

The Sun

Irish Guys Aren't Smiling

Theater

BY HELEN SHAW

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In a climactic scene in "Howie the Rookie," the violence reaches an awful pitch. Two men, caught in a berserker rage, snap and rip at each other like fighting dogs. Averted eyes won't help, though; there's nothing to look away from. Mark O'Rowe's play consists of two monologues, back to back. That scene of physical brutality exists entirely in our imaginations, called up in vivid detail by the Rookie himself.

Mr. O'Rowe also wrote the recent film "Intermission," with which "Howie the Rookie" shares a certain continuity of theme. Again, Mr. O'Rowe talks about the grittiest bits of south Dublin, populated with working-class lads who aren't working. And both pieces - one a film, one a play - have that wandering eye that notices the way two lives can overlap and eventually interweave. Mr. O'Rowe's unlikely strategy - two narrators who never share the stage - doesn't need a camera to be cinematic. First we meet Howie Lee, a bruiser with a soft center. His favorite activity is "getting after" people, which can mean anything from a leisurely chase down an alley to a savage beating. When Howie and his mates decide that their pretty-boy chum the Rookie passed along a savage infestation of scabies, the night's mission becomes to punish him. By the end of the first act, unexpectedly tragedy has already struck. In the second act, when the Rookie arrives to tell us his side of the story, we find the men descending into further depths of humiliation and destruction. As played by Mark Byrne, Howie has a perennially bright outlook.

Things that strike us as grotesque he greets with a sunny "Nice!" and an endearing smile. His sweetness floats right on the surface, and it seems hard to imagine him as the group's go-to thug. He's dear, but director Nancy Malone seems to have cautioned Mr. Byrne to speak slowly so his accent and Irish slang won't catch an audience flat. Unfortunately the adrenalized first act suffers for it. Our lad prides himself on his tackling ability - Mr. Byrne should have tackled the text as well. John O'Callaghan as the Rookie, though, has been perfectly cast. Scenes of ridiculous physical comedy (Howie's dance with the portly ski-panted "Avalanche", the Rookie's unhelpful flatulence in times of crisis) keep our minds off the tragedy we know is coming. Navigating between two extremes, Mr. O'Rowe's play needs someone with Mr. O'Callaghan's impressive narrative control and gorgeous comic timing. He simpers and quails and runs away, slipping in his boots on the stage-floor. He keeps us just as off-balance as his tractionless boots, and when the fall finally comes, it's exhilarating.