



Once

Director: John Carney

Country: Ireland

Date: 2007

A review by A O Scott for *The New York Times*:

Periodically — about twice a year, by my calculation — someone tries to breathe new life into the movie musical by putting together a lavish song-and-dance spectacle like the ones they used to make, full of big numbers and bigger emotions. (See, most recently, “Dreamgirls” and, before too long, “Hairspray.”) Against this trend, “Once,” a scrappy, heart-on-its-sleeve little movie directed by an Irishman named John Carney, makes a persuasive case that the real future of the genre may lie not in splashy grandeur but in modesty and understatement.



Filmed with more efficiency than elegance on the streets of Dublin, Mr. Carney’s movie, a favorite at Sundance earlier this year, does not look, sound or feel like a typical musical. It is realistic rather than fanciful, and the characters work patiently on the songs rather than bursting spontaneously into them. But its low-key affect and decidedly human scale endow “Once” with an easy, lovable charm that a flashier production could never have achieved. The formula is simple: two people, a few instruments, 88 minutes and not a single false note. And this is true even if the main style of music is not quite your thing. The principal male character (Glen Hansard) — neither he nor his female counterpart (Marketa Irglova) are given names — is a street musician who favors the wailing-white-man-with-a-guitar mode of folk pop. His songs, full of ringing open chords and vague lyrics, are earnest and self-dramatizing. Their subject seems to be heartbreak, which he has recently suffered at the hands of a straying girlfriend who now lives in London.

This information is extracted from him by his new friend, a young Czech woman whose forthrightness he finds irritating at first. He fixes her vacuum cleaner (his day job is working in his father’s repair shop) and makes a half-hearted, bluntly rejected pass. But while there is an evident spark of attraction between them — Ms. Irglova’s teasing directness works beautifully with Mr. Hansard’s shuffling sincerity — “Once” is far from a conventional love story. It is, instead, the story of a creative partnership that develops by chance and that involves a deeper, riskier bond than mere sex ever could. She, it turns out, is a musician as well, a classically trained pianist with an interest in songwriting. Her professional prospects are, if anything, less stellar than his, since she lives in a small apartment with her mother and small daughter and supports herself by cleaning houses and selling flowers on the street. But she responds to his songs and is happy both to sing harmony and to write lyrics for one especially challenging tune.

It seems silly and grandiose to lavish praise on a movie whose dramatic crux is the recording of a demo tape, and there is some danger that the critical love showered on “Once” will come to seem a bit disproportionate. It is not a film with any great ambitions to declare, or any knotty themes to articulate. It celebrates doggedness, good-humored discipline and desire — the desire not only to write a song or make a recording, but the deeper longing for communication that underlies any worthwhile artistic effort.

The special poignancy of the movie, the happy-sad feeling it leaves in its wake, comes from its acknowledgment that the satisfaction of these aspirations is usually transient, even as it can sometimes be transcendent. Neither Mr. Hansard, who fronts a band called the Frames, nor Ms. Irglova is an established professional actor, though both are gifted composers and performers. Their guilelessness protects the movie from its sentimental impulses. A good song — even a bad one heard at the right moment — can cast a glow of enchantment over ordinary circumstances. “Once” understands this everyday pop magic about as well as any movie I can think of, and communicates it so easily and honestly that you are likely to want to see it again.

From: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/16/movies/16once.html>