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Bret Harte once wrote, "One big vice in a man is apt to keep out a great many smaller ones."

Such is not the case for the sad, sodden protagonist of "Rum and Vodka," a short early work by Irish playwright Conor McPherson ("The Weir"), now at the Celtic Arts Center in Studio City. For the young Dubliner in McPherson's one-man show, drink is not only an honest man's failing, it is a bitter cycle of gratification and misery resulting in infidelity, thievery and uncharacteristic violence.

Under the direction of Jay Leggett, ruffled, basset-eyed John O'Callaghan traces the unfortunate progression of his nameless protagonist through an epic three-day binge. A working-class Irish functionary, married at 20 and twice a father before his 25th birthday, O'Callaghan's character feels trapped and frustrated, limited by his circumstances and his lack of education. But as we later realize, those limitations are a thin excuse for the alcoholism that grips him. His latest bender, which we suspect is his worst yet, leaves the young man jobless, probably wife-less and sick to his stomach.

Whether that malaise will lead to sobriety is frustratingly ambiguous in McPherson's strangely unfinished drama, which ultimately drops off a cliff of unresolved intentions.

Dublin-born O'Callaghan, who has been performing the piece for several years at fringe festivals and off-Broadway, performs with aching authenticity and a dry matter-of-factness as humorous as it is poignant.

On a stark stage, talking directly to the audience, O'Callaghan simply and straightforwardly re-creates the sordid, Stygian odyssey of a young alcoholic — not a novel story, but one that bears repeating.

— F.K.F.

**"Rum and Vodka,"** Celtic Arts Center, 4843 Laurel Canyon Blvd., Studio City. Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m. \$15. (818) 760-8322, 1 hour, 10 minutes.