

Ballads of Bob make for a Dylan delight: QUENTIN LETTS watches *Girl From The North Country* at The Old Vic

By [Quentin Letts for the Daily Mail](#), 28 July 2017

The Old Vic's new Bob Dylan musical — which isn't really a musical — is easy on the ears and has a few lovely moments.

I enjoyed it a great deal more than some of the stuff that has opened recently in London, even if its artistic truth is on a par with a pop music video rather than anything more profound.

Twenty Dylan songs — performed in a folky manner by actors in their characters — have been draped around a sort-of-play by Conor McPherson.

The story is set in an early 1930s guesthouse in Minnesota (Mr Dylan's home state). The proprietor of this 'two-bit fluffhouse', Nick Laine (Ciarán Hinds), is close to bankruptcy and his guests are in various stages of crisis and decay.

The starkness of a black-sided stage is occasionally relieved by illustrated backdrops, the band unobtrusive but visible. Actors occasionally come out of character to perform as backing singers.

In a traditional musical, the songs help to develop the plot; here, they merely match the mood of the character involved. It, therefore, does not matter much that some of the lyrics are indistinct.

The important thing is you soak up the vibes and look for value in Dylan's music away from the man himself.



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It doesn't work all the time — he is less of a lyricist than the late Leonard Cohen was — but the enterprise is bold and honourable.

The best moments occur when the songs are most closely adjacent to the storyline. Thus, when Laine's adopted teenage daughter Marianne — pregnant by an absent man — sings 'Has anybody seen my love?', it works as a dramatic moment. This is sung beautifully by Sheila Atim, a tall and fascinating presence, surely bound for big things.

Later there comes a touching rendition of *Is Your Love In Vain?* by a middle-aged couple in distress. This moment is made all the better by Stanley Townsend's unaffected bass, as deep as the Liffey.



Stanley Townsend (Mr Burke), Arinze Kene (Joe Scott) and Bronagh Gallagher (Mrs Burke) in *Girl From The North Country*

There is quite a lot wrong with this show. Shirley Henderson is dreadfully miscast as Laine's dementia-afflicted wife. She is too young, too busy, a fiddlesome bag of upstaging. Her performance almost torpedoed the production, and how the admirable Mr Hinds did not throttle her in rehearsals, I can scarce imagine.

That hoary old fellow Ron Cook doubles as a town doctor and as a narrator, the latter being a dramatic cop-out by writer McPherson.

Mr Cook's closing monologue is hilariously corny. The dialogue has some unnecessary swearing and Depression-era America is never quite evoked.

Yet the evening gives you glimpses of love and hope amid troubles. Most of all, the show has a heart, and in that spirit of generosity, I suppose it just earns its fourth star.