

Girl from the North Country at the Old Vic

By [Connor Campbell](#), 28th July 2017



Labelling something a “play with music” smacks of snobbery, the creators and marketing team alike keen to separate what’s on offer from the jukebox musicals that clog up the West End. Yet in the case of *Girl from the North Country* it’s a pretty good description. Writer/director Conor McPherson eschews most of the genre baggage – especially the practice of clumsily turning popular songs into exposition – instead treating Bob Dylan’s music as a thematic companion to his Great Depression-era drama.

The setting, a guesthouse in 1930s Duluth, lends the production a short story collection-style structure. Itinerant boxers, bible salesmen, widows and wasters end up at the Laine family’s inn, all invariably bringing with them their own share of money troubles. It’s a hell of a lot of characters for a relatively short “musical”, however, so many in fact that threads get introduced and dropped in the space of a scene.

One can’t help but feel the whole experience would have been far richer if the playwright had focused on the Laine family. When the (excellent) ensemble is in full force everything is a bit too romantic, the humour a bit too warm. Winnow in on patriarch Nick’s dogged attempts to keep the guesthouse afloat – or the way his wife Elizabeth, suffering from dementia, is lost to the world – and the desperation and poverty of the time become so much more acute.

That’s in no small part because Ciaran Hinds and Shirley Henderson are incredible. The latter wriggles around the stage like a sprite, so often in her own fantasy land. And then she sings and clarity descends; *Like a Rolling Stone* tears through the character’s confusion, Dylan’s rambling masterpiece a vessel for all the thoughts Elizabeth is unable to articulate.

As for Hinds, he manages to shine despite never singing a single note. Be it from a practical – maybe the actor just can’t hold a tune – or narrative standpoint, the decision to have Nick remain

silent is genius. He isn't allowed the moment of catharsis others find in song; instead Nick is always rushing about, a man afraid to stop in case his world finally crumbles around him.

Simon Hale's arrangements are stunning, from the yearning of *I Want You* to the ensemble-stomper of *Hurricane*, while Rae Smith's picture panel design, all sparse furniture and darkness, reinforces the absences at the heart of each story. *Girl from the North Country* is far greater than the sum of its narrative parts, even if this does mean leaning on Dylan's poetry for emotional impact, casting a spell that lingers long after the curtain comes down.