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SEASON

MUSICAL

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It felt to me that to do the movie justice, it needed just one thing — to be left alone.

*—Enda Walsh, playwright of *Once**

O*nce* started from a one-page outline based around a simple idea: an unnamed street musician in Dublin meets a woman on Grafton Street and that unnamed woman receives a piano at the end. Irish writer and director John Carney based the story on his days as a busker on Grafton Street, and when he had his eureka moment with the story he knew he had something amazing to say with it: “With this idea, with this story, I felt like I had finally managed to crack a story that would have universal appeal no matter which way you did it.”

While Carney originally intended the film would star Irish film actor Cillian Murphy, he asked his old band mate Glen Hansard for help with the songs in the film. It was while working with Hansard that Carney was introduced to Markéta Irglová, Hansard’s partner in the folk band The Swell Season. Seeing the two perform together one night, Carney made the decision to ask the then 17 year old Irglová to star as the woman. Murphy had concerns about acting opposite such a young, untrained performer and also worried his voice wasn’t a match for Hansard’s music and withdrew: “If I was in it, I think I’d ruin it a bit. I really think Glen should be in it.” Carney then went ahead and decided to have Hansard star, and shot the movie in a documentary style with the actors improvising many of their lines to put them at natural ease. Without a major star attached, the budget plummeted along with the film’s aspirations. Instead of a major movie, perhaps they could burn it to DVD and sell it alongside t-shirts and posters at The Swell Season concerts.

When it was rejected by every film festival apart from one showing at the 2006 Galway Film Fleadh, that future seemed inevitable. However, in a twist that seems right out of a movie itself, the Sundance Film Festival’s Senior Programmer was in the audience that night and recommended it for the 2007 festival. It ended up winning the World Cinema Audience Award and starting a journey that would take the film and its stars all the way to the stage at the Oscars where “Falling Slowly” won the Academy Award for Best Original Song. Hansard and Irglová gave an electrifying performance at on the broadcast that turned the song and movie into a bonafide hit.



Playwright Enda Walsh

Going from an independent film shot in 17 days for \$150,000 and starring two non-actors to a Broadway musical that would go on to win eight Tony Awards was an idea that shocked many, including Irish playwright Enda Walsh:

“You see, I love the movie *Once*. I’m a practicing misanthrope, but that movie turned me into a bunny rabbit. So when, in October 2010, I got the call from the producers asking whether I wanted to write a stage musical version[...], I was embarrassed. This was the end. I was a proper playwright trying to write real plays, trying to experiment with form! I mean, I wrote plays about death! A friend of mine was particularly appalled at the idea. When he heard I had been approached to write *Once* for the stage, he said it was ‘like someone giving Charles Manson the rights to adapt *It’s a Wonderful Life*.’”

Walsh expanded the scope of the stage production from the narrow focus the movie had on Guy and Girl, changed the nature of the Girl character, and created a setting where the actors would all play the instruments. The set was a working bar which served patrons before and after the show. The show opened on March 18, 2012 and initially had small audiences. Many were unfamiliar with the film, to the point audience members often asked star Steve Kazee at the stage door if he had written the music. As word of mouth grew, however, the shows began to sell out and those stage door crowds grew. *Once* ran for over 1100 performances on Broadway and won eight Tony Awards, including Best Musical. (Walsh’s embarrassment aside, it also won Best Book of a Musical.)

—HCTO Guest Dramaturg Mark Fossen, MFA



Poster for the 2007 movie, *Once*