

Girl from the North Country review: This Bob Dylan musical will leave his fans in raptures

By David Butcher, Friday 28 July 2017

You don't need to be into Bob Dylan's music to get bursts of pleasure from Conor McPherson's new play. But if you do happen to be a Dylan fan, boy are you in for a treat.

Set among the transient guests at a depression-era boarding house in Minnesota, *Girl from the North Country* is sparsely plotted, a group of lightly drawn character sketches that drift by, offering hints of more tragedy than we see.

There's a boxer on the run from trouble, a dodgy bible salesman, a widow waiting for her inheritance, a couple whose simple-minded son is more than they can handle, a kindly doctor, an elderly shoe-shop owner, and so on. We could gladly spend a whole, binge-worthy Netflix series with these people, but instead we just see glimpses of their longings and disappointments, lit up gorgeously by Dylan's songs.

Presiding over the action are Nick, the debt-ridden owner of the flophouse (Ciaran Hinds), and his wife Elizabeth, who is succumbing to dementia (though in Shirley Henderson's hands, it's the sexiest, cheekiest dementia you'll ever come across.)



Shirley Henderson and Michael Shaeffler (photos by Manuel Harlan)

Their no-good son Gene is a would-be writer with a drink problem. Their adopted daughter Marianne is pregnant but without a partner, leading to a rendition of *Tight Connection to My Heart* in which Sheila Atim keeps the refrain, "Has anybody seen my love?" to devastating effect.

That's the show's first heart-melting high point but there are more. The story goes that Dylan's record company approached McPherson with the idea of a show using the songs and the playwright declined. When he eventually agreed, a package containing 40 albums arrived at his door: he could use whatever he liked, however he liked.

What he chose comes mostly from the 1970s and 80s, often with two or three songs merged together. The boxer sings *Hurricane* (as you might expect); Gene sings *I Want You* – one of the all-time great songs of yearning – to his girlfriend, who is moving on to better things. But mostly the links between songs and story are oblique – they don't move the action along so much as comment on it, like reveries the characters are dreaming.

Jokerman is used twice to haunting effect. Henderson, radiant in orange dress and period shades, delivers a thoroughly belting version of *Like A Rolling Stone* - though how it relates to her story is anyone's guess. And towards the end the sweet, skipping *Duquesne Whistle* becomes almost a revivalist anthem then slips into a reading of *Is Your Love in Vain* that is wonderfully re-figured by Stanley Townsend's bass.

If I have one cavil, it's in the surface appearance of the show. The characters talk about being poor but never look it. It's hard to buy into the idea of 1930s hardscrabble poverty when the denizens of Nick's place look so groomed and dapper, like a well-heeled literary gathering.

But the music, ah the music. The arrangements and the on-stage band are impeccable, giving well-worn songs a shot of soulful energy. Cut loose from Dylan's treatments, they take on a life of their own, as standards of the future and worthy part of the great American songbook.

Having seen Dylan live this year, I can vouch for how maddeningly slapdash his own renditions can be. So instead of shelling out for his next hit-or-miss tour, get a ticket for *Girl from the North Country* – and if they release a cast album, buy that too.