

In 'Girl From the North Country,' Rolling Stones Gather Regrets

By [Ben Brantley](#), JULY 26, 2017



Sheila Atim, left, and Shirley Henderson in "Girl From the North Country" at the Old Vic Theater in London. Credit Manual Harlan

LONDON — The Irish playwright Conor McPherson has gone a-wanderin' in a Minnesota of the mind, a bleak and soulful place conjured by the songs of [Bob Dylan](#). As portrayed in “Girl From the North Country” — the truly sui generis new work written and directed by Mr. McPherson, with a multitude of songs by Mr. Dylan — this cold corner of the United States is a place where it is all too easy to lose your way.

That’s certainly true for the angry and bewildered characters in this strange theatrical hybrid of soaring music and thudding dialogue, which opened on Wednesday night at the [Old Vic Theater](#) here. As for Mr. McPherson, one of the greatest dramatists working, he, too, seems to be traveling through the dark without a compass.

Such helplessness has always been the natural state of the people who inhabit Mr. McPherson’s plays, which include the unsettling masterworks [“The Weir”](#) and [“Shining City.”](#) These folks are a haunted breed, mortally lonely yet dimly aware of a connection to some indefinable otherworld. Song often becomes their conduit to that unmapped place, and I shall never forget the fleeting transcendence achieved in his [“The Night Alive”](#) by four whacked-out wastrels dancing to Marvin Gaye.

That same subliminal beauty, as rousing as it is heartbreaking, shimmers through “Girl From the North Country” whenever its performers raise their voices in songs (culled from every phase of Mr. Dylan’s long career), finding a holy rhythm that reality denies their characters.

Yet the gap here isn’t just between the drab lives and the opalescent music. It also yawns between the thrill of this production when it sings and its perversely melodramatic flatness when it’s behaving like a traditional play.



Arinze Kene, center, in Conor McPherson’s “Girl From the North Country.” Credit Manual Harlan

“Girl” is a boardinghouse drama, a gathering-of-archetypes genre that was popular in the first half of the 20th century. (Its upscale equivalent is a movie like [“Grand Hotel.”](#)) This particular boardinghouse is in Mr. Dylan’s hometown, Duluth, Minn., and it is a wintry autumn in 1934 during [the Great Depression](#).

That’s seven years before Mr. Dylan was born, and roughly two decades before he began composing the songs that would win him the [Nobel Prize in Literature](#) in 2016. (Mr. McPherson had been approached by representatives of Mr. Dylan about the possibility of using his songbook in an original production.)

Mr. Dylan may be forever associated with the folk-protest movement of the 1960s. But his work’s populist melancholy and anger (and acoustic-guitar-friendly melodies) fit smoothly into the abject American prairiescape of the mid-1930s, especially with the enhancement of Simon Hale’s glorious retrofitted orchestrations. Embodied by a fine cast led by Ciaran Hinds, the denizens of “Girl” definitely feel — well, you know — like they’re on their own. With no direction home. Like complete unknowns.

These rolling stones (referring to one of Mr. Dylan’s best-known songs, memorably performed here by Shirley Henderson) gather no moss but accumulate lots of regrets. They are assembled for one thankless Thanksgiving under the roof of Nick Laine (Mr. Hinds); his demented wife, Elizabeth (Ms. Henderson, in a compellingly visceral performance); their alcoholic, literary son, Gene (Sam Reid); and their adopted daughter, Marianne (a mesmerizing Sheila Atim), who may or may not be pregnant.

Their roomers are a shady man of the cloth (Michael Shaeffer), a former boxing champion (Arinze Kene), a comely widow (Debbie Kurup) and a once prosperous couple (Stanley Townsend and Bronagh Gallagher) and their son (Jack Shalloo), a strapping man with the mind of a child. Visitors include an old shoemaker (the Tony Award-winning McPherson veteran Jim Norton), who seeks Marianne’s hand in marriage, and the town doctor (Ron Cook), who stills his anxieties with morphine and delivers cosmic commentary directly to the audience.

These nomadic folks have scarcely a dollar among them, but their secrets are dark and manifold. If you know classic American theater, you’ve met them before. With its mix of down-home coziness and violent desperation, “Girl” brings to mind a fraught collaboration by Thornton Wilder and Eugene O’Neill, with a dash of William Saroyan’s whimsy.

As they stumble into collision, the members of this provisional family of losers bear a crippling burden of lost loves, past crimes and concealed identities. Like most of Mr. McPherson’s characters, they are ravenous for intimacy and mortally alone. But in expressing these feelings, they seem to be simultaneously and clumsily translating from another, more graceful language.

Here’s Nick on his financial state: “I don’t find that money, the banker gonna take everything. We’ll be like dust in the wind here.” Or one character saying to another why their having sex isn’t a good idea: “We’d be like two lonely beasts in the field.”

Now compare those sentences to a line like this: “Freedom just around the corner for you, but with the truth so far off, what good will it do?” Not so different, eh? Except that it wasn’t written by Mr. McPherson; it’s from Mr. Dylan’s “Jokerman.”

It sounds a lot better set to music. And I have the feeling that Mr. McPherson, in writing his dialogue, may have been overly infected by Mr. Dylan’s lyrics, which are far more credible sung than spoken.

Not surprisingly, then, it’s when the characters sing that “Girl” acquires the numinous glow associated with Mr. McPherson’s plays. These numbers — from vintage ([“I Want You,”](#) “Forever Young”) to recent ([“Duquesne Whistle”](#)) — occur with merciful frequency, and Mr. McPherson doesn’t try to link them directly to the plot, in the style of the musical “Mamma Mia!”

Instead, without conventional segues, the performers pick up instruments, gather around microphones and move with the blessed synchronicity of people ineffably tuned into one another. Standing in their weathered period costumes against Rae Smith’s wide-open space of a set (starkly lighted by Mark Henderson), they belong both to a very particular time and place and to a wondering eternity.

They’re not just singing Bob Dylan songs. They are giving eloquence to wounded, inarticulate souls from a lost era that, for the moment, feels achingly like the present.