

Once

New York Theatre Workshop
(212) 279-4200



Though *Once* is based on a movie, the show proves to be a powerful reminder of theater's "singular capacity to enchant and transport us," said David Rooney in *The Hollywood Reporter*. Enda Walsh's adaptation improves on the 2006 hit Irish film, "expanding its emotional breadth and elevating it stylistically"

while retaining the appealing fragility of its love story. The two leads, still named merely Guy (Steve Kazee) and Girl (Cristin Milioti), meet cute in Dublin and, while singing and playing some "emotionally ravishing" original music together, fall in love without acting on their emotions. Director John Tiffany stages their brief romance with such precision and thoughtfulness that "even the scene changes pack visual poetry."

Not everything translates well to the stage, said Ben Brantley in *The New York Times*. In the film, the "understated naturalness of the performances" kept the story from veering into cutesy romcom territory, but subtly "has never been considered an asset in musicals." That might be why Walsh



Kazee and Milioti: A musical bond

acquire the depth and mystery that they lack when delivering their spoken lines.

In the end, "it's impossible not to feel the love," said Adam Green in *Vogue.com*. Even when the script "falls into the traps of cliché, over-explanation," and forced whimsy, the show overall has a less-is-more aesthetic that's "almost cinematic." Likewise, the "soulful Kazee and the elfin, wide-eyed Milioti" have irresistible charm, and when they play and sing together, she on piano and he on guitar, they prove so well matched that "it sends shivers through the audience." Even though Guy and Girl part "without ever having even kissed," your sense is that "they've done something just as intimate."

God's Plot

Ashby Stage, Berkeley, Calif.
(510) 841-6500



Set in a small Puritan settlement in 1665 Virginia, Mark Jackson's new play "resonates with issues that Americans are still fighting about," said Robert Hurwitt in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Revolution was still a century away, yet King Charles II and his oppressive trade policies—which forced farmers to sell tobacco at a loss to a

few wealthy merchants—were already breeding resentment. This provided the fodder for what may have been the first play performed in the British colonies: William Darby's *Ye Bare and Ye Cubb*. Though the script no longer exists, we can easily imagine why a satire about a bear that refuses to give its offspring honey would ruffle some feathers. While Jackson's version of the old play "isn't much," the intrigue that surrounds the play's performance proves "inspired."



Lustenader's wayward Puritan

Jackson cares less about Darby's play than about creating "a rich portrait" of the community that gave rise to it, said Lily Janiak in *SFWeekly.com*. Each character is remarkably complex, from the charismatic playwright (Carl Holvick-Thomas) to the sanctimonious judge who tries Darby and his players

for sedition. Yet it's the judge's unusually bold daughter, Tryal, who really propels the story, throwing herself into Darby's play with the same fervor that she once gave to writhing public church confessions. As played by the luminous Juliana Lustenader, Tryal is the only character brave enough to call others out for their hypocrisy, and she does so "with all the righteous force of an underdog giving history's fat cats their long-due comeuppance."

The week's other openings**Lysistrata Jones**

Walter Kerr Theatre, New York
(212) 239-6200

Moving up to Broadway, this high-energy twist on a sex comedy by Aristophanes remains "mostly pure helium" said *The New York Times*. Even so, Douglas Carter Beane's peppy musical about cheerleaders and basketball players offers "tasty substance beneath the froth."

The Friends of Eddie Coyle

Oberon, Cambridge, Mass., (617) 496-8004
Reading George V. Higgins's dialogue-rich 1970 novel about a Boston gunrunner was almost like watching a play to begin with, said *The Boston Globe*. Watching this new stage version is just as heart-pounding. The supporting players are a little weak, but Paulo Branco "has the right moves" as Coyle. He's virtually electric.

Penelope

Steppenwolf Theatre Co., Chicago
(312) 335-1650

Enda Walsh's "delicious riff" on a subplot of *The Odyssey* is "one of those word-drunk, overstuffed shows" that keeps your head buzzing for days, said the *Chicago Tribune*. Walsh depicts Penelope's suitors as aging "wannabe Lotharios" in Speedos, deftly exposing the folly of their vanity.