



Review

Boston Playwrights' Theatre Scores With 'Brawler,' A Tale Of Havoc And Hockey

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By Kilian Melloy



Anthony Goes as Odie and Greg Maraio as Adam in "Brawler." (Courtesy Kalman Zabarsky/Boston Playwrights' Theatre)

Walt McGough's new play "Brawler" — playing through March 18 at [Boston Playwrights' Theatre](#) — works too hard at first to keep its story moving, but scores in the end.

Pro hockey player Adam (Greg Maraio) — known affectionately to his teammates as Moose — goes berserk in a hockey arena locker room one night after a romantic evening of skating around on the ice with his girlfriend Trisha (Gigi Watson). He's a powerful guy, and the havoc he wreaks is extensive. (Props to scenic designer Cristina Todesco, whose sets are always beautiful to behold. In this case, even wreckage seems eloquent.) The damage Adam does to the locker room is the least of the problems his outburst creates; his pal Jerry (Marc Pierre), the arena's security guard, is on the hot seat for having let Adam and Trisha into the place for their private pleasure.



Gigi Watson as Trisha and Greg Maraio as Adam in "Brawler." (Courtesy Kalman Zabarsky/Boston Playwrights' Theatre)

Jerry's not the only one compromised by the athlete's meltdown. Adam's old friend and former teammate Odie (Anthony Goes) rushes over to help calm Adam and get the crisis sorted out, but soon finds that his loyalty has thrust him into a potential PR nightmare. For one thing, Adam's duffel bag is stuffed full of drugs. Trisha, a nurse, insists the pills are all legal and have been properly prescribed, but Odie is extremely sensitive to the optics of the situation. As it happens, he's the team captain of the Boston Bruins, and that means he has to avoid scandal at all costs. It doesn't help matters that Adam keeps bellowing irrationally about Odie's failures as a friend and insisting that they have a fistfight right then and there, while Jerry the security guard is a superfan who can't help making awkward, trivial small talk.

For a moment, the play seems about to descend into an exercise in which shouting replaces dramatic tension and character motives disappear behind plot-driven excuses to keep things moving. With Adam so clearly out of his mind, why isn't Trisha, with her medical background, zeroing in on the possibility that a career as an "enforcer" — a player who engages in physically punishing conflict with the opposition to protect star players from harm, or to retaliate if harm does befall them — has resulted in the sort of brain damage that frequently-concussed football players suffer?



Marc Pierre as Jerry, Gigi Watson as Trisha and Greg Maraio as Adam in "Brawler." (Courtesy Kalman Zabarsky/Boston Playwrights' Theatre)

That's the implication we pick up on in the audience and McGough does circle around to it, though not in the way you might think. Along the way, the playwright examines themes of dedication, devotion, fear-driven denial and self-sacrifice. McGough explains in the play's program that he drew inspiration from the idea of military men who have faithfully rendered service, but are then left behind by those they served. When the play snaps into focus, it reveals a complex portrait of intense loyalty between fellow athlete-warriors, a bond complicated and derailed by secrets we only gradually come to understand.

For all its alpha-masculinity, "Brawler" makes room for more refined and subtle story threads, and the cast — under the intelligent and emotionally wise direction of M. Bevin O'Gara — do fine work all around. Jerry turns out to be more than a security guard with

no life to call his own — he’s a passionate devotee of the sport, with a history of dashed hopes, and Marc Pierre brings out his fascinating depths and nuances. Gigi Watson more than holds her own in this room of testosterone-sweating males, showing how toughness can coexist with tenderness.



Greg Maraio as Adam, Anthony Goes as Odie and Gigi Watson as Trisha in "Brawler." (Courtesy Kalman Zabarsky/Boston Playwrights' Theatre)

But it’s Maraio and Goes who constitute the play’s two-chambered heart, forging a powerful partnership. If you saw Maraio as the sweetly awkward Jordan in “Significant Other” a couple of seasons ago, you might not even recognize him here. It’s a startling transformation: Maraio now seems huge and formidable. Goes plays Odie with equal intensity, and smartly reveals his character’s deeply compromised state by degrees. But it’s not all a matter of brawn or brawl; Adam and Odie each reach their own sorts of exquisite catharsis. Not everything surrounding those watershed moments feels completely ironed out (McGough is still honing the material), but this production nails the play’s payoffs.

“Brawler” continues through March 18 at [Boston Playwrights’ Theatre](#).