

# Once there was a street musician and an immigrant who fell in love

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1 / 4 Guy (Peter Deiwick) and Girl (Amanda LeBlanc) share a moment in the musical *Once*, a tale of a busker and a Czech immigrant in Dublin that runs at Neptune Theatre till May 28. (TIM KROCHAK / Local Xpress)

People often say once, muses Donna Garner.

Once the kids are older.

Once we are through with our payments.

Once I retire.

But no matter how old people are, they need to look at what brings them joy, says Garner, who plays Barúška in the Neptune Theatre's season-ending musical [Once](#).

That may be relationships, poetry, sports or, as in the hit Broadway show based on the 2007 movie of the same name, music.

The winner of eight 2012 Tony Awards, including best musical, *Once* tells the story of a busker, Guy, and a Czech immigrant, Girl, living in Dublin.

"Girl has the best English in the family and she's out in the work world and meets Guy on the street. He's trying to be a musician, to break away from Dublin and see the world, but he's lost his way. He's grieving the loss of his mother, his girlfriends. He's stopped ... or maybe you would call it stuck," explains Garner, who spent 16 months playing *Baruška*, Girl's mother, in the musical's first U.S. tour. She reprised the role at the Ed Mirvish Theatre in Toronto in 2015.

"Through the music they teach each other how to love, how to have passion again," adds Jon-Alex MacFarlane, who was also in the Toronto production, then went on to tour with *Once* till it wrapped its tour in Boston in 2015.



*The 15 members in the cast of Once, which runs at Neptune Theatre till May 28, all sing and play instruments. (TIM KROCHAK / Local Xpress)*

A Halifax native who moved to Toronto after graduating from Dalhousie's theatre program in 1992, MacFarlane plays the bank manager who, like the rest of the 15-member cast, is struggling.

"He feels like he doesn't belong in the bank world, the 9-to-5 grind, he's worn down inside. He's an artist and wants to break out. He needs to express something.

"The underlying theme is music is the lifeblood that keeps everyone going."

The Halifax West grad was last at Neptune playing Mendel, the rabbi's son, in *Fiddler on the Roof* in the spring of 1992, so he's happy to return to Halifax where he learned to play cello through the school music program.

He plays cello and guitar in *Once* and everybody including Guy (Peter Deiwick, the original Gilbert in the musical *Anne and Gilbert*) and Girl (Annapolis Valley native Amanda LeBlanc), plays at least one

instrument.

LeBlanc, who graduated from Dalhousie with a double major in theatre and music, sings and plays piano and guitar.

Though she has been largely performing in musical theatre, this is the first time she'll play piano onstage. She has a piano solo and two big musical numbers and is feeling confident after a good rehearsal period.

Girl is a dream role and to have it happen in Halifax makes it really incredible, says LeBlanc, who was last onstage at Neptune in Annie in 2004.

She starred in Eastern Front Theatre's The Passion of Adele Hugo in 2011 but hasn't acted in Nova Scotia since then.

### Sneak Peek of ONCE at Neptune Theatre



"I love the film and I love the music. Glen Hansard and Markéta Irglová were amazing. It's a beautiful story and an opportunity to use many talents."

LeBlanc says she loves Girl's honesty and directness and how she puts others ahead of her self to a fault. She also appreciates Girl's love of music.

Once speaks very much to LeBlanc, who spent the last couple of years as part of the National Arts Centre English Ensemble.

"Even with success, there are obstacles external and internal regardless of profession."

Garner notes that with so many characters of all different ages and types, everyone will relate to the struggle of someone onstage.



Baruška, for example, is grieving herself and trying to let her daughter be a adult.

"(Baruška's) stopped too," says Garner. "I haven't learned the language. My husband committed suicide years ago and I haven't moved on. I become more open to being vulnerable and expressing myself with love."

Garner grew up on a dairy farm near Stratford, Ont., the youngest of 13 children in a home much like the Czech house in *Once*, loud and full of music. She plays accordion and fiddle in the production and is also the music captain.

She loves *Once* so much, and was so determined to perform at Neptune, she asked for, and was granted, a 12-week leave of absence from the *Sound of Music* national tour in which she currently plays Frau Schmidt.



*Calvin Laveck, Grant Landry and Jon-Alex MacFarlane in the chairs on the left, and Peter Deiwick and Cameron MacDuffee in the centre, are part of the cast of the Tony Award-*

*winning musical Once, at Neptune Theatre till May 28. (TIM KROCHAK / Local Xpress)*

One of the big draws is the music, which is not typical musical theatre and which won the 2013 Grammy for Best Musical Theatre album.

Garner and MacFarlane describe it as folky, roots, Irish-influenced and modern, adding the music makes the story more relatable.

"They are embracing so many things. When the text means so much, you can't just say it, you have to sing," enthuses Garner.

Once is also unique in that there is a ceilidh before the show. The performers start playing at 7:10 p.m. in advance of the 7:30 performance and do about half a dozen songs while the audience is invited to have a beer on stage.

"We've had people singing along and even step-dancing," says MacFarlane, while Garner notes someone once brought a flute onstage.

"I love to watch the audience. Most have never seen a theatre from the stage before and the best place to see a theatre from is onstage, there's a moment when they turn around like anything is possible," she says.

"When you sit in the theatre, you look at a finite point and when you get up here, the possibilities are endless," agrees MacFarlane.

Like a transforming love between a busker and an immigrant.

Once, directed by Neptune's artistic director George Pothitos, features musical direction by Scott Christian, set by John Dinning, costumes by Helena Marriott and lighting by Renee Brode.

It previews Wednesday and Thursday, April 5 and 6, opens Friday, April 7 and runs to May 28. Tickets start at \$30 and are available by clicking [here](#).

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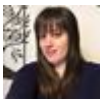
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Amazing show. ❤️

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Absolutely amazing show, it left me speechless.

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