. And his smartly imagined new take on *Tommy* makes a strong case for how this music, and this story, might endure for generations.

Thom Geier

Production credits – The Who's Tommy

Cast Ali Louis Bourzgui, Alison Luff, Adam Jacobs, John Ambrosino, Bobby Conte, Christina Sajous *et al*

Direction Des McAnuff

Choreography Lorin Lattaro

Music direction Rick Fox

Orchestrations Steve Margoshes

Set David Korins

Lighting Amanda Zieve

Sound Gareth Owen

Costumes Sarafina Bush

Hair, wigs Charles G LaPointe

Projections Peter Nigrini