ARTS

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'Once', a musical about an Irish busker (Glen Hansard) and a Czech immigrant (Marketa Irglova), shows how people can be ennobled by simple lives

Life underneath a suit and tie

FILM REVIEW
Freddie Sayers

Once

15 CERT, 85 MINS

The two adjectives "urban" and "urbane", so close in derivation and meaning, so different in connotation, reveal two totally different impressions of modern city life – and neither of them is particularly positive. Urbane means smooth, sophisticated, the fancy metropolitan aspect of city life that can so often be decadent and world-weary; urban, by contrast, speaks of danger, rough city kids, and the harshness and chaos of a concrete jungle. These are the two sides of the modern city we are used to seeing portrayed.

What a revelation, then, to discover *Once*, the new musical film by musician-director John Carney, which in its portrait of Dublin reveals a delightfully pastoral aspect of a modern city: a world of buskers and immigrant musicians which, if possible, is the exact opposite of both urbane and urban. Instead of smooth and sophisticated, it is naïve and sincere; instead of harsh and tough, it is sweet and harmless.

My only regret is that I was too urbane to fully appreciate it.

Funded by the Irish Film Board with a total budget of about £100,000 and completed in three weeks, *Once* is an unlikely success story. Written by a former band member of the (never very successful) Irish band The Frames, and starring his fellow band member and Czech musician girlfriend, it answers the question of how you make a modern musical in a simple way: the two lead characters are musicians, from different countries, and their relationship is primarily built on the music they play and sing with each other. Having won awards at last year's Sundance festival and received rave reviews, it has now been released in British cinemas.

The plot of *Once* is very simple: a thirtysomething Dublin street musician, out of luck and out of love, meets a young Czech immigrant worker who happens to play the piano. We never learn their names. He lives with his father and works in a vacuum repair shop, but hopes for a record deal one day; she sells roses on the street to pay for her mother and young daughter. She just happens to have a vacuum she needs repaired; he just happens to be able to fix it.

The best thing about it is the muted, almost childlike, way their relationship develops. It is delightfully un-Hollywood. Neither of them are great beauties – he is all ginger beard and teeth and she is (at best) pretty in a plain way; their dialogue is wonderfully unsmooth and direct; they don't kiss or sleep together (he asks if she wants to stay over, and she is so offended she won't speak to him for days); she is married, and he is still in love with his ex-girlfriend. But he decides to record his music with her piano and voice on top, and so they take out a loan, put together an unlikely band, and for one blissful weekend they are artists together – two souls, from different places, united, just once.

The big flaw, for me, was the music – decent, but hardly inspiring, trad rock. His voice is rather harsh on the ear – lots of slightly high notes, so screechy that it is awkward – and her voice is so tiny as to be inaudible. Even her much-vaunted piano skills were rather underwhelming. What is a dinky, touching movie could have been a great movie with better music; she needed to have an incredible voice, and play superb piano, and they needed one or two spine-chilling scenes where they click musically and magic happens. For me, there was no such scene.

Instead of refusing a loan request, the bank manager takes out his guitar and sings to them

And it is hardly gripping. The description by the director, "an extended music video", feels true at times – more than once I zoned out and turned my mind to other things. And more than once I had to fight off a wince at the sheer sincerity of it all – not another guy with a guitar, was the lingering put-down, ever present in the wings. The whole singer-songwriter thing, let's face it, is *so* younger sister.

But just about keeping my perilous urbanity in check, I managed to warm to them all. He takes her to a dinner with all his Irish busker friends, and there is tremendous warmth, as they all sing to each other, applauding and wishing each other well. Who does that in London? I can't think of a single dinner party I have ever been to which ended with sincere, gentle singing. There would always be a giggle, or an awkwardness. This is really a story about the age-old fusion of the Irish culture with the gypsy culture, and it showcases the warmth of both.

It is also a story about poverty, and people stripped back to their most raw selves. As a portrait of a modern city it is uniquely hopeful: here, people can find common ground across nationalities, and are ennobled rather than debased by their simple lives. In one funny scene, when they think their loan request for a recording is going to be denied, the high-street bank manager instead takes out his guitar and sings them his own compositions, before granting their request. The vision is pastoral and as old as the ages: underneath our suits and ties, our urbane airs and urban fears, isn't there a singer-songwriter in all of us, who just wants to sing, and live simply, and be happy?

Behind the swearing this is a masterpiece

THEATRE REVIEW
Peter Shaw

Glengarry Glen Ross

APOLLO THEATRE

Most people overcome their shock at the constant expletives of David Mamet's dishonest, insecure and crazed American real estate salesmen in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. They soon realise they are watching a masterpiece. Twenty-two years after it was first performed at the National, Mamet's analysis of ambition, avarice and desperation is still a terrifying commentary on the pressures that can turn ordinary men into fraudsters and thieves. That such a production can play to packed houses in the heart of the commercial theatre, with an excellent cast headed by Jonathan Pryce and Aidan Gillen, cheers me immensely, for this overwhelming and alarming play is serious work. It is even more encouraging that elsewhere in London belligerent plays such as Patrick Marber's *Dealer's Choice* and imaginative ones like Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* are equally popular.

Pryce plays Shelley "The Machine" Levene in *Glengarry Glen Ross*. He is a ruthless salesman who was once successful and now cannot close a deal. Consequently, he is facing the sack. Gillen plays the much younger Richard Roma, crazed with insecurity and greed. Their colleagues are equally aggressive, willing to trick anyone into buying anything, however overpriced and worthless. Pryce's anxious mannerisms are perfect. My own (much nicer) salesman father worked largely on commission, and watching Pryce I remembered the light flick of someone's sleeve to attract attention, the quick drumming of a hand to marshal thoughts, and the watchful, rehearsed patter. It seemed utterly real. Gillen is tremendous as he attempts to hang on to a contract acquired through bullying and seduction. Mamet's even-handed compassion for the reduction of human dignity in these harrowing lives has the power to transfix and engage us, but he leaves his characters dangling in midair.

Dealer's Choice

MENIER CHOCOLATE FACTORY

Tensions within a male world are also the theme of Marber's hugely popular play about a poker school, *Dealer's Choice*. Unlike in *Glengarry* these are defeated men, only hanging on for the chance of easy money on the turn of a card. Although first performed over 10 years later than *Glengarry*, the changing status of poker from seedy to glamorous makes *Dealer's Choice* more of a period piece. The jokes in *Dealer's Choice* are more bleak and desperate than in Mamet's play. We are seeing weakened men grinding themselves further into the dust.

However, the laughs make it bearable for the audience. There is a startlingly broad and enjoyable performance from Stephen Wight as Mugsy, the perennial loser. Jay Simpson plays Frankie exactly like one of those hilariously troublesome wide boys who made Sharon's life such a misery in *EastEnders*. The staging of the poker school itself is gripping and wonderfully theatrical, and two performances of great subtlety dominate the evening. Roger Lloyd Pack is the professional card player forced to exploit the lack of skill in this desperate backroom game, and he conveys exhausted anxiety brilliantly. Life has sucked him so dry he hardly has the energy to move. Malcolm Sinclair is spot-on as the austere restaurant owner, obsessively living for his poker game. Sinclair concentrates on the melancholic, self-lacerating pathos of his character, turning the final scene into a mesmerising insight into the terror of private defeat. *Dealer's Choice* is engrossing, and West and his excellent actors have turned a potentially old-fashioned and self-conscious bit of machismo into something very affecting.

Rhinoceros

ROYAL COURT

The audience at the Royal Court showed a remarkable lack of commitment to what was on stage. They seemed a jaded and fidgety crowd of chattering fashionistas, well-heeled locals and baffled tourists. In front of me a young American in his 20s fell asleep on his girlfriend's shoulder. She in turn wondered aloud to their female companion whether his jet lag might affect his enjoyment of *Spamalot* the following day. This is a shame, as Dominic Cooke's production is superb and ingenious. Benedict Cumberbatch avoids caricature as Berenger, the hero of this rather obvious warning against totalitarianism and conformity. While looking as if he is about to be sick, he strives to retain his individuality as, one by one, friends and fellow townspeople turn into rhinos and vanish into a rampaging herd. The rest of the cast act with enjoyment, as if auditioning for a French farce. The exception is Jasper Britton, who is tremendously scary in his transformation scene. The rhinos are great, crashing through walls and poking their heads through windows.

A classic, from the north?

THEATRE REVIEW

Hobson's Choice

TOURING

Maggie Hobson, who works in her father's shoe shop, comes to the conclusion that, if she is not to remain single for the rest of her life, she will have to marry her father's unassuming master bootmaker. Willie Mossop is not only her best choice – he's her only choice. With her brains and his hands she reckons they will make an unbeatable commercial team. Maggie, who is used to ordering people about and getting her own way, proposes – in one of theatre's great comic love scenes – and Mossop finds himself engaged to be married, his protests totally ignored.

Harold Brighouse's comedy is the most enduring and best loved of all the plays of the Manchester school of sentimental realism. Today, it is rightly considered a modern classic and regularly revived. But back at the beginning of the 20th century all the London theatre managers turned it down because they thought that audiences wouldn't want to see a regional play with regional accents. It wasn't staged in the West End until 1916 and then only after it had been a big success in New York. What Jonathan Church's production may lack in Salford grit and pathos it makes up for in charm, and it's nicely acted by Carolyn Backhouse and Dylan Charles. The father, a mean windbag and bully, is both a comic and a tragic figure. John Savident, physically so right for the part, full of self-pity and railing ineffectually at his daughters, looks as if he has stepped out of a cartoon in *Punch*. *Hobson's Choice* – likeable and generous, warm and homely – is a perfect family show.

Parade

DONMAR WAREHOUSE

This award-winning and provocative American musical relates a notorious miscarriage of justice in 1913 when an innocent man was dragged out of prison by a mob affiliated to the Ku Klux Klan and lynched in Atlanta, Georgia, for murdering a 13-year-old factory girl. The accused had two great disadvantages: he was a Jew and he came from the north. Anti-Semitism was rife and memories of the civil war still rankled.

Alfred Uhry's storyline is totally gripping. Jason Robert Brown's score, which mixes hymns, gospel and ragtime, is easy to listen to. The production is dramatically choreographed by the director, Rob Ashford. There are fine performances, especially from Bertie Carvel as the accused, Lara Pulver as his wife and Shaun Escoffery, in excellent voice, as his accuser.

Shadowlands

WYNDHAM'S THEATRE

C S Lewis, Fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, and author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, marries American poetess and divorcee Joy Gresham. But, at the age of 45, Gresham dies unexpectedly of cancer, leaving a 10-year-old son. William Nicholson's play is about faith and mortality and it opens with a question: if God loves us, why does he allow us to suffer so much? Lewis's mother had died when he was nine. Pain, he argues, is God's megaphone to rouse a deaf world. The world that seems to us to be substantial is no more than shadowlands. The real life has yet to begin. Charles Dance, following in the footsteps of Nigel Hawthorne on stage and Anthony Hopkins on film, gives a sensitive account of a long-time bachelor who fears emotional commitment. The divorcee (Janie Dee) has a nice line in American-Jewish acerbic wit. The production will have a special appeal for all those theatregoers who have been wondering if they will ever again be able to see a modern drama in which there is not a single expletive.

Robert Tanitch

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