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Theater: *Once* Turns Into Moving Musical Headed To Broadway

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Once *** 1/2 out of ****
[New York Theatre Workshop](#)

The fairytale hasn't ended for the movie *Once*. That shoestring budget of a movie captured lightning in a bottle by showcasing two non-actors and their music in a story of bittersweet almost-romance. It starred Glen Hansard of *The Frames* and Marketa Irglova, who together perform as *The Swell Season*. The slip of a story has these two adults meeting at an inopportune moment, with romance an unfulfilled option. But the Girl (as she's known in the movie) resolutely brings together musicians to record a demo of the Boy's wonderfully heartbreaking music. As you doubtless know, the movie became a genuine word of mouth sensation, grossing almost \$19 million worldwide (on a budget of \$150,000) and ultimately winning the Oscar

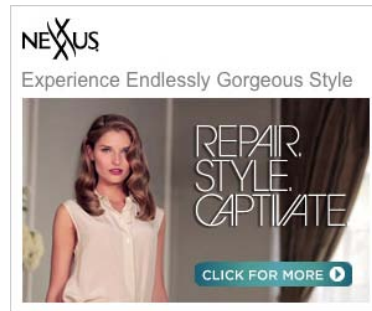
for Best Original Song.

Someone had the very bad idea of turning the movie into a stage musical. The movie worked almost entirely due to the chemistry of its two leads (who were in love in real life) and those marvelous songs they performed. The story was so slight you might not even notice it: the magic occurred when they seemed to create the music right in front of us (like the scene in the music store). So without those two, what did you have?

Against all logic, you have a beautifully intimate, sweet, and deeply moving musical anchored by two marvelous new leads, that stirring music and a pitch-perfect production at the New York Theatre Workshop. I was going to write, "The only surprise will be if *Once* doesn't immediately transfer to Broadway and then win the Tony for Best Musical." But before I could even file my review, an email came announcing that *Once* will indeed be transferring to Broadway starting February 28. God help the competition. I'm eager to see it in a larger space where the emotions can swell even bigger, but do what you must to finagle a ticket to see it right now at NYTW.

Based on the film written and directed by John Carney, most every decision made by director John Tiffany and book writer Enda Walsh has been a smart one. The stage is a warm space filled with antique mirrors of all shapes and sizes, with an especially large one front and center over the curving bar that sweeps around the back of the set. Wooden chairs circle the sides and they're usually filled with musicians and actors. Walk into the NYTW before the show begins and you'll hear music as they casually perform classic old tunes, cheering each other on with gentle camaraderie. Making music is at the heart of *Once*, so why waste any time getting right to it?

It's not hard to spot our hero Guy (Steve Kazee) because he's the handsomest fellow around, though with



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a disarming charm that keeps him from being matinee idol distant. It's difficult to play what is essentially a very nice guy (in the movies you need someone like Jimmy Stewart or Spencer Tracy to pull it off) but Kazee makes him compelling throughout. Without any fuss, one of the people onstage urges him to sing a song and he starts and you realize the show has begun. He stands there with his acoustic guitar singing a moving ballad and the audience falls into a hush. By great good luck (I was seated stage right), I was transfixed by watching the Guy when the Girl materialized right over his shoulder in the large mirror over the bar, like an angel. I glanced over and she was standing on stage left near the audience, rapt with attention. It would be wrong to call the Girl merely a fan, but she believes deeply in the Guy's music and that motivates everything she does.

In some ways, Cristin Milioti has an easier part: Girl is filled with humor and such a focused energy that she must be a blast to play. ("I am always serious," she says flatly at one point to much laughter. "I am Czech.") But knowing that she also plays nicely and sings beautifully -- in an accent, no less! -- let's you know this part is no pushover either. We believe the Girl loves the Guy (who wouldn't?) but has a daughter and an absent husband she wants to work things out with. Her rectitude is the main barrier to these two coming together and it could be annoying if you didn't accept this as fundamental to who she is.

When the Guy is done singing, Tiffany and his team manage to create a very unusual moment in a musical: the song ends and you *don't* want to applaud. It's such a lovely, quiet spell they've crafted that you want it to continue. Time and again, they cleverly segue into the next scene or bit of dialogue after a song is over and downplay the desire to stop the action and clap away, which adds very nicely to the feeling that you're listening in on this story. This is accomplished by the entire creative team working in unison: the just-right set and costumes are by the great Bob Crowley, the crucial and marvelous lighting by Natasha Katz, the excellent sound design by Clive Goodwin and the lovely orchestrations by Martin Lowe.

Before you know it, the Girl has talked the Guy into repairing her vacuum cleaner in exchange for some music. She drags him not so unwillingly into a music store where the owner Billy (a fun Paul Whitty) is smitten with the Girl; he lets her play one of the pianos whenever she wants. She plays the Guy a piece by Mendelssohn and urges our hero to not abandon the guitar he tried to leave behind. (Confused and alone, he was ready to toss in dreams of making music after years of struggling.) Like us, Guy is falling for her hard, but she knows he has some unfinished romantic business, which turns out to be a girlfriend who has both moved to New York City and moved on romantically, or so it seems to him.

Magic strikes again when the Girl finds another song he's written and starts to play along to it. The Guy almost irresistibly joins in. The tune is "Falling Slowly," the Oscar-winning song that seems to be created right in front of us -- complete with harmony vocals by a Czech songbird -- almost on the spot, even though we've heard it numerous times before. Anyone who has ever had the privilege to see an artist create a song or perform it for the first time for an audience knows how special that can be. To allow that moment to happen again and again is a treat.

One curious fact about *Once* is that it's an almost conflict-free show. The overriding question is whether the Guy and the Girl will get together, but the Girl makes clear almost from the start that this is not in the cards. The other obstacles are hardly worth mentioning. When the Guy needs money to record a demo, they visit a bank manager; he turns out to be a music buff and is wowed by yet another wrenching gem performed by Guy. A band rehearsal gone awry is plagued by infighting; the Girl pounds on her piano and snaps everyone back into line. Billy threatens to back out and take his crucial drum kit with him; the Girl gets her sexy Czech friend to seduce him with genial ease.


So it seems like smooth sailing. Yet that would-be romance colors everything we see with a tinge of regret and sadness. Of course, that's often why people create music in the first place -- to capture and evoke and overcome those very feelings. The recording session, the finale and numerous other points allow a quiet release of emotion via the songs rarely allowed in more blustery, insistent musicals. It's a communal loneliness, a shared sadness and yet genuine joy at being able to acknowledge and celebrate pain.

Moving the show to a much larger house will pose problems but also an opportunity to tighten up and refine some of their decisions. First, I'm not a fan of intermissions if they can at all be avoided. *Once* creates such a fragile mood of intimacy that the interval is positively a detriment. It doesn't help that currently the intermission is followed by the artificial obstacle of a fight between Billy and the bank manager (Andy Taylor), two secondary characters. Broadway houses dearly love their intermissions but here's hoping they tighten the show and do away with this one.

It's easy to see why they include the rehearsal and the fight between those two, but it's not necessary. Plus, Billy should be toned down -- does anyone in real life actually say they do karate and then deliver those exaggerated hi-yah gestures? Billy will work just fine as a regular fellow who feels protective of the Girl. Don't play him so obviously for laughs and he'll be much more amusing (this is the script's fault, not Whitty's). On the other hand, David Patrick Kelly is spot on as the Guy's unassuming dad (and a fine musician; who knew?); David Abeles holds forth nicely as a musical focus before the show begins and the engineer at the recording session; while the women, from the Girl's mother Baruska (Anne L. Nathan) to Ivona (Claire Candela) and Reza (Elizabeth A. Davis) handle their parts deftly.

The magic of that first recording is marred ever so slightly by the rehearsal (which lowers the tension of the recording session a tad; it works better if it's the first time we see everyone play together) and by the reaction of the engineer. In the musical, he just stands stock still and then says the performance was great, whereas in the movie he had a more subtle chance to show how he was blown away. A very modest change of dialogue so he can transition from doing a routine job into getting very excited and very serious about this recording would be much funnier and satisfying.

Most of the movement (by Steven Hoggett) feels organic, which makes the Girl's scene in her bedroom listening to the Guy's music stand out in a bad way. She has headphones on and is suddenly mirrored by




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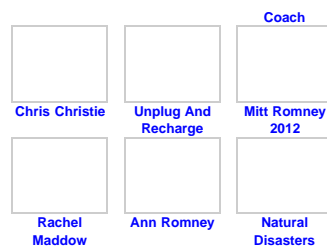
two others, dancing a rather arty and ineffective bit of choreography that doesn't look or feel remotely as natural as the other dance pieces in the show. In most other cases, the movement by Hoggett -- who teamed with Tiffany on the memorable play *Black Watch* -- is a model of simplicity that never calls attention to itself.

Less is more should be the mantra of *Once*. And if we're paring down, Andrej (the charming and funny Will Connolly) doesn't really need a big comic moment about not getting his promotion at the fast food joint he works at. Perhaps the creators were worried they needed subplots and extra conflict to beef up the story. But the tug of war between the hearts of the Guy and Girl are plenty. (I'm also not sure drummer Lucas Papaalias is as good as is necessary at his playing, though if anyone is going to be quick and easy comic relief the drummer is of course the natural choice; in his acting Papaalias keeps the beat.)

Further, there's the song the Guy sings on top of a cliff late in the show (there are no song lists in the booklet). Unlike almost every other tune, it doesn't quite nail the emotions of the scene at hand; consequently the movement of the cast below him is fine but a tad unfocused as well. It's the only number that isn't spot-on as far as illuminating or moving forward the action. Perhaps another tune is called for.

These small moments keep a very good show from being even better but they don't come close to spoiling the story. At the center of it are Kazee and Milioti, who create two complicated and moving people who fall in love with creating music even more than they do with each other. They're wonderful. How often does a musical allow you both a tingle of excitement over spontaneous creativity as well as deep emotion? Only *Once* in a great while.

[Here's the video for the song "Falling Slowly," just to remind you how lovely the music from the film was.]



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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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08:25 PM on 12/07/2011

I heard an item on NPR about this and I thought that the charm of the original was lost by casting such obviously professional Broadway voice talent. Much of the power of the original film's songs came from the raw, untrained nature of the singing. It's like an opera singer belting out "Blowing in the Wind" - technically superb, but loses the power completely.

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12:42 AM on 12/07/2011

Thank you. may I share another review from Brandon. I felt nothing could match ONCE and that it deserved its Oscar and more and that it is the best representation EVER of falling in love and more and was worried about it on stage but Brandon's review set my mind at ease. Coupled with other reports leaking, it deserves a Tony and more.

Brandon's review here:

<http://www.theswellseason.com/discuss/topic.php?id=1876>

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