



Three scenes from the London West End production of *Once*, which opened last year

the 1990s with his long-time backing outfit the Frames, and where he regularly plays sell-out houses? (In February and March he was back in the country as the support act to Vedder and to do his own solo gigs, many of which culminated in sing-a-long audiences following him out the door, Pied Piper-style.)

He sits back. "I've no opinion," he says with a shrug. "Honestly, it's not my project any more. I have songs in it, that's all."

I get a flash of the 20-something Hansard, with his red ponytail and sidies and flyaway curls, refusing to answer journalists' questions about *The Commitments*. Insisting the focus be on his work with The Frames instead. ("I might have overreacted a bit to make my point," he'll say later. "People were like, 'F..k you'. I get that now.")

But mindful that the Australian debut of *Once* is the reason he's talking to me — why he has made the half-hour journey into town from Pickering House, the rambling 19th-century home in County Kildare owned by brewery heiress and philanthropist Marina Guinness that Hansard has shared for years with a changing line-up of arty types including fellow former busker Damien Rice and, most recently, his filmmaker girlfriend — he tries again.

"OK, well, my first reaction to the idea of a musical was 'F..k, no!'" he says. "I mean, nothing much happens in the film. It would be so easy to wreck it. Mar was just as resistant as I was."

He name-checks Irglova, now a married mother of one living and working in Reykjavik, Iceland, where he recently sent her a new piano, and where he visits as much as he can.

"But our reluctance forced them to make good decisions. When I heard that Enda was on board I thought, 'Now we're on track,'" he says.

"I've always liked the idea of someone left field taking something successful and putting a new spin on it. Whenever people used to talk about a *Commitments* sequel I'd think, wouldn't it be amazing if Mike Leigh or Ken Loach did it? If the film started 10 years after the band split up, when they'd gone back to other jobs?"

He's pleased, he adds, that the stage version of *Once* turned out to be a sort of "anti-big production", with the actors pushing on the piano and generally interacting with the audience, and the music all happening onstage. Nice and simple. No smoke and mirrors.

He pauses and sighs, his gaze level. "I just hope that when it runs its course they will put it out to pasture and leave it alone. It's a nice piece of theatre. It would be sad to see it dragged out."

This won't be anytime soon. With Ronan Keating making his West End debut as Guy in November and productions scheduled to open in Seoul and Toronto as well as in Melbourne, the *Once* juggernaut — or for Hansard, jugger-



Madeleine Jones plays the female lead in the Australian production of *Once*, above; Hansard, with guitar, in the 1991 film *The Commitments*, below



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not — is only just gearing up. His relationship with the musical feels complicated. A few weeks after our interview, in Los Angeles to perform a headline gig at the Hollywood Bowl, Hansard gatecrashed the touring cast of *Once* at the Pantages Theatre for an off-the-cuff rendition of that traditional Irish party piece, *The Auld Triangle*.

For the past few months he has been taking time out to reboot and reassess, starting with time spent near Byron Bay, in northern NSW, just chilling and drawing and painting, water-colours mainly.

"When you call yourself a songwriter, the problem is that you have to write songs. For me painting is meditative. It's a good way of freeing up the hand and letting the lyrics come."

He has just written a new song called *My Little Ruin* ("It's me saying to a friend or a friend saying to me, 'Come on, pick yourself up, you're all right'"), which he's adding to a bunch of songs for a new album he's in the middle of composing in his head.

"The order of the songs is as important as the songs themselves. One song might change the meaning to the song before it, so I'm thinking about all that. Right now it's great to be afforded a bit of time."

The idea, he says, was to check in with life, with himself. "I don't want to look up when I'm 50 and think, 'You've done exceptionally well because you've worked hard in this area of your life but you still don't know who you are, and you still haven't had kids.'"

He checks himself, changes the subject. After I leave Dublin I read a rumour that Hansard's girlfriend is pregnant; either way, and especially after his very public relationship with Irglova, he's keeping this one private. He'd rather talk about other stuff, like the fact he's reading *Animal Farm* for the first time. That he has been taking photos with his old Hasselblad, and digging in the garden, and making tables — big, long kitchen tables — out of wood.

"I've always thought of songs like furniture," he says. "If you build them well, if the drawers open and close, it holds stuff and it lasts."

Some overzealous sawing and hammering meant that Hansard recently hurt his arm, badly enough to be treated by a physio. The best songs come out of struggle, I say, and he laughs before turning serious.

"Yeah, but you know, as much as I want to keep on writing great songs, I don't want to live a miserable life. So things have to deepen. I have to re-imagine what it is that I do. It's a difficult rebirth. The best way, I think, is to keep going out on a limb."

A smile. "Really," he says. "That's what all of us should do."

Once opens in Melbourne on October 4.