

Theater review: ‘Once’ upon a time in an Irish pub

Jim Lowe | July 01, 2017
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Julie Benko (at piano) is the Girl and Brad Standley (forefront, on guitar), the Guy, in the Weston Playhouse production of “Once.”
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“Once” is unlike most Broadway musical storytelling, and it’s not just because it’s Irish — though that is largely responsible for the quirky but delicious plot.

Rather, the love story in “Once” emerges from a cabaret on stage where performers are both actors and pit band. And the result, in the Weston Playhouse production opening its 2017 main stage season Friday, was effervescent, fun and deeply affecting. Performances run through July 15.

Set in Dublin, this unusual romantic tale centers on an Irish street musician and a young immigrant Czech woman, described only as Guy and Girl. The Girl overhears the Guy

singing one of his songs and is smitten, but he is going to chuck it all because he's getting nowhere and his girlfriend, who moved to New York, has found another.

The Girl takes the Guy on as a project, not a romantic one, but to push him to success. But the Girl has her own issues, including a young daughter and an absent husband. Add to this tragicomic mix of Irish and Czech cultures — “I'm always serious. I'm Czech” — some great Irish music and you've got a unique theater experience.

“Once” is based on the 2007 film of the same by John Carney and, like the film, it has music and lyrics by Glen Hansard and Markéta Igllová, including the Academy Award-winning theme song “Falling Slowly.” Enda Walsh wrote the book for the musical, which opened on Broadway in 2012, winning eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical.

The Weston production, directed and choreographed by Michael Berresse, Weston's associate artistic director, was energetic and fast-paced, and benefited from a most talented cast. Each and every one was a fine instrumentalist, singer and actor, and some were fine dancers to boot.

Still, in this true ensemble piece, it was Julie Benko's Girl that proved the center of Friday's performance. Her simple directness, with emotions simmering underneath, made her irresistible and riveting. She sang hauntingly, and even delivered a credible version of one of Mendelssohn's “Songs without Words” on piano. (Faye Giordano was charming as her daughter Ivanka — this was written before Donald Trump became president.)

Brad Standley cut a perfect figure of the miserable Irish hero as the Guy, and delivered the all-important songs with passion. Although a bit monochromatic, Standley's Guy was the ideal self-loathing object of the Girl's sympathy. Most importantly, their interaction was convincing and compelling.

The remaining 10 performers, who played various roles, were amazing in their versatility. Notable was the excellence in the instrumental work as well as the singing, led by music director Adam Wachter. Still, most incredible was that they did all this simultaneously while creating convincing characters.

Berresse's ability as a choreographer was all-important. The performers were simultaneously actors, musicians and stagehands, and the movement was nearly seamless. It just seemed to flow.

Meredith Ries's staging set the action in an Irish pub — Lloyd's, after the Weston acting dynasty — but there were amazing subtle touches throughout, as with the lighting by Seth Reiser. The seemingly authentic costumers were by Leon Dobkowski.

Weston Playhouse's "Once" proved a wonderful and unexpected musical theater experience.

Weston Playhouse

Weston Playhouse Theatre Company presents "Once," the Broadway musical based on the 2007 film, June 27-July 15, at the Weston Playhouse on the Village Green, 12 Park St., in Weston. Performances are at 7:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, plus 2 p.m. matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Tickets are \$25-\$63; call 802-824-5288, or go online to www.westonplayhouse.org.