

THEATER REVIEW

'Once' Again, With Feeling

More of a play with songs and a folk-pop score than a full-blown musical, this love story is both affecting and mature.



By [Terry Teachout](#)

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Matt DeAngelis as Guy and Mackenzie Lesser-Roy as Girl PHOTO: JOAN MARCUS

The commercial triumph of “Once,” which moved to Broadway in 2012, ran there for 1,168 performances and won eight Tony Awards, was one of the happiest—and least likely—theatrical success stories of the past decade. Nor is the story over yet: If you missed out on “Once,” or merely want to see whether it’s as good as you remember, Pennsylvania’s Bucks County

Playhouse is giving it a warm-hearted revival directed by Travis Greisler that's as satisfying as the original production, maybe even more so.

By all rights, "Once" shouldn't have gotten to Broadway at all, much less become a smash hit. It's a soft-spoken, small-scale show performed on an uncomplicated unit set by a cast of 13 singer-actors who play their own instruments. Nor is it a full-fledged musical: "Once," which is based on John Carney's 2007 film, feels more like a play with songs, and the folk-pop score, by Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová, is nothing special. And while it's a love story, it's a very particular kind of love story, a should-they-or-shouldn't-they tale of two Dubliners (Matt DeAngelis and Mackenzie Lesser-Roy) who fall hard for one another but have pressing responsibilities that pull them in opposite directions. A musical for adults, in other words, told with a forthrightness that's guaranteed to put a lump in your throat.

The plot is simple: Mr. DeAngelis's character, a vacuum-cleaner repairman and would-be singer-songwriter who has been painfully unlucky in love, can't bring himself to believe that his songs are good enough to make the grade. Then he meets Ms. Lesser-Roy, a Czech émigré in whose sincerity ("I'm always serious—I'm Czech") it is impossible not to believe, and her unswerving belief in his talent emboldens him to take a chance on himself. Of course Guy and Girl (that's how they're identified in the script) fall in love, but what happens next is the point of "Once," and Enda Walsh's book is so full of straightforward yearning that you cannot help but be touched to the heart by what becomes of them.



The cast of 'Once' at Bucks County Playhouse Photo: Joan Marcus

Instead of setting “Once” in a pub, which is where the original production took place, Mr. Greisler and Nate Bertone, the scenic designer, have placed their cast inside a large room that looks at first glance like a music store but turns out on closer examination to be the inside of a giant guitar, a truly inspired touch. The 11 supporting actors, all of whom are competent instrumentalists, make strikingly individual impressions, in the process gracefully underlining the comic aspect of the show (“Once” is *much* funnier than I remembered). Mr. Greisler’s staging and Misha Shields’s choreography are woven together so tightly and imaginatively that you can’t be sure at any given moment who did what.

Casting is critical in a show like “Once,” and the two leads are exceptionally well-chosen. Mr. DeAngelis sings Guy’s songs with such complete conviction that you’ll think they’re far better than they are. As for Ms. Lesser-Roy, who previously starred in a national tour of “Once” and thus knows the show well, she’s so affecting as Girl that you’ll feel no temptation to compare her to Cristin Milioti, who created the role on Broadway: She makes it her own and does so effortlessly.

Bucks County Playhouse, which is a 90-minute drive from New York, is a 1790 grist mill by the Delaware River that was converted into a 439-seat summer-stock house in 1939, closed down in 2010 after a protracted string of financial difficulties and reopened two years later. Now it’s one of the top regional theaters on the East Coast. Indeed, Bucks County is well on the way to becoming a bonafide destination theater, equipped as it now is with an excellent on-site restaurant. (In addition, a newly opened boutique hotel, the Ghost Light Inn, is located at the far end of the parking lot.) The repertory is light, as befits a summer-and-fall theater, but the quality of the company’s offerings is impressively consistent: I’ve seen four musicals and a play to date, all of them first-rate. Moss Hart, one of the local residents who turned Bucks County Playhouse into a theater 80 years ago, would be proud indeed to see how it’s grown.

Once

*Bucks County Playhouse, 70 S. Main St., New Hope, Pa.
\$65-\$80, 215-862-2121, closes Nov. 30*

—Mr. Teachout, the Journal’s drama critic, is the author of “Satchmo at the Waldorf.” Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com