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Duddy has taken a liking to the stage. The reviews have been kind to the man from Derry, who last month decided he'd hang up the gloves. (photo by Guy Warren) Does life imitate art, or art imitate life? Five years earlier, Wayne Kelly had been the referee who took Shelby Pudwill into protective custody the night John Duddy knocked him down three times in the first two minutes of their fight at Madison Square Garden. Now here was Kelly, counting over Duddy's prostrate form in a ring on the stage at the Atlantic Theatre Company.

At almost any time you could name over the past half-dozen years, providing John Duddy with the look of a busted-up prizefighter would not have been an exercise that greatly challenged the creative powers of a resourceful theatrical make-up artist. Even when he won, which he usually did, the Derry middleweight could reliably be counted upon to spring new leak or two, and there were at least a few fights over that stretch from which Duddy emerged with his face looking like freshly-chopped hamburger.

Which helps to explain Lou DiBella's surprised reaction when he ran into Duddy and his wife Grainne at the New York premiere of "Lights Out" in early January. Seven months had elapsed since the boxer had last been bloodied, in a loss to Julio Cesar Chavez Jr. in San Antonio, and time seemed to have eradicated any vestigial residue of that night's carnage.

"I was struck by how good he looked," recalled the promoter. "I'm talking movie-star looks. It had been long since I'd seen him looking so fresh.

"'John,' I told him, 'You look marvelous. Taking all that time off has obviously done you a world of good,'" recalled DiBella. "Looking back on it now, I can't believe what I said next. I actually told him 'You look so good that you really ought to think about not doing this much longer. Who knows? Maybe you have a future in the movies yourself.'"

Just few days earlier, DiBella had successfully concluded negotiations with manager Craig Hamilton for a March 12 Duddy fight against Andy Lee at the Foxwoods casino in Connecticut. The St. Patricks week bout on the Mashantucket Pequod tribal reservation would be the co-feature of a card headlined by Sergio Martinez' middleweight title defense against Ukrainian Sergey Dzinziruk. Making the fight had been an arduous process, and in the end DiBella had to strong-arm HBO into televising the bout only by mortgaging future Martinez bouts as collateral, which in turn provided $100,000 guarantees for the two Irish middleweights.

DiBella was unaware at the time that Duddy had already taped a yet-to-be aired episode of “Lights Out,” the FX channel’s new boxing-themed series, but he was about to find out. The “Lights Out” premiere took place on January 5. Ten days later Duddy stunned the boxing world by announcing his retirement.

“I wish I still had the hunger, but I don’t,” said Duddy in the January 15 statement released by Hamilton. “The fire has burned out.”

Ten days after that came the announcement that Duddy would make his theatrical debut in an Off-Broadway revival of Bobby Cassidy Jr.’s 2007 play “Kid Shamrock.” The seemingly precipitate haste of the second announcement led many to suspect that the two events must have been connected, but Duddy insists that this was not the case.

“Just a couple of days after I announced my retirement I got a phone call from Seamus McDonagh asking if I’d be interested in the play,” said Duddy, who portrays the younger, fighting era version of he eponymous lead character, plainly based on the playwright’s father Bobby Cassidy, a useful middleweight and light-heavyweight of the 1960s and 70s. (McDonagh plays the older Shamrock, recounting the events depicted from the vantage point of a saloon bouncer years later.)

“My initial reaction was that I was pissed off,” said DiBella. “I’d had to fight tooth and nail to make the Lee fight, and I’d gotten both boxers exactly what they’d asked for. I felt betrayed.

“But when I thought about it, and it didn’t take very long, I realized that he was right. If he felt the way he did, Duddy should have retired. It would have been the easiest thing in the world to go through the motions and take $100,000 of my money for just showing up. Instead he did the honorable thing.”

After Duddy’s departure, DiBella secured the services of unbeaten, Edinburgh-born Craig McEwan as Lee’s March 12 opponent in the HBO fight. And Duddy went straight into rehearsals with Dublin-born director Jimmy Smallhorne for “Kid Shamrock.”

Like Duddy and McDonagh (who two decades ago fought Evander Holyfield for the US heavyweight title), every member of the seven-man cast had some boxing connection, guaranteeing the presence of the Fight Mob for the seven-night run at the Atlantic. It’s a fair bet that at least half of Tuesday’s opening-night audience was there to see Duddy, and that a substantial portion of those showed up expecting to see him fall flat on his face in his theatrical debut. If so, they were disappointed.

You might not say that Duddy stole the show (Patrick Joseph Connolly, the veteran character actor who plays an inebriated salesman whose barroom conversation serves as a foil for the older Kid Shamrock’s reminiscences, did that), but he was almost astonishingly competent, delivering his lines (in a New York accent) with a flawless ease.

The boxing scenes, most them based on Cassidy pere’s 1971 Madison Square Garden fight against future middleweight champion Rodrigo Valdez, may well be the best-choreographed

fight action ever seen on a New York stage, on or off-Broadway. And casting ex-pugs in every role might have seemed a gamble, but it paid dividends in verisimilitude: Gary Hope, the onetime English cruiserweight who plays the Kid's cornerman Paddy Flood, is believable because he acts like a boxing trainer.

And Wayne Kelly certainly knows how to act like a referee. In fact, Kelly's understudy had to work the second night's performance of Kid Shamrock. Unaware of the potential conflict with the Atlantic Theatre Company, the New York State Athletic Commission assigned Kelly to work DiBella's real-life Broadway Boxing card at B.B. King's Blues Club tonight.

While confessing to a case of opening-night jitters, Duddy seemed gratified by his reception and was looking forward to the rest of the run, as well as to what now looms a second career.

Not that he's turned his back entirely on his former pursuit.

"I'm going up to Connecticut to watch next month's fight, and I'm actually looking forward to it," he said. "I like Andy Lee's chances against the Scotsman for a couple of reasons. Because they're both southpaws, McEwan won't be able to run the way he might against an orthodox boxer. He'll have to stand and fight, and Andy has more of a punch than McEwan does; he hits harder.

"You know, I've enjoyed this even more than I thought I would," added Duddy as he toweled off after his first turn before the footlights. "I don't know what the future holds, but of course I'd like to do more of it."

What comes next? "Have your people talk to my people?"

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