



Grace Notes

A different kind of musical romance

ONCE: Written and directed by John Carney. Music by Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova. Starring Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2007. R. 88 minutes. ★★★★★

Once is a movie that simply begins, dropping its viewers into the dingy, beautiful, crowded Dublin of its inhabitants. It begins with a musician on a street (Glen Hansard), interrupting his performance to deter a junkie with an eye on the busker's coins. Shot plainly, unfussily, *Once* nonetheless is immediately immersive. The busy streets, the cramped vacuum cleaner shop where the nameless guy works with his father; later, dimly lit bedrooms and a sunlit recording studio, a dark apartment

and an ordinary music store, a sunset-dappled beach — all look as they would through your own camera's lens, undecorated, utterly real.

The product of three key talents — writer-director John Carney and musician-stars Glen Hansard (of The Frames) and young Czech songwriter Marketa Irglova — *Once* is aptly named. It captures a rare moment in time, an unexpectedly meaningful connection. *Once* is a love story, but it's also a look at a different but no less fulfilling relationship between two people who bring out the best in each other — creatively.

Forward and sassy, a pretty, smiling girl (Irglova) asks the guy, busking at

night, a question: Did he write the song he was singing? Yes? Why doesn't he play his own songs during the day? People don't want to hear them, he says. They want to hear songs they know. But she wants to hear *his* songs. A tentative connection is struck; coffee is had, a favor done. Guileless, she asks personal question after personal question. Who does he write the songs for? Where is she now? He asks if she plays music. She does; piano, but she doesn't have one.

Every bit of dialogue in *Once* is like this: a conversation that sounds like one you've had or heard before. Carney's film is a first cousin to last year's *Mutual*

Appreciation, which was equally low-fi, casual but taut with familiarity. Its song are vital to the meaning, the tone, the story of the film, but Hansard and Irglova don't simply burst into full-throated song (aside from one autobiographical, inspired bus-ride ditty); they wander into a collaboration with a borrowed piano, and as they piece together a handful of plaintive, heartbreaking melodies, the meanings in the music shift. Hansard's changeable voice and image-laden songs call to mind David Gray or Damien Rice; Irglova's fragile, girlish voice threads like a silver wire through the graceful, repetitive piano line of "The Hill." But you needn't care for this particular kind of music to fall for the people creating it.

There is more to *Once* than the initially tentative, ever-building relationship of the guy and the girl, as lovely and graceful as that is. There's the thoughtful depiction of ordinary lives, day jobs, bus rides; there's the nuanced creative journey the pair (with accompanying musicians) takes as they collaborate and then, finally, record some songs; there's the hope, the incredible hope, required to take the leaps that, at the end, are taken. *Once* is a love story about music, and a musical about love, but it's not the big, flashy kind of love or music that are often paired. It's the quiet kind, the kind you hug close to your chest like a journal full of confessions or a fairy tale that, to your surprise, rings utterly true. To watch this film is to feel as if you're eavesdropping on the moment that changes a life. It's an intimate, enchanting triumph of love and art. **EW**

Once opens Friday, July 27, at the Bijou.

Think Big

A new version of the cult film and Broadway musical

HAIRSPRAY: Directed by Adam Shankman. Written by John Waters, Thomas Meehan, Mark O'Donnell and Leslie Dixon. Cinematography, Bojan Bazelli. Music, Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman. Starring John Travolta, Michelle Pfeiffer, Christopher Walken, James Marsden, Queen Latifah, Brittany Snow, Allison Janney, Jerry Stiller and Nikki Blonsky. New Line Cinema, 2007. PG. 117 minutes. ★★★★★

"Good Morning Baltimore," the cheery number that opens *Hairspray*, contains elements not often found in movie musicals, let alone daily life. Atop a garbage truck sits Traci Turnblad (newcomer Nikki Blonsky), greeting the day with the enthusiasm of the seriously overmedicated. This is pre-Paxil 1962, mind you, so we're left to conclude that Traci, who's built like a linebacker with the voice of a 12-year-old, is *just being herself*. (Also that when you missed your bus in '62, you just hopped the closest refuse vehicle.) Before pausing for breath, Traci greets a trio of rats and an eerily familiar flasher — it's John Waters, director of the original film. But it isn't until John Travolta shows up in drag that everything falls into place: *Hairspray*, you realize, is the anti-*Grease*. It's campy and inclusive and purposeful. With its twin themes of race and obesity, *Hairspray* has a lot on its mind, but it doesn't ever forget to have fun.

You also realize early in *Hairspray* that this Baltimore is *white*. It's going to stay that way if Velma von Tussle (Michelle Pfeiffer) has anything to do with it. Von Tussle is the chilly white witch of Baltimore. As station manager of the TV channel that produces the popular Corny Collins dance program, she's committed to racial segregation. As a goodwill gesture, the program allows blacks to dance once per month, an event affectionately referred to as Negro Day, during which time the program plays "race music." In the meantime, where are all the black kids, you ask? It turns out they're in the detention room at school, where Traci finds herself following another tardy morning. In detention, Traci finds a sort of black *American Bandstand*, a rich dark center to the vanilla school she's known. At the insistence of a gorgeous boy named Seaweed Stubbs (Elijah Kelley), Traci learns how to get her dance on.

Everything is set for a very interesting Negro Day on the next Corny Collins show, which uses white rope to racially divide the dance floor. When Traci crosses over, a full-on interracial booty shake ensues — in other words, a regular dance. If Traci's plumpness



Amanda Bynes and Nikki Blonsky get their groove on in *Hairspray*

didn't ostracize her before, her progressive beliefs should take care of it. There's a ray of hope when Link Larkin (Zac Efron), the longtime object of Traci's affection, crosses the dance floor as well, after which Traci, emboldened, inspires the local blacks to march. *Hairspray* then becomes, briefly, a serious but alternative history of the civil rights movement, in which a young white girl helps to racially integrate Baltimore. Traci's mother Edna (a nimble John Travolta in a size 60 dress and lispy accent) is terrified, while her father Wilbur (Christopher Walken) knows he can't stop the future.

Hairspray is the child of two parents a generation apart: The sensibility belongs to the 1988 film, but the 2002 Broadway production provides the bulk of the music. That's as it should be: *Hairspray* the musical swept the 2003 Tony awards, including Best Musical and Best Book. The current film, although toned down from earlier versions — Traci doesn't end up in jail, for example — is nonetheless ably directed by Adam Shankman, a former dancer and the choreographer for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s "Once More, With Feeling." Pulling a rare double-duty, Shankman also choreographs *Hairspray*'s musical numbers, which aren't always equal to the songs themselves. Nevertheless, this sweet, intelligent film manages to entertain while making a point: Namely, that a person's worth begins deep beneath the skin, no matter what size or color that skin might be. — Jason Blair