Playing Andy Dufresne in the new national tour of *The Shawshank Redemption*, Joe McFadden ponders: "It's such a well-known story and he's such an iconic character, and some might say that's foolish to take on." Joe smiles. "But it feels like a really good challenge for me as an actor, and I do like a challenge."

Written by Owen O'Neill and Dave Johns, the play is based on Stephen King's 1982 novella *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption*, which featured in King's *Different Seasons* collection and was adapted into the beloved 1994 film starring Tim Robbins and Morgan Freeman.

McFadden is a huge fan of both the book and film, saying that there will be surprises in store for theatregoers who are only familiar with the big screen version. "There's lots in it that they'll know from the movie," he points out, "but it delves deeper into the novella and offers something extra. It's a brilliant script, so saying yes to it was a no-brainer for me."

The story starts in the late-1940s, when - despite protesting his innocence - Andy is incarcerated at the notorious Shawshank facility and soon learns that no one can survive alone. So he strikes up an unlikely friendship with prison fixer Red but is bullied into subservience by Warden Stammas when the latter exploits his talents for accountancy.

As Joe elaborates: "At first Andy ostracises himself from the other inmates, then realises he has to adapt. But he keeps his core values and retains his moral fibre in an immoral, dark and dangerous place. He’s a really intelligent guy who uses his brains to work the system."

Asked if he has anything in common with the character, McFadden laughs. "I'm probably not as clever as he is, but I do have a moral compass. He uses his skills for the benefit of the other prisoners, not just for himself, and he's someone we can all aspire to be like. It's a story about hope in the darkest of places, and we could all do with a bit more hope and optimism in our lives. "

Glasgow-born Joe came to fame on TV in *Sex, Chips & Rock n’Roll* and as PC Joe Mason in *Heartbeat* and Raf in *Holby City*. The latter was a particular highlight because: "I got to really explore a character for four years and I love it when where you're with a company of actors and you get to know each other well. It was the same with the cast and crew on *Heartbeat*."

Then there was the 2017 series of *Strictly Come Dancing*, which saw Joe and his professional partner Katya Jones take the Glitterball Trophy. "Looking back, it was a really intense, rewarding, challenging and brilliant time." He laughs again. "I'm not sure I would want to do it again ever, but I'm really glad I took part when I did."

McFadden has done lots of theatre, including recent tours of *The Rocky Horror Show* and *The Mirror Crack'd*, and says: "Good theatre shouldn't only be in London. There are so many beautiful theatres around the country and audiences are different wherever you go. And with *The Shawshank Redemption* it's important to spread that message of hope and optimism around the UK."

Elder inmate Red is played by Ben Onwukwe, whose 30-year stage career has seen him playing leading roles with the RSC and the Royal Court and who is best-known to TV audiences as Recall McKenzie from *London's Burning*.

He first played Red role in the production's 2016 tour and was originally drawn to it because, like Joe, he sees it as a story about hope. "The word 'redemption' is right there in the title," Ben notes. "Most prison dramas are pretty grim, but this one is also about humanity - where in this morass of misery we find two people who have some goodness within them.

"With Red, he made the most disastrous mistake in his young life - a mistake that was so brutal that it led to three deaths - but he's made his peace with his crime and the fact that he's having to pay the price for what he did. He's a fascinating character and I love that I now have the challenge of playing him again with an entirely different cast."

As in King's novella, he describes Red in the play as "an observant, intuitive and empathetic observer of people". As to why people are drawn to prison dramas, Onwukwe feels: "All of us have or have had wicked thoughts. I've got four siblings, all of them girls, and when I was young I'd think about doing things like twisting the necks of their dolls to get my own back. As you grow up, hopefully you suppress those kind of thoughts, but prison dramas show us people who have succumbed to them. There's a 'There but for the grace of God...' element to that."

Ben recalls his time on *London's Burning* with a grin: "When I auditioned for it I thought it was something to do with The Clash and their song of the same name! Then when I landed it people were going 'It's the most exciting show on TV' and for me it was. You got a two-week training course, then you were immersed in this world you didn't have a clue about before. It was wonderful to be able to pay homage to these people who are honourable, dutiful and, again, full of goodness."

The film of *The Shawshank Redemption* has been hailed as one of the greatest movies of all time. "And rightly so," the actor feels - as does Bill Ward, who plays Warden Stammas in the stage version.

"It was one of my favourite films growing up," Bill says, concurring with his co-stars when he adds of the theatrical adaptation: "It's a beautifully-written play about hope emerging from darkness. It has so many other compelling themes, like brotherhood, love and resilience."

Stammas is an amalgamation of three characters from the novella. "So he's a really multi-faceted personality," Ward continues. "He's ruthless at his core, but he has ways, means and tactics for getting what he wants. He can be very charming and charismatic. He's not a one-note, nasty piece of work who you can see through immediately. A lot of the time, on the surface, he appears to be quite reasonable quite a lot of the time, but actually what he's doing is being extremely manipulative."

As for why people who've seen the film should come and see the play, he feels: "You get to meet these characters in the flesh and to walk in Andy's shoes as he makes this very moving journey, which is a very uplifting one but which has some massively tricky road bumps along the way."

Ward's numerous TV credits include stints as Charlie Stubbs in *Coronation Street* and James Barton in *Emmerdale*. Of the former he laughs: "It seems so long ago now, and I have done so much since then, but people remember him because he was such a foul individual."

On stage he's been in *The Full Monty*, *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* and *Spamalot*. "And it's so different to doing telly, where you do up to 15 scenes a day. In theatre, you follow the arc all the way through and I especially love the rehearsal period, where you're trying all sorts of different things as a way of getting into the character and seeing how they fit into the overall piece.

"Then when you're up and running there's the camaraderie between the cast and the crew, and nothing beats being in front of a live audience. Getting to take a show like *The Shawshank Redemption* around the country is a joy because it's a wonderful story, and theatre is really just one great big shared experience of storytelling."