



# Back to where it all began

David Hennessy chats to playwright and director Mark O'Rowe as his play *Howie the Rookie* returns to London where it was first performed in 1999

**W**hen it premiered at Shepherd's Bush Theatre in 1999 *Howie the Rookie* earned its writer Mark O'Rowe the *George Devine Award*, the *Rooney Prize for Irish Literature* and *The Irish Times/ESB Theatre Award*. Since then the Dublin

writer Mark has had further success in theatre with his series of interlocking monologues, *Terminus*, earning rave reviews at the Abbey Theatre and going on to win a Fringe First award.

Mark has also won accolades with his screenwriting with credits that include highly rated Irish films such as *Intermission* and *Perrier's Bounty* as well as the Andrew Garfield movie *Boy A* (which starred *Spiderman's* Andrew Garfield) and *Broken*, which won a British Independent Films Award.

Mark recently returned to theatre, this time as a director, taking charge of *Howie the Rookie* to direct Tom Vaughan-Lawlor of *Love/Hate* in both roles in his double monologue that takes the audience through an urban nightmare told from the points of view of both Howie Lee and Rookie Lee.

After a successful tour of Ireland, a stint at last year's Edinburgh Fringe and a run at Dublin's Olympia Theatre, *Howie* plays the Barbican from next week.

"A few years have passed

since then," the writer and director says of the play's first London production back in 1999. "It went down very well here (Ireland) after all that time.

"It's always quite gratifying and quite scary actually bringing something back. You know you've a great actor and you know you can do a good production but do you still think the play holds up?"

"It was very gratifying to see that it did, or that people felt it did."

Although in the original productions the roles of

Howie and Rookie were played by two different actors, as soon as he knew Tom Vaughan-Lawlor (who plays Nidge in RTE's smash hit, ultra violent TV gangland drama *Love/Hate*) was interested Mark hit on the idea of him playing both parts because he thought it would just be unfair to ask another performer to go up against an acting powerhouse like Tom and also that it would be under utilising him if he was only onstage for half the show.

Suspension of disbelief is needed from the audience for



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Tom to become both characters.

"When we first did it, it was all theory so we were definitely hoping that our instincts would be right.

"It's not an exercise in showing how an actor can transform himself into two different characters through make-up or giving one limp and the other not or any of that kind of stuff.

"The differences between the two characters are much more subtle. You present something to the audience and say 'Here's a guy, he's the same guy in both of them but simply through how he tells his story, he's got to make you believe that he's two different people'.

"When I say make you believe, you have to use your own imagination and you have to enter into a contract with the actor into believing so I think it's sort of a two way thing in that way."

Ahead of the play transferring first to London and then to New York, we asked Mark if he ever noticed cultural characteristics in how different cities react to the play? "They respond differently from place to place but they respond differently from night to night as well.

"The play is very funny but it's also very dark. When I say it's very funny, there's a lot of behavioural stuff that you may or not find funny.

"There are no jokes in the play so there are no lines that require a laugh and if the energy in the audience is a slightly more upbeat energy, they will sort of choose to laugh at a lot of the stuff but then on other nights, you might get a much more listening serious audience and that's the energy that will prevail in the theatre then.

"Tom as a performer, he's always got to be prepared to go one way or the other and slightly tailor the performance to that.

"If you get a lot of laughter, you've got to do a lot of pausing to wait for that to end so they can hear the next line but if it's a more quiet audience, you've got to play through those moments so it doesn't sound like you're waiting for a laugh that's not coming."

Mark recently directed Tom in his latest play *Our Few and Evil Days* at Dublin's Abbey, a production that also featured Ciaran Hinds and Sinead Cusack. Does Mark see himself working with Tom again?

"I love Tom, yeah. If whatever I write has a character that's not a million miles away from his age or physique or gender or whatever, he would be the first door I'd knock on definitely.

"We have a good rapport and he's just brilliant, he's amazing so why wouldn't you go to the best first? Even the next thing I write, I would very seriously think of having a character who would be of his

general type just as an excuse to work with him again."

Sam Mendes says that theatre is the actor's or writer's true medium and that egotistical directors should be directed instead to film. How did Mark find re-entering theatre as a director having been a writer?

"I love it. You've just got to put the writer aside really. The alternative is to let someone else do it and at this point, that's not an alternative for me.

"As hard as rehearsal can get sometimes, you could be very stressed and you can have days that are very pressurised and the alternative is actually to have the faith in someone to put it into someone else's hands and hope for the best.

"You're in the best of both worlds in a way because often the rehearsal process is about discovery, it's trying to work out things about the characters, about their past,

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about whatever and you're kind of ahead of the game because you wrote it. You save a little time having some of those answers."

"If you need something slightly



rewritten or you need to cut something, you don't really need to ask the writer, you don't have to make a phone call, you don't have to have an argument," Mark laughs perhaps at the idea of having an argument with himself. "You can just do it. It's a bit of a time saver, I think, directing yourself.

"It (directing)'s something I wanted to try a few plays back and I did say, 'if I don't take to it or it's not

for me or if I'm bad at it, I promise I'll never do it again but I need to try', and I did and I enjoyed it and the work I did wasn't particularly bad. Particularly with the very first production of a play to be the person that's protecting it is very nice and any productions that come after that, you can let it go then.

"The end of things I would be coming from would be you birth this thing into the world, you make this

thing out of nothing and the directing would be a way of seeing that to its end so it's very much about protecting the writing I suppose.

"I've no interest in directing for directing's sake, doing other people's work."

In the future, Mark will be directing one of his own scripts for the screen but would he still agree that film and TV can't compete with theatre when it is at its very best?

"As an emotional and intellectual achievement at its best, it can't be beat. Theatre requires an act of imagination on the audience's behalf, there's an effort happening from the outset that I think engages a theatre audience more because their mind is actually firing because by necessity, you have to fire in order to make these actors standing in front of you feel like something real that you can commit to and believe in.

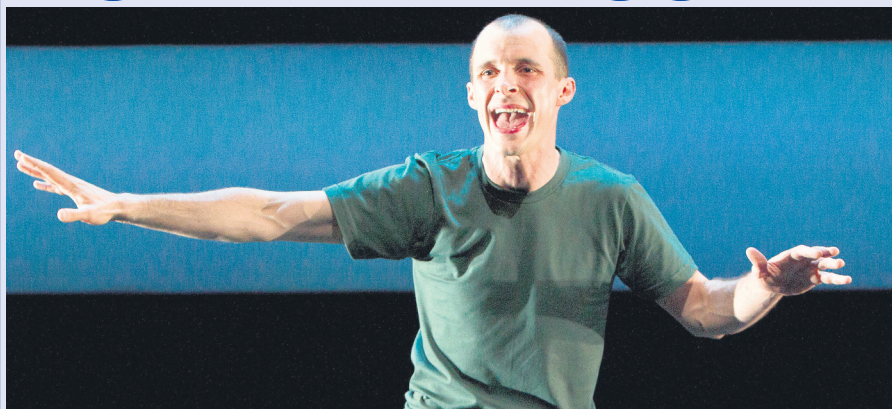
"A play and an audience come together somewhere in the middle whereas I think film seems to be very one sided so I think because you're making that effort and because you're channelled and plugged into a play much more so than you are in a film, when it reaches its peaks, it's a much more powerful and rewarding experience."

Mark continues: "You do what you're able to do. I find I fit in very well in theatre. I like to tell stories through language and dialogue and maybe just the reason I love theatre is simply because it suits me better," he laughs.

"That might be a more truthful answer. I know in those few occasions where I've seen the best theatre I've ever seen, I've been far more moved and far more engaged and it stays with me far longer than the equivalent film."

**Howie the Rookie plays at The Barbican November 19-29, or [www.howiethe rookie.com](http://www.howiethe rookie.com)**

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