

“Once” to likely captivate audiences

Broadway musical bringing Oscar, Grammy and Tony award-winning magic to TheatreZone

BY LARRY ELL
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Elite standing is conferred upon entertainers who achieve the prestigious EGOT status, which is winning an Emmy, Grammy, Oscar and Tony award.

That rare-air pedigree is nearly equaled by the Broadway show “Once,” now being brought to the TheatreZone stage in Naples. The fan-favorite has won eight Tony awards, including Best Musical, an Oscar for Best Original Song and a Grammy for Best Musical Theatre Album. The well-decorated production will kick off the theater’s 20th season.



DANNI

The musical is under the direction of Mark Danni, founding artistic director of TheatreZone, choreographed by TheatreZone’s Associate Artistic Director Karen Molnar Danni, with music direction by Charles Fornara.

“I have always loved the music and story to ‘Once’ ever since I saw it on Broadway,” said Mark Danni. “I knew it would be a wonderful musical for TheatreZone’s stage, and we have an amazing cast of actor-musicians.”

Based on the 2007 film of the same name, “Once” is a romance set in Ireland with a multi-talented cast who are also the show’s on-stage orchestra. It chronicles the poignant story of Guy, a talented but struggling street musician, and Girl, a free-spirited Czech immigrant with a passion for music. When their paths cross, they embark on a whirlwind romance that inspires them to pursue their dreams. As they navigate the ups and downs of life and love, their music becomes a powerful expression of their emotions and aspirations.

“I’ve never done it before. I saw it on Broadway, and it just really resonated with me. I knew it would be beautiful on my stage,” Mark Danni said. “I knew it was going to be a challenge because all the actors have to play certain instruments. So not only do you have to have really good actors who can sing and do an Irish accent or a Czech accent, but also certain ones have to be able to play guitar, piano, cello, violin, ukulele and accordion. So yeah, it’s a challenge to cast.”

The score of “Once” is characterized by fast-paced, jubilant Irish rhythms combined with lush, soulful ballads. Cast members play a number of different instruments as the score builds during the



COURTESY PHOTOS

Like the character he plays on stage in “Once,” Cody Craven is a passionate guitarist and songwriter.

show from piano and guitar to a full orchestra.

In a very real sense, the music of “Once” is a character in its own right. The hauntingly beautiful score blends folk, rock and pop influences. The musical’s iconic songs, including the Academy Award-winning “Falling Slowly,” along with “Leave” and “When Your Mind’s Made Up,” will transport audiences to the streets of Dublin and into the hearts of the characters.

TheatreZone’s production of “Once” boasts an impressive cast of talented performers, each bringing their unique voice and perspective to the story. While Cody Craven is no stranger to “Once,” his portrayal of Guy will mark his TheatreZone debut. The California-based performer, actor and musician has done the show so many times he’s jokingly referred to as “Mr. Once.” The TheatreZone production will be his sixth performance in the musical.

“Once’ is closer to my heart than any show, and I would happily do it for the rest of my life,” Craven said.

While performing recently in a production of “Million Dollar Quartet” in Indianapolis, Craven learned from fellow actors about TheatreZone’s production of “Once” and their praise for the theater’s intimate setting.

“The small space will really accentuate the subtle and intimate details of the story,” he said.

Like his character, Craven plays mul-



CRAVEN

multiple string instruments as well as drums. The self-taught musician was playing mandolin at 4 years old. An actor-musician by trade (his father is international folk musician Joe Craven), he now plays and writes music with his band in New York City and other regional venues. He has also been seen performing at sea for cruise lines including Norwegian, Oceania and Disney.



SMITH

Lexi Rae Smith is making her TheatreZone debut in “Once” in the starring role of Girl. The Chicago native is a professional actress, singer and dancer based in Fort Myers, who earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Point Park University in Pittsburgh. Smith has had “Once” on her radar for a long time after seeing the movie and studying the show in college. In her TheatreZone role, she speaks English with a Czech accent, using her facility with dialects, which she studied in college and continues to pursue with IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet).

“Once’ examines the different stages of love,” Smith said. “It is made of small moments that don’t always last a lifetime, which is why it’s called ‘Once.’ Girl has a strong sense of self and sees the best in everyone. She is a young mother, which enhances her sense of empathy for the heartbroken Guy and drives her to encourage him to write songs and record.”

Along with the challenge of assembling a cast capable of handling the complex demands of the roles, Mark Danni will strive to distinguish his production by adding his own creative touch to a well-known and well-loved show.

“You always end up putting your own stamp on it because the design on Broadway was an original that is owned by whoever designed the Broadway production,” Mark Danni said. “So it really starts more with an idea based on the show that you always remember from the time you first saw it on Broadway. You understand that, but it’s really your own take on it. This show leaves a lot of flexibility. It’s a conceptual show to start with, so it’s already lending itself to whatever concept you want to come up with.”

TheatreZone’s production of “Once”

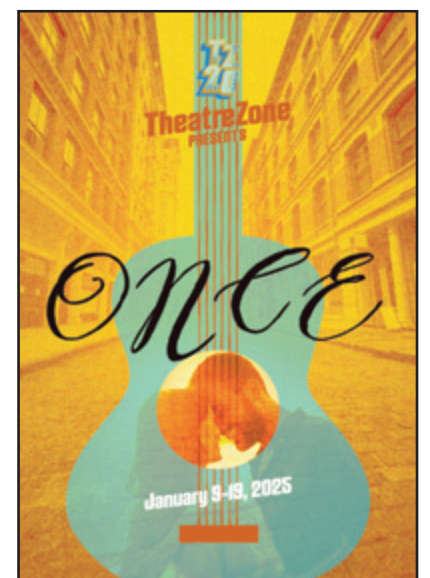
promises to be an immersion that transforms the theater into the streets of Dublin and transports the audience to the world of the musical. It’s a must-see production for anyone who has ever been touched by the power of music, love and fate. With its talented cast and stunning music, this production promises to leave audiences humming the tunes and savoring the opportunity to experience the magic of this timeless tale.

“Southwest Florida audiences love Broadway, they love theater, they love musical theater,” Mark Danni said. “So they’re very responsive to coming and seeing mainstage shows. Our audiences tend to try new things, but this is a very special show and I think it deserves to be seen.”

“Once” performances are scheduled for 7:30 p.m. from Thursday, Jan. 9 through Sunday, Jan. 12 and from Thursday, Jan. 16 through Sunday, Jan. 19. Matinee performances are at 2 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays, Jan. 11, 12, 18 and 19.

After the final curtain call on the evening of Jan. 16, the audience can settle back in their seats for a talkback, an opportunity to meet the show’s cast and directors for candid and casual Q&As. The talkback is offered at no additional charge, and separate tickets are not required. The audience can enjoy the talkback with refreshments from the honor bar. ■

In the KNOW



“Once”

- **When:** Jan. 9 to 19; 2 p.m. matinees and 7:30 p.m. evening performances
- **Where:** TheatreZone, 13275 Livingston Rd., Naples
- **Tickets:** Shows start at \$50
- **More info:** <https://theatre.zone> or 888-966-3352

ARTS BRIEFS

From page 5

January exhibitions at The Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center

The Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center announced two new art exhibitions during January. The Grand Atrium hosts a group exhibition titled “Brewing Expression: Coffee, Paintings, and Poetry,” curated by Reynier Llanes. The second floor Capital Gallery will exhibit the second series of an immersive installation by Israel Alpizar and SBDAC titled “Panoramica: Curio Dream.” Both shows will be on display through Jan. 30.

Llanes’ coffee ink paintings are described as vivid dreams where spirituality and daily life intertwine, as noted by Janet Batet in the Olga M. & Carlos Saladrigas

Art Gallery catalog. The exhibition, inspired by Hispanic cultural heritage and coffee’s significance, initiates a dialogue about the human odyssey and home. Using coffee on paper, Llanes evokes emotional resonance linked to his upbringing and the aroma of espresso.

The event features coffee-on-paper paintings and complementary poems, exploring cultural heritage through a multi-sensory experience. Curated poems highlight contributions from the South Florida community, focusing on preserving cultural traditions amidst migration. In a creative gesture, invited writers hand-transcribed their poems with coffee ink, reflecting the painting technique. Featured poets include Antonio Tillis, Ricardo Pau-Llosa, Rosie Inguanzo and many others.

As guests enter the second floor of the Capital Gallery, they will be immersed in the second rendition of a visually transforming multimedia projection show titled “Panoramica: Curio Dream.” The fusion of visual aids, special effects, installations and projection mapping technology creates imaginative landscapes for guests to delve into a world of multi-sensory meditation. The installation is set to soothe viewers into a dream-like state. Alpizar utilizes the gallery space to provide a visual journey that will weave a path into the curiosity of dreams and surreal landscapes. From the whimsical to the extravagant, it’ll be a spontaneous voyage to rare, bizarre and dreamy visuals.

For more information, call 239-333-1933 or visit the website at www.sbdac.com. ■



COURTESY PHOTO

Reynier Llanes.