

# The Boston Globe

DON AUCOIN

## A writer discovers his dark side in Ronán Noone's 'The Smuggler'

By [Don Aucoin](#) Globe Staff, Updated November 14, 2019, 3:48 p.m.



Billy Meleady in "The Smuggler" at Boston Playwrights' Theatre. Stratton McCrady (custom credit)

One — just one — of the achievements of “The Smuggler,” Ronán Noone’s engrossing new verse drama at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre, is the way most of its rhymes fall so naturally on the ear.

That we largely forget the verse and focus our attention on the drama is a tribute both to Noone’s craftsmanship in constructing such a ripping yarn and to the storytelling gifts of Billy Meleady, who delivers a tour de force solo performance in the New England premiere of Noone’s play.

Meleady companionably invites us along as he narrates and recreates a journey to the dark side by Irish-born Tim Finnegan, a middle-aged, unemployed bartender and would-be novelist on a Nantucket-like island called Amity. After Tim learns of the riches being reaped by a human-trafficking ring operating on the island, he proceeds to break bad, big-time, in a tale that starkly illustrates what Tim calls “the price you pay for American individualism.”

As with Noone’s earlier “The Blowin of Baile Gall,” set in his native Ireland, tensions over immigration ripple through and around “The Smuggler,” directed at BPT by the playwright on a gritty set by Adam Hawkins that is dominated by stairs leading up to an office marked “Private.” The events recounted and reenacted by Meleady’s Tim occurred in the aftermath of a fatal car collision between a local youth whose family goes back six generations on the island and an undocumented immigrant from Guatemala — an episode that has prompted a wave of deportations.

After a financially strapped Tim gets a job as a painter with a crew of undocumented immigrants, he sees a lucrative opportunity. Events spiral from there, leaving Tim with quite a tale to tell. He relates that tale with suitable writerly flourishes, telling the audience at one point, by way of prelude to an anecdote involving a sycamore tree and his mother-in-law, “It is time here for a metaphorical layer.”

Like the corrupt journalist in Noone’s “The Atheist,” who discovers he has a “talent for deception,” Tim learns a fundamental truth about himself: that the thrill he gets from committing robbery is akin to the gratification he feels when one of his stories is published, and, furthermore, that his detour into thievery has “in some way . . . given me back my dignity.”

Aficionados of Noone’s earlier work will recognize certain other hallmarks of the Boston-based playwright: the between-two-worlds balance immigrants must struggle to maintain; the ever-present potential for violence, ticking away beneath all those heated words being flung back and forth; the speed with which greed marries opportunism, swiftly followed by self-justification (Tim’s young child is sick, and he needs money to pay medical bills); the battle Noone’s characters wage against their baser instincts as they navigate what Tim calls the “thin line between desperation and acting immorally.”

It’s a pleasure to behold the brio and casual expertise with which Meleady walks that line. Possessed of a wonderfully lived-in face and attired in a gray suit and red tie, he projects the confidence of a performer who knows the character he’s playing from the inside out. One moment the actor is exuding the relaxed, worldly mien of Sinatra at the Sands; in the next there is a slight tremor in his voice as Tim confesses that “I thought I’d be more than I am”; in the

next Meleady is convulsively wrenching his body back and forth as he recreates the comic horror of Tim's epic, life-or-death struggle with a huge and ferocious rat (the sanguinary details of which will be seared into my memory banks for a while).

To memorize reams of free verse and make it look as effortless as Meleady does is no small accomplishment. Equally impressive is the way the actor proves able to conjure nearly a dozen other characters besides Tim over the course of a 70-minute monologue, from Tim's anxious wife to his surly policeman brother-in-law to a 22-year-old Brazilian named Daniella to a furtive tipster. Only intermittently as Meleady ranges from one to the other are you aware of Noone straining for a rhyme, as when Tim proclaims: "Profit. Nothing to scoff at."

That line reflects the Irish immigrant's bleak awareness that financial success, however it is achieved, is "how they define success in this country." Consequently, Tim concludes with a certain grim logic, "You do what you need to do to become what you want to be." And there's not much poetic about that.

## **THE SMUGGLER**

Written and directed by Ronán Noone. Presented by Boston Playwrights' Theatre, through Nov. 24. Tickets \$35, 866-811-4111, [www.bostonplaywrights.org](http://www.bostonplaywrights.org)

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