

# ONCE IS NEVER ENOUGH

Ahead of the Australian premiere of the musical *Once*, **Jane Cornwell** meets musician Glen Hansard in a Dublin pub and asks how it all began



CARLY EARL

**I** REALLY do believe that the world rewards the courageous," says Glen Hansard, blues eyes flashing under rowdy red brows. "Cause out there" — he tips his curls at a window — "there's no protection. You might be robbed, beaten or killed. You might get your big break, or meet the love of your life. You're that exposed."

Here in the armchaired splendour of the Library Bar, a genteel drinking den in downtown Dublin, it's easy to forget that Hansard, 44, busked this area for five years as a teenager. Most days he'd pitch up on busy, pedestrianised Grafton Street, stand near his open guitar case and wield his Takamine acoustic like a weapon as he belted out tunes by his heroes. Leonard Cohen. Bob Dylan. Van Morrison.

"One time I was singing a song by Van when the man himself walked by and looked right at me," says Hansard, open-faced in jeans, checked shirt and desert boots, a beaded leather choker — the street performer's man jewellery — tied around his neck.

He flashes a grin. "The funny thing was, I was raising the money to go and see him play that night."

A singer, songwriter, occasional actor and self-confessed workaholic, Hansard has maintained his busker's aesthetic throughout a career that has variously brought him international renown, first-name terms with the likes of Van, Bob and Leonard and — since his role as guitarist Outspar Foster in Alan Parker's 1991 smash-hit flick *The Commitments* — household name status in Ireland.

"Glen Hansard? He's a good working-class lad," said my taxi driver en route from Dublin airport. "You still see him busking around."

It was an unorthodox school principal who sent Hansard, the third of several kids born to a hard-drinking ex-boxer and a housewife with a penchant for gambling, on to the streets with his guitar, aged 14. Told him he was wasting his time at school so he might as well kickstart his musical career, starting at the bottom rung.

"Grafton Street was all the education I needed," says Hansard, whose earliest musical memory is of his mother teaching him the lyrics to Leonard Cohen's *Bird on a Wire* as she bathed the then four-year-old in the kitchen sink. "Busking gave me everything."

He admits that playing struggling Dublin



Glen Hansard, main picture, and with co-star and former partner Marketa Irglova in the film *Once*

*Once* might have been enough for Hansard, who toured the world for two years with the Swell Season while taking part in an eponymous documentary that detailed the pressures of fame, the cracks in his relationship with Irglova and their eventual, inevitable break-up.

"When you take the struggle away from a man who only knows how to struggle," he says in his earnest, personable way, "I believe he'll just go looking for it. But I don't want to keep messing things up."

After touring the US as support act to his mate Eddie Vedder — who reached out to Hansard in 2010 after a man publicly killed himself at a Swell Season gig in San Jose — Hansard released an intimate 2012 solo album titled *Rhythm and Repose* that he recorded fast ("I didn't want to sweat the details") and swears he hasn't listened to since.

In the meantime, the stage production rights for *Once* had been snapped up by American producers and in 2012 the "quiet, delicate film" beloved of millions became a musical playing on Broadway. Critical reaction was hesitant, then effusive: "A modest little love story, played with fierce sincerity," declared *The Wall Street Journal*. "As vital and surprising as the early spring that has crept up on Manhattan," swooned *The New York Times*.

Adapted by celebrated Irish playwright Enda Walsh (*Disco Pigs*, *The Walworth Farce*) and award-winning theatre director John Tiffany (*Black Watch*), *Once* scooped eight gongs at the 2012 Tony Awards including best musical, best director of a musical and best book of a musical: "Holy shit," said Walsh, stepping up to accept the latter.

*Once* opened in London's West End last year; a production is touring North America. Next month the musical makes its Australian debut in Melbourne, with British actor Tom Parsons and Australian performer Madeleine Jones in the lead roles, and the city's Princess Theatre transformed into an Irish pub with a working bar at which audience members can purchase a drink.

So how does Hansard feel about the musical opening in Australia, which he first visited in

busker Guy in the surprise 2007 cinema hit *Once* wasn't much of a stretch. There, onscreen, is the bold charisma and whisper-to-a-roar singing style that Hansard honed on the streets. There, too, are hints of the real-life romance that bloomed with his younger co-star, Czech songstress Marketa Irglova, with whom he

founded folk rock act the Swell Season. "This is mad," said Hansard as he stood onstage with Irglova at the 2008 Academy Awards, clutching the Oscar for best original song for *Falling Slowly* from *Once*. "We shot this film on two Handicams. It took us three weeks to make. It's been an amazing thing."