

# Girl from the North Country at the Old Vic – review round-up



Shirley Henderson and Arinze Kene in *Girl from the North Country* at Old Vic, London. Photo: Tristram Kenton

by [Fergus Morgan](#) - Jul 28, 2017

Let's be clear this is not a "Bob Dylan musical". *Girl from the North Country* might feature songs from the Nobel Prize-winning, singer-songwriter's extensive catalogue, but it's not a jukebox compilation of classic tracks.

Conor McPherson's highly anticipated new show at the Old Vic boasts a large, diverse cast, and 20 Dylan songs from across his career, pared down and rearranged for the stage by Simon Hale and performed by a live, onstage band.

McPherson is perhaps best known for his 1997 play [The Weir](#), which transferred from the Royal Court to the West End and Broadway, and won the Irish playwright the Olivier Award for Best New Play – and Bob Dylan is, well, Bob Dylan. But can McPherson translate Dylan's plaintive poetry from vinyl to stage? Does *Girl from the North Country* go knock, knock, knockin' on heaven's door? Or does it sink like a (rolling) stone?

Don't think twice, it's all right, because Fergus Morgan rounds up the reviews.

## [Girl from the North Country – Depression-era Dylan](#)

McPherson instead drapes twenty of Dylan's songs around a story set in a run-down Minnesota guesthouse during the Great Depression. We're in Duluth, Dylan's place of birth, seven years before the singer-songwriter entered the world.

"Girl From the North Country gives us glimpses of the lives of those passing through, the flotsam and jetsam of Dust Bowl America," says Matt Trueman ([Variety](#)). "It's really a series of short stories rubbing shoulders, sharing a table in a temporary home. There are runaways and romantics; sinners and snake oil salesmen; drinkers down on their luck and out on their own."

Some critics fall in love with the concept. Paul Taylor (Independent) thinks that "the idea is inspired and the treatment piercingly beautiful", Fiona Mountford (Evening Standard) calls it "beguiling and soulful and quietly, exquisitely heartbreaking", and Ann Treneman (Times) labelling it "an instant American classic".

Others, though, find it a bit odd. For Sarah Crompton (What's On Stage,) "it simply doesn't work", for Dominic Cavendish (Telegraph, it's "valiant" but "derivative", and for Bella Todd (The Arts Desk,) McPherson just "tries to do too much".

For those that are swept away by it, Girl from the North Country evokes a rich, poetic, cross-section portrait of Depression-era America.

"Girl from the North Country extracts the Steinbeckian strand from Dylan's oeuvre," explains Andrzej Lukowski (Time Out,). "It's a mood piece, marrying the myths of Dylan and the Depression into something timeless and elegant – a stark evocation of the American firmament."

For those that aren't, however, it's a show riddled with problems. "The songs, compelling though they are in themselves, disrupt rather than progress the action," complains Crompton, while Natasha Tripney (The Stage) observes that "McPherson crams in far too many characters" and Cavendish laments that he "lets the shadow of other influences fall too heavily".

### **Girl from the North Country – Nobel Prize-winning Poetry**



Claudia Jolly and Sam Reid. Photo: Manuel Harlan

The big draw here, though, isn't the drama or the dissection of 1930s America, it's the Dylan songs – twenty of them, drawn from some obscure, some not-so-obscure corners of his sprawling, 50-year back catalogue.

Again, assert the critics, this is not "the Bob Dylan Musical". "In a traditional musical, the songs help to develop the plot," describes Quentin Letts (Daily Mail). "Here, they merely match the mood of the character involved."

"You won't have heard Dylan's music this way before," relates Cavendish. "Sans whine, sans drawl, sliding in and out of the action, connecting, after a fashion, with characters' sorrowful, yearning, even suicidally inclined states, soloists at times surrounded by striking choric clusters of other performers."

"Rather than move the show forward (the usual desideratum), the songs open it up, entering into a conversation with the drama and amplifying the mood of Depression-era despair and hope or providing the lift to transcendence.," adds Taylor. "The dislocation to the 1930s and Simon Hale's ravishing arrangements liberate the songs from their niches in the discography and embellish our sense of the world from which Dylan's art arose."

"Under McPherson's guidance, they simply grow almost miraculously from the unfolding story, from the desires and despairing secrets of these people on their various edges," echoes Libby Purves (TheatreCat,). "Here is lost love, compromised love, failure, weakness, loneliness, endurance."

The songs are "plaintive but beautiful" according to Mountford and "unhurried but restless, downbeat but uptight" according to Trueman. "There are moments when you can just close your eyes and melt into the night," writes Treneman.

Even those less-than-impressed by the whole package concede the haunting beauty of Dylan's songs, as arranged by Hale. For Crompton, they're "compelling", for Tripney, they're "glorious", for Ben Brantley ([New York Times](#)), they're "opalescent", and for Cavendish, "there are moments of infectious almost evangelical rapture".

### **Girl from the North Country – Tambourine Men**

McPherson's work divides the critics then, but they're united in their admiration for Dylan. What about Girl From The North Country's singing, dancing, 19-strong cast? Do they convincingly populate 1930s Duluth?

For most, the entire ensemble is impressive. It is "uniformly strong" for Billington, "superb" for Tripney, and "terrific" for Will Longman (London Theatre).

There's particular praise for Ciaran Hinds' guest house owner Nick - "stoically suffering" according to Billington, "a force of nature" according to Treneman – and for Shirley Henderson as his wife Elizabeth – "mesmerising" according to Taylor, "mould-breaking" according to Purves, and "incandescent" according to Neil Norman (Express). Sheila Atim as Nick's daughter, Arinze Kene as a fallen boxer, and Ron Cook as a local doctor turned narrator also receive widespread praise.

The naysayers' reservations, generally, don't stem from the performers themselves, but arise from McPherson's script again; "sentimentality and cliché abound", writes Tripney, while Dougie Gerrard (City AM,) reckons that the drama teeters perilously close to "utter

confusion and discord" and Ian Shuttleworth ([Financial Times](#)) finds the whole thing "stagey and a little distant".

McPherson "fails to weave his magic", opines Crompton. "It is as if his wild and wonderful imagination has been constrained by the structure he has imposed on himself."

### **Girl from the North Country – Is it any good?**

Some critics – Billington, Treneman, Taylor and Mountford – think McPherson blends storytelling and song into a heady, haunting evocation of 1930s Minnesota.

Others – particularly Cavendish, and Crompton – find more to dislike, opining that McPherson bites off more than he can chew, cramming in too many characters and failing to craft a play that deftly matches the poetry of Dylan's music, which consensus suggests is easily the best thing about Girl from the North Country.

Some award it five stars, some only two or three, but everyone agrees on one thing: this is very definitely not "the Bob Dylan Musical".