

Review:

# Beautiful 'Once' at the Paramount, from artists who know this musical's heart



Barry DeBois and Tiffany Topol star in "Once" at the Paramount Theatre in Aurora. (Liz Lauren photo)

**Chris Jones** Chicago Tribune

Tiffany Topol and Barry DeBois are not new to “Once.” Both of the stars of director Jim Corti’s beautiful and moving new [Paramount](#) Theatre production were understudies on the recent national tour; they have lived for a good while in these gorgeously drawn roles, inhabiting two lovable, working-class characters, one Irish, one Czech, both poised on the ecstatic edge of Eros, but seriously stuck.

The glue is of their own invention. “Once,” which was written by the masterful Irish scribe Enda Walsh after the hit 2007 John Carney film that featured the music and personas of Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova, imparts lessons of life. One of its teachings suggests that life is random and unfair; pandemonium, even. For some of us, in our darker moments, are visited by an unselfish person who is so determined to lead us to the light that you wonder whether this is even a person at all, or maybe some kind of angel. Some of us are not so lucky.

This is a musical very much about love, which you might think describes most all musicals and, well, sure, but “Once” just ranges so much deeper than most in its exploration of love’s redemptive power. It might not come out and say that people are sent to us for a reason, but I’ve always left every production I have seen (and there have been many) with that feeling. The show is like leaving the house in the morning with your stomach coated with oatmeal.

I’ve written many times about “Once.” I love the piece so much, I feel weirdly protective of its truths, its power to move an audience. My affection comes from my admiration of the lyricism in Walsh’s book and from how the show managed to take a film and avoid each and every trap when it comes to adapting a movie for the stage. Original New York director John Tiffany threw away everything he did not need, and amplified theatrically everything he did.

When I first saw the show on Broadway in 2012, I [remember writing](#) that no other movie-to-musical adaptation had found so simple and rich a theatrical vocabulary, especially when traveling from one place to another. Now here we

are some six years later. Every movie studio now has a theatrical office. Yet, still, no one else ever achieved what “Once” managed. The only comparable piece is “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child,” which happens to be the work of the same director in Tiffany, and as juicy as that J.K. Rowling story feels in the theater, it does not come with anything close to the poetic book that Walsh penned for “Once.”

Corti’s production is, of course, different from the original staging. It is a tad more romanticized, a bit lighter on the comedy and heavier on the heart, which is fair enough. And despite the size of the house, Corti’s show actually is somewhat simpler. But the program credits Tiffany’s “original production concept.” We are still in an Irish bar; you can buy drinks on stage at intermission, as you could in New York; the ensemble of musician-actors is full of longtime veterans of the show, and the emotional key of the piece is strong and clear. It is most beautifully lit by Nick Belley, who finds soul in the shadows, and exquisitely sung under the musical direction of Tom Vendafreddo.

So, if you have never had the pleasure, and it is a great pleasure, this probably is your last chance to see “Once” in the Chicago area at this level, reaching out but still connected to its genesis.

*Chris Jones is a Tribune critic.*

*cjones5@chicagotribune.com*

**Review: “Once” (4 stars)**

*When:* Through June 3

*Where:* Paramount Theatre, 23 E. Galena Blvd., Aurora