

## Theatre Review: "Once"

By Kevin M. O'Toole



Weston Playhouse Theatre Company's rousing, engaging and thoroughly satisfying production of "Once," the award-winning musical that opened its season, begins in an Irish pub. Prior to the formal performance, patrons were treated to non-alcoholic ginger beer onstage alongside cast members who, each armed with a fiddle, mandolin, banjo, cello or other instrument, took turns playing various ditties and jigs. When audience members eventually took their seats, all were at ease and ready for the entertainment to come.

Set in Dublin, "Once" relates the story of a serendipitous encounter between a street musician, despondent over the girlfriend who dumped him and relocated to New York City, and a young Czech woman who is intrigued by his talent and needs to have her vacuum cleaner repaired. As it happens, the fellow moonlights as a musician, but spends his days working with his Da, fixing appliances.

In a way, "Once" is just a story about a guy and a girl who, through each other, find their moorings and get back in the game.

"Once" completely integrated actor and musician. Sometimes another, and then another would accompany the actor who began playing until full orchestral tones were heard in a setting where motley was worn. Director Michael Beresse's background as choreographer showed when supporting players synchronized gestures to the rhythms of the music. The final rendition of the show's anthem, "Slowly Falling," was haunting.

As the one who cursed his lot until overwhelmed by Czech force of will, Brad Standley wore his character's loneliness and then gratefulness openly. Standley's soaring tenor demanded that we pay heed. His onstage presence was matched by Julie Bendko as the earnest Czech woman who fell for him but, in the end, listened to her governor of familial obligations that required head over heart.

Every cast member doubled as stagehand when needed for set changes. Particularly memorable in the large ensemble of superb actor/musicians were Adam Huel Potter as Billy, a big Irish lug who fancied himself as a martial arts expert but with a bad back, Fred Rose as the bank manager from Cork with whom Billy had a row, and Bristol Pomeroy as our hero's Da. Pomeroy informed his character with a disarming graciousness.

Scenic Designer Meredith Ries completely transformed the stage into a neighborhood Irish tavern (albeit one with hooks for instruments strategically placed on the walls). Costume Designer Leon Dobrowski and Lighting Designer Seth Reiser's creations meshed seamlessly with the narrative.

"Once" was simply grand.

Performances of "Once" continue at the Weston Playhouse through July 15. For ticket information, call the WPTC box office at (802) 824-5288 or visit its website at [www.westonplayhouse.org](http://www.westonplayhouse.org).