ARTSInterview

Fresh off the back of one hit play and now having two of his older works revived, things could hardly be better for playwright and director Mark O'Rowe

Interview: Nadine O'Regan Picture: Maura Hickey

o comment!" Mark O'Rowe says, with a short barking laugh. We're sitting in a plush Dublin bar. Morning sunlight streams through the windows and a delicious tray of biscuits has been placed before us. But for all the relaxing jazz fusion tunes wafting from the speakers nearby, and the amiable bar staff on hand, Mark O'Rowe means business: he's hyper-aware this is an interview situation and a dictaphone lies between us.

Moreover, a dangerous question has just been asked. O'Rowe has been invited to comment on The Guard and Calvary director John Michael McDonagh's recent controversial comments about the supposed "not very good" quality of Irish films. Hearing this query, O'Rowe's small, pallid face has crinkled up like one who has spied the iron jaws of a particularly nefar-

He snaps his own jaw shut in answer, but hen rethinks the matter. "Maybe I need to elaborate," he muses, "maybe I'm saying the wrong thing by saying 'no comment'.'

A long silence ensues. "The ratio of good to bad films would be similar to anywhere else in the world," O'Rowe says carefully. "Only the odd really good film manages to

What did O'Rowe think of Calvary, then? "No comment!" he explodes, with a roar of laughter. You have to hand it to him: if this interview were an obstacle course, he'd have avoided every orange cone with ease. Questions about the state of Irish theatre are avoided with similar aplomb. "What's the question exactly?" he says carefully, every time he thinks controversy-baiting danger is near, then prods the question until it has lost any of its bite.

The down-to-earth Dubliner isn't planning on making headlines for anything other than his plays and films with this interview. Fortunately for him, his work deserves the acclaim. The writer behind the hit 2003 film Intermission, starring Colin

At a glance Mark O'Rowe on. . .

.. the lack of good new plays In a particular time and place, there are only a certain amount of good plays being produced. There's a lot of distraction from TV and film, and a lot of people who are good dramatic writers are moving into those territories. People seem to feel that because there aren't as many good plays being written that that's someone's fault, but only a good playwright who's dedicated and determined to get their vision onto the paper, and who has skill, can make a good play.

.. getting into writing

always had a hunger to do something creative. I wanted to be an actor or film-maker, but there was no way to become a film-maker, so I thought: what is the way in? With writing, you just need to put a pen to

Movies have become devalued because of the fact that they're so available to people. Hollywood isn't selling movies, it's sellng spectacle that has to be seen on a big screen. In terms of good quality adult stuff, there's an independent movie area that's been left slightly stranded.

always had such great successes - his films Perrier's Bounty and Boy A emerged to lesser receptions – but he's been having a fruitful year of it in 2014.

His brilliant play Our Few And Evil Days has just finished a sold-out run at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. His play Howie The Rookie is about to kick off in the Olympia Theatre, and his play Terminus will also get an airing at the Axis in Ballymun in early November. Add to that a number of "important" projects O'Rowe is also working on – none of which he's allowed to name yet – and it's shaping up to have Farrell and Cillian Murphy, O'Rowe hasn't been an excellent year chez O'Rowe.

sack, Ciarán Hinds and Tom Vaughan-Lawlor starred in Our Few And Evil Days, each of them adding considerable heft to the already-taut and finely tuned story of

a young man, Dennis (Vaughan-Lawlor), who comes to visit his new girlfriend's home. From traditional beginnings – awkward, stilted chit-chat between Dennis and his girlfriend's parents -- the play spirals into something much darker and more ambiguous. Brilliantly written, it zigs and zags

It's Vaughan-Lawlor's hope that fans of in different directions, making for edge-of-

It doesn't hurt that the cream of Irish

talent want to work with him. Sinéad Cu-

your-seat viewing. "A lot of the reviews have contradicted each other, in terms of people's readings of it," O'Rowe says. "It's a play with many

ambiguities. It's a specific script but there are spaces for the audience to invest their own thoughts in it. Afterwards everyone is discussing what did or didn't happen." At the packed-out performance I attended, there was a decided feeling of attendees feeling they were extremely lucky to have snagged tickets for the run – enthusiastic audience members included RTE anchor Anne Cassin and comedian Dara O Briain. "Brilliant cast and a powerful piece of

work," O Briain later tweeted. Although Vaughan-Lawlor – better known as Nidge from Love/Hate -- doesn't take the lead role in Our Few And Evil Days, he's an important presence in the drama nonetheless, and he has history with O'Rowe, having starred in his visceral, gripping play Howie The Rookie, which repia on November 11.

For Vaughan-Lawlor, there was no doubt in his mind about wanting to step back into the world of O'Rowe and Howie The Rookie. "First and foremost, he is an extraordinary writer," the actor told The Sunday Business Post. "I feel very lucky to have been given the opportunity to work with him so closely on Howie The Rookie and Our Few And Evil Days. He has great humanity, and he's a very funny man - he's

Love/Hate might be tempted out the door by Howie The Rookie. "I think when theatre is at its top level, film and TV can't compete," Vaughan-Lawlor said. "What is wonderful about so many of the Love/ Hate cast doing theatre is that, hopefully, it will encourage people who are fans of the show, but not big theatre-goers, to go and

Set in a Dublin underworld, and originally produced more than a decade ago, Howie The Rookie flings us wholesale into the lives of two characters, The Howie Lee and The Rookie Lee, both played by Vaughan-Lawlor.

Alone on a bare stage, Vaughan-Lawlor explains how he and his gang are going after The Rookie Lee, because they have reason to believe he infected them with scabies. Charging forth in search of his prey, his performance is kinetic, lyrical, claustrophobic and exhilarating.

"The play has a fundamental rawness," Vaughan-Lawlor says, "but it's coupled turns (with Vaughan-Lawlor) to the Olym- with the most extraordinary mythic, fantastical and poetic encounters."

The night I saw it at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin, famous actors dotted the audience, among them Robert Sheehan, Domhnall Gleeson, Laurence Kinlan and Aidan Gillen, leaning forward to savour an acting masterclass. O'Rowe says they won't change anything much from that 2013 Project Arts Centre production. "There's nothing that needs to be tweaked," he says. "We're going into a very big venue, but anything we do will be based on the

That confidence from O'Rowe is testament to the time the 44-year-old writer has spent working up his craft over the years. Born in Tallaght, O'Rowe's parents knew fairly quickly that their child wasn't going to follow his father into the fitter-turner business. A horror movie and kung-fu junkie, O'Rowe was a creative type from the beginning. "I was the one that the aunts and uncles thought there was something wrong with," he laughs. He worked in various jobs - a video shop, Dunnes Stores - he even did a Fás training course in electronics, but soon discovered he "couldn't remember a thing" he'd learned. By 26, he was fully invested in writing for the stage and screen.

These days, with his thin-framed glasses, blue shirt and unobtrusive manner, O'Rowe still looks more like a friendly taxi driver than a successful playwright, director and screenwriter. There's no whiff of pretension off him whatsoever: he has a keen intelligence, but none of the typical accoutrements of the theatre luvvie. Still, there's no mistaking his raw am-

Mark O'Rowe: 'I was the one that the aunts and uncles thought there was something wrong with.' Below: Tom Vaughan-Lawlor in Howie The Rookie

bition. For his 2003 film Intermission, O'Rowe didn't have a screenplay commissioned. Instead he sat down and wrote the whole thing on spec. Usually, he says, "you're paid before you write it. You give someone a treatment, a couple of pages that tell a story and then you get them to pay you to write that." But with Intermission O'Rowe just wrote the script in longhand typed it up and gave it to his agent to sell. O'Rowe is a grafter. As soon as his

kids, aged 12 and nine, have headed off to school, he straps on his own satchel and leaves his Marino home for a succession of coffee shops, his favourite places to write screenplays and scripts. Yesterday, he was in Insomnia and around by the IFSC. He has a few favourite haunts for writing, usually based around their deployment of a stereo system or not. "I like the buzz of conversation," he says. "Background noise is fine, but music isn't. It's too distracting."

Since Intermission, O'Rowe has written four films that were made and three that weren't. It's a precarious way to earn a crust, and he laughs at the very idea that some people - unused to the ways of the film and theatre world -- might consider him and his wife, who also works, to be on the pig's back.

"You must be joking," he says. "No, it's a struggle to meet the mortgage. There are people obviously way worse off than me, film A paycheque for a film is much bigg than for applay but given how long a film takes to write and see through to its end, it's probably an average wage for that period of time. If you balance it out between the time it took you to get started and the time you finish, it's probably an average or maybe slightly below average wage, that's doing well." w to had

show. Something that would bring in tons of royalties and you wouldn't have to do anything. But that has never happened for

Still, there's huge interest already in a new production of Our Few And Evil Days, either at the Abbey again or further afield. "We'd love it to travel and have a further life, but it has a cast of busy actors who aren't wanting for work. It'd be about trying to get that cast back again," says

In the meantime, though, O'Rowe must feel content with the year he's had. For ages, when taxi drivers asked him what he did for a living, he had to rely on the "get out of jail free" card that was his hit movie Intermission. But when he got into a cab recently, it was a different story.

"When we went on holidays this year, myself and the family, the guy in the cab asked the same question: what do you do?" O'Rowe says. "Then he said: 'I go to the theatre a little bit myself.' He mentioned the Borstal Boy that was coming up, and then he said: 'There's a good one with the fellow Nidge playing two characters. Howie The Rookie. Did you see that?' And I said: 'Did I see it? I wrote it!"

Howie The Rookie is at the Olympi Theatre from Nominus runs from November 4-6 at Axis in Ballymun

EXTRACTED



Howie The Rookie By Mark O'Rowe

I'm feeling horny. My mickey's a bit sensitive and I'm thinking about Peaches' sister Avalanche down Flaherty's.

Of course, I don't say this. I say: "See you tomorrow boys, a job well done!" And off they go, and off I

Strolling nice, looking forward, hoping she's still down Flaherty's. elegran Dingle and Ginger Boy ot vragrue aiswing past. Green Hiace "It'd be great to have a big Broadway aft roll ". with the sliding door open. gniog novertheye surgered My Facet manahawould you like a

> Extended the stall it here, tally changed so much Off Janahymoshansalla. Ho THIS THE TOT TO THE SHOOT OF nains the same: we all mittight Stop attapped on 185 av vi ociety hasn't changed a jot. All the Once, we would beid mila we and office: "Have you seen your du Aoi I understanding that when w * * * Getting the buttermes how, possibly even to Zellweggranitaste

enuous to principing the enquisible ness, we were only being human in I y down the street when sho rad Logger approached her she dayerto, trust that things eswell the roleay, hard to trust when I'm bricking. and But then he saved me today, and he knew things. Knew to stop my itching.

Even now it's less,

so I kinda believe in him.

You know?