DVD Select: 'Once' is so good, you should see it twice

by Robert_J_Hawkins

Every once in a while, a movie comes along that is so good, so refreshingly real and so honest and entertaining that it gets you through all those contrived studio products and reminds you why you pay those ridiculous prices at the ticket booth.

"Once" (Fox, 4 stars) is exactly one of those movies.

'ONCE' - 'Once' is a touching indie musical starring Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova. CNS Photo courtesy of Fox Searchlight. DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the $1 bin The story is a simple one: Irish boy loses girl. Boy goes into major funk and writes lovely, tragic songs filled with pain that he sings on Dublin street corners for change. Boy meets Eastern European girl. Girl kicks him in the subconscious until he awakens from his emotional slumber. Boy and girl make great music together. Boy misinterprets girl's intent and he makes a wrong move. Relationship survives clumsiness and more great music is made. Boy might even get original girlfriend back, if he's lucky.

The boy is the musician Glen Hansard of the band The Frames. The girl is a non-actress who has a lovely voice and pixie-tough charm about her, Marketa Irglova.

The movie is built so low to the ground it almost feels like a documentary. Filmmaker John Carney deliberately kept it so. He insisted on shooting on a budget that was less than $150,000 and he did it in a bit over two weeks with a 60-page script to stunning results.

Carney, a former bandmate of Hansard's, says he wavered between getting actors who could half-sing or musicians who could half-act. He decided to go with the latter. Further, he expected them to flesh out his spare script with improvisation.

Carney doesn't even give his characters names. Hansard is Guy, but it could as easily be guy. Irglova is simply Girl. She meets him as he's singing on a street corner and engages him in conversation about his songs.

In a way, you could call "Once" a contemporary musical. Hansard and Irglova spend about 70 percent of the film writing songs together or singing. Beautiful songs - available on a soundtrack CD from Sony Music. Buy it. Now. What are you waiting for?

Irglova and Hansard happen to be music pals on the Dublin scene in real life and that previous chumminess works to their benefit throughout the movie. And as Hansard notes in the DVD extras, for the 60 percent of the movie that's music, "that's the part where we're not acting at all."

In the end, "Once" is just a simple story, told well and true. I could keep on gushing for another 500 words but it won't do the film justice. You just have to trust me on this one. It is a contemporary love story in which the main characters barely touch hands - yet they connect on musical levels that we mortals can only wish for.

It's that good.

ALSO THIS WEEK

"The Simpsons Movie" (Fox, 3 stars) Of course the movie gets a high rating. After nearly 18 years of waiting, the anticipation has calcified in our systems. If the movie had consisted of Homer scratching body parts for 87 minutes, the experience would have been reasonably satisfactory for beleaguered fans. When the movie showed up on the big screen, it was an "event." At home, on the small screen, not so much an event. Still, funny enough. It even has a heavy-handed eco-message that Al Gore could get behind. It seems that a steady diet of crud, waste and mysterious canisters of toxicity has turned Springfield's lake into the most polluted in the country. One nudge would put it over the edge. Which is what Homer does, dumping a silo of pig waste into the toxic pool. The EPA seals off all of Springfield beneath a clear dome and an enraged citizenry decides to lynch Homer. Even his own family has had it. Homer goes from single-handedly destroying the town to saving it - which somehow makes him a hero in the end. I've never been able to figure out how that works - destroyer to savior to hero? Must be an ADD thing.

The story is OK-funny, but hardly a monument to two decades of creative toil. I will say that Maggie's first word is uttered on screen - "sequel" - and in interviews Matt Groening has vowed to make the next one much sooner. I for one will hold him to his word. I could go for a topical Simpsons movie once a year.

"Balls of Fury" (Universal, 1 1/2 stars) Somebody woke up one morning and the first word that came to them was "balls" - and from this a movie grew. At least I think that is how this double-entendre fest got going (actually, a surprising dearth of double-entendres). That person was surely a wunderkind producer in his early 20s with nothing to show for his salary and corner office. Well, now he's got "Balls of Fury." You just sort of wish the writers ("Reno 911," "Taxi," "Night at the Museum") and producers would have had the confidence to chuck a third of the dead-ball jokes - and try a little harder. A brutal, clandestine society of high-stakes pingpong players - "Fight Club" for pingpongers? - yeah, it is a funny concept. Come on, writer dudes, reach higher for low-ball jokes.

"TED: The Future We Will Create" (Docurama) Not a person, TED stands for Technology Entertainment Design, and it is an annual gathering of the great minds in the arts, science, politics, engineering and more. On this best of 2006 you can listen to Al Gore, Nicholas Negroponte, aerospace engineer Burt Rutan, musician Peter Gabriel, environmentalist Majora Carter, self-helper Tony Robbins, author/minister Rick Warren and more.

"Stardust" (Paramount, 3 stars) There's England, and on the other side of the wall, the magical land of Stormhold. That's where the fallen star has landed. That's where Tristan (Charlie Cox) must go to recover it and prove to the lovely Victoria (Sienna Miller) that his love is true. A most pleasantly pleasing and surprising fairy tale that deserves a place next to "The Princess Bride" on your DVD shelf. Claire Danes, Robert De Niro (Yikes, are you ready for his character?), Michelle Pfeiffer, Rupert Everett, Ricky Gervais, Peter O'Toole - and Ian McKellen as the narrator. What a cast. Pirates, soothsayers, an evil queen - all from a magical tale written by Neil Gaiman.

And the rest: The titillating tales-of-cheerleaders franchise rolls on with "Bring It On: In It to Win It" (Universal); Roman sword-buckler epic "The Last Legion" (Weinstein/Genius); Merry Christmas from Rob Zombie's putrid "Halloween" (Genius); Latino family's quest for honor in "Illegal Tender" (Universal); martial arts star Jet Li is at it again in "Fearless" (Universal).

IT CAME FROM TV

Serial killers, out this week: Pete, Linc and Julie make their long-awaited DVD debut as Season One, Vol. 1 of "The Mod Squad" unleashes 13 episodes; the kids grow up and graduate in season four of "One Tree Hill."

"The Adventures of Young Indiana Jones: Volume Two" (Paramount) A nine-disc set that takes the adventurer around the world - back when Indy was a boy and then a young man.

"The Bronx is Burning" (ESPN, 5 discs) The summer of 1977 and Reggie Jackson and those amazing New

York Yankees got the miniseries treatment on ESPN and is now yours in the, brace yourself: "World Championship Limited Edition." Lots of vintage footage of the real deal included.

FROM THE VAULTS

Mel Gibson's historical drama "Braveheart" (Paramount) is out in a remastered two-disc edition.

For its 25th anniversary Ridley Scott went back into the lab to cut up "Blade Runner: The Final Cut," (Warner Brothers) which you can now get in an aluminum "Deckard Briefcase" with the 1982 original cut, the international cut, the interim 1992 "director's cut," (which omitted the Deckard voice-over and the "happy" ending) and the elusive and radically different "work print" version. For the less arduous collector or fan there are two-disc (Final cut only) and four-disc (all but the "work print") sets.

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