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In Irish folklore, the hero Oshin dwells in the land of eternal youth. Slowly he comes to miss his friends and ventures to Earth once more. But the moment he steps foot on the ground, time rushes up around him, and he's turned into an old man.

Billy Roche's "Poor Beast in the Rain," the absorbing inaugural production by the new Salem K Theatre Company, offers a modern version of that myth. In mid-1980s Ireland, the regulars at a Wexford betting shop run by taciturn Steven (Michael O'Hagan) and his daughter, Eileen (Kate Steele), gather to crank up for the Hurling Finals.

Turns out the real suspense isn't about the game but the reappearance of Danger Doyle (Andrew Connolly), the dashing bad boy who ran off with Steven's young wife. Eileen pines for her ma, oblivious to the love-struck Georgie (Christopher Carley); Danger's old mate, Joe (Kevin Kearns), can't wait to relive his wild youth, while a torn-up Molly (Joanne Whalley) torches for Danger.

This prodigal has been made into a legend by people who don't know how to move on, and his return sets their mythmaking to the test. But if Danger back in town doesn't quite set off the fireworks the play promises, that's half the point. Director Wilson Milam's intimate production compels less through plot than with lived-in verité. We feel like eavesdroppers at a corner table in set designer Laura Fine Hawkes' grungy shop, all chalk dust and sticky counters, and the fine ensemble work on view will strengthen as the run continues. Carley brims with clammy youth, while Whalley and Connolly spark and burn.

Roche has an easy way with local talk: Joe says of the slim Eileen: "there's more meat on a butcher's apron"; Molly dismisses a young flirt as "the latest little tearaway." That old Irish turn from disappointment to poetry can still cast a spell. "Poor Beast" calls out a bittersweet farewell to the past -- a lament to quiet for in loud times.