

REVIEW: Girl From The North Country, Old Vic T

By [Julian Eaves](#) on 28th July 2017



The Company of Girl From The North Country. Photo: Manual Harlan

I always knew there was a lot of O'Casey in Conor McPherson, the writer of modern Irish myths, but now seeing his production of his own play, inspired by the songs of Bob Dylan, I can see there is perhaps even more of Chekov. He takes an ill-assorted group of characters, places them together in a temporary, insecure setting, and watches how they fail to master the challenges that life throws in their path, and – above all – fail to see themselves for what they are. That privilege he affords the audience. And, at the same time, as one of the outside producers attending the press night said, he 'tells us who we are': a wise utterance indeed. For that is the gift of the poet, and in this new work by McPherson, he and Dylan demonstrate that that is precisely what they possess.



Sam Reid (Gene Laine) and Ciaran Hinds (Nick Laine) in Girl From The North Country. Photo: Manual Harlan

We are in wintry Minnesota, in 1934, in a crumbling, cheap hotel (artful design by Rae Smith, lit gorgeously by Mark Henderson), where the proprietor, Nick Laine (Ciaran Hinds), is doggedly trying to keep his business going through the Great Depression, while his estranged wife, Elizabeth, sinks further into dementia, with all sorts of inappropriate behaviour. Confusingly, she is played by the youthful Shirley Henderson, who raised the foundling babe Marianne (Sheila Atim) as her own: we are presumably asked to suspend our disbelief here, but it is an awkward stretch; Atim towers over Henderson, as she busily works around the hotel, her long-limbed frame athletic and powerful, and her colouring making her appear even more distinctive. One of the main 'plot' strands is seeing her reject the moneyed relic of a pharmacist, Mr Perry (Jim Norton), in favour of the robust manliness of the runaway convict Joe Scott (Arinze Kene) – a very 'rock'n'roll' move, and – we eventually learn – successfully accomplished, making them just about the only real successes to emerge from the wreck of the American Dream on display here.

Other refugees from broken illusions gathered together under the Laines' roof are the Burkes (Stanley Townsend and Bronagh Gallagher, an ill-matched couple, doomed – as so many are – to remain together) and their Lennie-like childishly dangerous son Elias (Jack Shalloo, to whom one of the most splendid vocal moments is given leading into 'Duquesne Whistle', one of the many magnificent ensemble events of the show). The Laines also have a son, Gene (Sam Reid, oozing a kind of faded glamour), whose frustrated literary ambitions mark him out as another archetype of the age – and of this type of drama – he might well have wandered in from a Cliff Odets play, or something by O'Neill, especially given his weakness for drink. He has a sweetheart, Katharine Draper (Claudia Jolly, almost visibly assuming more responsibility with each moment she is on stage), whose main action is to reject him in favour of a better bet who can give her a new life in very faraway Boston. And there is Mrs Neilsen (Debbie Kurrup), who introduces herself eponymously with 'Went to See The Gypsy', and who also reflects much of this company's vagabond quality to the last.



Arinze Kene as Joe Scott in *Girl From The North Country*. Photo: Manual Harlan

Further victims of disillusionment are the church, in the person of the bogus Reverend Marlowe (Michael Schaeffer), whose spineless extortion and thieving trumpet an angry loathing for hypocrisy, and medicine, through the helpless observations of the ultimately suicidal Dr Walker (Ron Cook). There is an ensemble of Kirsty Malpass, Tom Peters and Karl Queensborough, whose lives are unexamined, but we cannot imagine that they are any less on the run than any of the others in this cast of misfits. Indeed, such is the freakishness of the gang, that we seem at times to

have strayed into an overnight stop by Todd Browning's weirdos, putting on a spectacle of their many oddities. At other times, there is an acerbity and bite to the writing that is so sharp and clear it seems that we are somewhere down near Key Largo, where enforced jollity masks a hideous rot at the heart of society.



Claudia Jolly (Katherine Draper) and Sam Reid (Gene Laine) in *Girl From The North Country*.
Photo: Manual Harlan

To Dr Walker, incidentally, is given the additional role of mediator between the mis-en-scene and the people gathered on the other side of the proscenium. We are told many things by him. Standing at a 30's stand mic, in the same manner that many of the songs are delivered, he is avuncular, trustworthy, quietly spoken and – unlike most other characters on display – not given to either self-dramatisation or self-commiseration. He often seems a bit like the lawyer in 'A View From The Bridge'. But McPherson is too, too canny to allow himself to fall into any predictable, slavishly pat tragedy: his vision really is much more complex, and really Chekovian, in that he can see a totality of life that rarely comes within the sights of dramatists. The subtlety of his mind encompasses too much of the unpredictability of people's behaviour and responses, as well as having a heart that can empathise with apparently any hue of personality, any disposition of mind, any temperament.



Jim Norton (Mr Perry) and Sheila Atim (Marianne Laine) in *Girl From The North Country*. Photo: Manual Harlan

Around this vision weaves the web of all the other musical events (terrific sound design by Simon Baker). As days and weeks pass, from shortly before Thanksgiving into the onset of Advent, we parade through a string of Dylan numbers, given wonderful new arrangements by Simon Hale, and given movement with intelligent verve by Lucy Hind. In addition to the four-piece band, led by Alan Berry (piano), with Charlie Brown (violin and mandolin), Pete Callard (guitars and resonator), and Don Richardson (bass), the cast all turn their hands – triumphantly – to accompanying each other with an array of instruments not improbably lying around the common room of the hotel. These are breath-taking performances, sending shivers down the spine, and wringing tears from the eyes, in expressions of such pathos, and such surprising, unexpected beauty, you could almost be forgiven for not realising that Bob Dylan really is one of the greatest songwriters of all time. These songs seem to come at us as new, thrilling discoveries of powerful secrets about the human condition, perfectly given form and shape and textures of voice and instrumentation that will have them ringing on and on in your mind long after you leave the theatre.

Not for nothing does the audience rise to its feet at the end of the performance. Because, it knows, it has not met any strangers during the performance. It has met itself.