

Rookie rises again

Mark O'Rowe shot to fame with his play *Howie The Rookie*, and now he's back with a fresh look at that classic work

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Picture: Maura Hickey

Mark O'Rowe is busy revisiting his youth, a bittersweet experience that "feels a little bit like looking at a photograph". His play *Howie The Rookie* has just opened at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin. O'Rowe was 29 when he wrote the play that launched his career, electrifying audiences wherever it was performed. Directing this new, one-man production, he finds himself trying – and sometimes failing – to remember who he was 14 years ago.

"Probably the strongest feeling of oddness is the feeling of being older," he says. "And looking at the play that that young person wrote and seeing whatever that energy was, that sense of making it up as you go along, having the confidence that comes of not having too much knowledge in your head."

The sun beats through the blinds of the rehearsal room where he is on a short lunchtime break. The large, simple space is part of the LAB, Dublin City Council's purpose-built arts facility. There are no props around, just a couple of tables and chairs; the play is all about the words.

O'Rowe is excited about this production, which stars Tom Vaughan-Lawlor (Nidge from *Love/Hate*), and relieved to be working in theatre again, having done a lot of screenplays to "pay the mortgage, basically".

"The financial benefits of theatre are tiny unless you have a West End hit or something, but the spiritual, creative benefits are enormous because the amount of control you have is enormous, and the amount of support for your voice is enormous," he says.

His work has drawn comparisons with a riot of great writers – Joyce, Beckett, Flann O'Brien, David Mamet – but his success has stemmed from his singularity; his voice is entirely his own.

The energy and confidence of *Howie The Rookie* are matched by its linguistic verve, a sparse, visceral poetry that can be both wildly comic and savagely beautiful. Set in a Dublin underworld, the play taps into multiple mythological veins as it snapshots a few days in the lives of *The Howie Lee* and

At a glance

Mark O'Rowe on . . .

. . . risk

A play takes a long time to write and it's really hard work, but there's always the chance that your play will go on for four weeks and never be seen again, and that's the risk you take with every play you write. And even now that feels like a risk that will always be there.

. . . wordiness

I never really liked a novelist who would describe a country road for two pages. When he says country road, I've already pictured my own.

. . . staying in Dublin

I've a wife and two kids, my folks are here, and I love it here. With all the problems and all the crap that's going on and all the bad sides. I think I'm a bit of a home bird. I like going away; I don't love it.

. . . the Irish theatrical canon

I eventually got around to it and discovered people like O'Casey and Synge, and that element of Irishness and that slight obsession with self and perception of self, I genuinely don't get it, it's not part of my make-up. I can see the skill that O'Casey has or Synge has, but I just don't connect with that work at all.

The *Rookie Lee*, two characters who are fatalistically intertwined. A decade and a half after it was written, it seems, if anything, more familiar than it did in 1999.

Mobile phones are absent, sure, and there's a reference to Linford Christie, but partly because depictions of Dublin's gangland have become more prevalent, the landscape of the play is surprisingly contemporary.

"It's slightly gentler than what we see nowadays," O'Rowe says.

The climax features a fight so brutal that a wall is spattered with hair and blood, and

witnesses can see *The Howie's* teeth through a bite that's been taken out of his cheek.

"It's horrific," I say.

"It is," O'Rowe says, "but it's still just two guys with their fists, whereas nowadays violence works differently. Nowadays guys'd walk up to you and stab you or put a glass into your face. And so the rules have kind of changed since then."

Given the play's focus on divergence and convergence, it seems appropriate that we're surrounded by mirrors and two Mark O'Rowes, each wearing a short-sleeved check shirt and a chunky wristwatch, who talk affably and with casual confidence about the idiosyncratic principles of *Howie The Rookie's* characters.

"There seems to be a certain kind of code that runs through the story. People do things as best they can, for the right moral reasons. Even if their moral reasons are slightly skewed, they believe in the reasons, whereas it's much more random now, much more out of the blue, much more spontaneous."

Violence is always part of his work, which includes the screenplays for *Intermission*, *Boy A*, and most recently *Broken*, starring Cillian Murphy and Tim Roth. In his play *Crestfall* (2003) a horse is tortured and a prostitute is subjected to a ferocious attack.

When it played in the Gate Theatre, audience members regularly walked out. In *Terminus* – an international hit which won a Fringe First award at the 2008 Edinburgh Festival – a woman has her eyes poked out. "I've nothing to say about violence in society," O'Rowe says. "Most of the plays are violent plays set in violent worlds so they're not plays set in gentle worlds where violence is used, they're pretty much violent milieus."

He mentions a comment by Quentin Tarantino about violence being just another colour on the canvas. "He [Tarantino] compared it to a musical – you might have a violent film with violent set pieces, and a musical with musical numbers and they're different beasts."

Tarantino's stuff, he says, is more cartoonish than his own, but film – particularly kung fu and horror movies – was a vital formative influence.

He was born in Tallaght in 1970. "When I was growing up, there was nothing out there. If you're getting no culture you're kind of drawn to what's on the box, really."

He missed out on parts of Irish culture, he says, including songs, but that's not the full story; in the past he tended to emphasise the "lower arts" but he was hugely literate even in his teens.

"You undersell your literary interests, I suppose because there's a kind of a narrative there – you're from Tallaght, you're from a similar area to the area you write about."

Under the umbrella of literature rather than drama, he read Arthur Miller and Chekhov. Later, he discovered David Mamet.

"I remember reading stuff he had written again and again," O'Rowe recalls. "I wanted to return to a certain pleasure it was giving me that I couldn't quite name at the time and that turned out to be, I think, the music of it."

It takes a certain amount of courage to leap from reading to writing plays, but his self-belief as well as his choice of medium – which, he reasoned back then, would require fewer words than a novel and allow him to write colloquially – paid off.

In 1995, his first script, *The Aspidochelone*, was selected for a rehearsed reading at the Peacock Theatre; his second, *From Both Hips*, was produced by Fishamble Theatre Company in 1997. Following its London premiere, *Howie The Rookie* won several awards, including the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature.

The negative response to *Crestfall* has been the only real low point – or public low

point – of his career so far. The film *Intermission* was a big word-of-mouth hit, and O'Rowe says he has generally been happy with the final products of his scripts, nevertheless, he associates the movie business with deep frustration.

"You've just got to compromise left, right and centre and it can be heartbreaking. You get to the point where you get tired of being pushed around. You feel people are undervaluing you and you're undervaluing yourself by putting yourself into this position. Sometimes it's a case of being told what to do – I say sometimes – by people who aren't as smart as you. It's very hard to sit down at your laptop and say, 'Right, I've got to make this bit worse.' I say that also acknowledging that I'm not always right either."

He will have complete control over this Landmark Productions version of *Howie the Rookie*, the first time the play has been staged with just one actor.

He always saw the two characters as being "two aspects of young maleness," and there are clues to this within the text – a presentiment of *The Rookie's* has dire consequences for *The Howie*.

O'Rowe loved the original production starring Karl Shiels and Aidan Kelly, and didn't think it could be challenged. If he was

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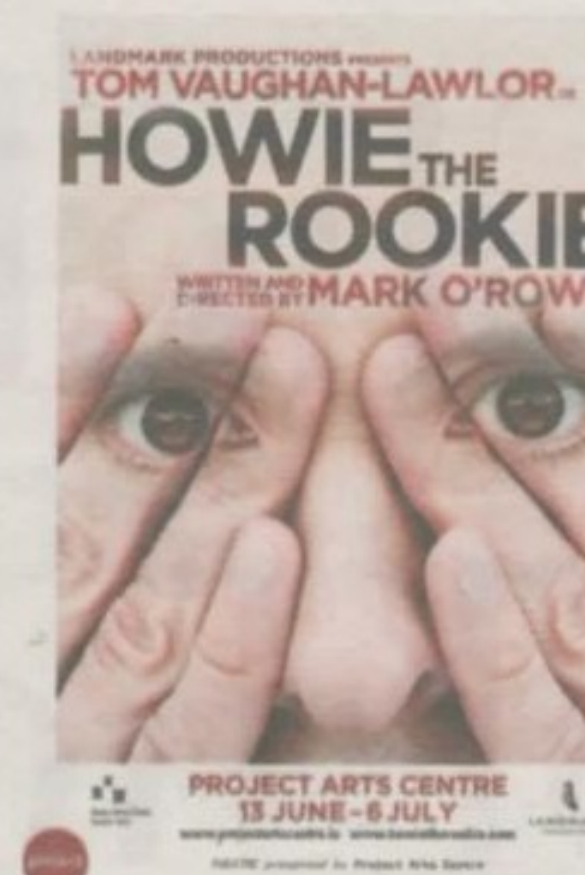
to direct the play, there had to be "an idea that felt strong enough, that would enable you to get up and come into the rehearsal room and feel like you were doing something new".

To hire Tom Vaughan-Lawlor for one part would have felt like "only using 50 per cent" of his ability. He also felt that it would have been difficult to match the actor with someone of equal weight.

When he wrote the play, he didn't have much experience of theatre and drew heavily on intuition. Working with it now, there are pleasant surprises. Unlike the reference to Linford Christie, a few lines about Matt Dillon still hold up. "It's a good play and it was always a good play and it's nice to come back to it and see that it's still strong," says O'Rowe.

I ask him if his younger self would be happy with where he is today. "No! I'd have liked to have been rich," he says, and bursts out laughing. "I mean I'm satisfied enough,

EXTRACTED



Howie the Rookie
By Mark O'Rowe

A dirty dive. Av's type of place. Place you can fuck in the jacks easy an' there she is at the bar, arse enough for three stools, she's wearin' – good Jesus – the white ski pants, the see-through ones. I wanna do it now, get it over with, 'cos I'm not in the mood any more. Could've had somethin' good, 'stead of this.

Avalanche wants to have a pint first.

Fine, fine, we'll have a fuckin' pint.

But not said like that, now, said nice.

Drink our pints, I buy a snack bar an' munch it.

Smoochy music's playin', small dance floor, you can dance.

Av pulls me up, we dance, we waddle, only ones up.

Lots of wind in the Av tonight, rumblin's inside, belches over me shoulder.

A dance, a shift. Open-mouth splashers, I hold her close. Close so's I can feel the belch in her chest risin', can stop kissin' before it reaches her mouth.

Howie The Rookie is at the Project Arts Centre, Dublin until July 6 before moving to the Everyman in Cork, where it runs from July 16-20, and then to the Galway Arts Festival, running from July 22-27