

# Tony Winner Jim Norton on Revisiting the Work of Conor McPherson in London's *Girl from the North Country*

By Matt Wolf September 9, 2017



Jim Norton & Sheila Atim in "Girl from the North Country"  
(Photo: Manuel Harlan)

Jim Norton is a beloved theater stalwart on both sides of the Atlantic, having won an Olivier and then a Tony for his performance in fellow Irishman Conor McPherson's *The Seafarer*. The genial veteran is working with writer-director McPherson once again on *Girl from the North Country* at the Old Vic, a play that weds an original Depression-era story set in 1934 Minnesota to the back catalogue of Bob Dylan; Ciaran Hinds and Shirley Henderson co-star. The ever-versatile performer took time one recent morning to talk hopping continents and keeping going in a career that spans 60 years.

**How does it feel once again to be working with Conor McPherson, whose work you have been performing on stage and screen ever since *The Weir*, some 20 years ago?**

What's great is that Conor will have a new play and I say, "I'll do it!" I don't even have to read them anymore.

**Do you keep ongoing tabs on what Conor is up to?**

It isn't as if we're bosom buddies or anything like that, but he lives near my sister in Dublin, so when I'm back [in Ireland] I will see him and we will go for a walk. What happens more often is

that he will write a play and say to me, “there’s a part for you,” and sometimes it’s a part he has written for me in mind. That was certainly true of *The Seafarer* [for which Norton won a 2008 Tony].

**Did *Girl from the North Country* feel like something new within Conor’s work?**

Yes, not least because you can’t instantly define what it is. Is it a musical, or a play with music? In fact, it’s a Conor McPherson play interwoven with Bob Dylan songs, so in essence, it’s a marriage of two minds. I don’t think many people realized how knowledgeable Conor is about Bob Dylan and also what a terrific musician he was. For much of the rehearsals, our musical accompaniment was essentially Conor on guitar—until we got our band.

**What are your thoughts on Mr. Perry, whom you play?**

He’s quite mysterious, really, but then Conor doesn’t really explain a lot about his characters, and you’re never sure in this instance whether Mr. Perry is a predator or not or whether he means well or not. Conor doesn’t reveal what he feels and neither do I. It’s important always to leave space for the audience.

**Did you ever expect to have such an ongoing association with a single playwright?**

When I was a teenager, I was in Brendan Behan’s first two plays, but I certainly never expected that I would be in I think it’s eight plays by Conor, and also a film [*The Eclipse*]. What’s wonderful is to have been right there watching Conor’s development as a writer.

**What was it like doing the cast recording [which will be available to buy, download and stream later this month]?**

We recorded over two joyous days at Abbey Road, in the same studio that had hosted the Beatles! You can hear me modestly singing harmonies in the background. I did have a song but it was cut, so I’ve got a whole new career as a backup singer [*laughs*].

**Has Dylan been to see the show yet?**

Not as far as we know, but it wouldn’t surprise me if he turns up one night with a guitar and starts busking with the guys on stage. Or he might come and lurk in the background—you never know.

**But you enjoy singing on stage, don’t you?**

Very much! There was a scene in *The Seafarer*, where I had to sing rather drunkenly, and the New York producers for *Finian’s Rainbow* came to see it and said to me afterward, “That’ll do—you can play Finian!” In [the 2012 revival of] *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, not only was I singing but I was also required to dance opposite Chita Rivera. So there I was sweating about dancing with a Broadway legend, when Chita said to me, “Don’t worry, I’ll grab your ass and no one will be looking at your feet.”

**How do you apportion your time between New York and London, not to mention your native Ireland?**

I regard myself as a strolling player. Maybe it’s being Irish, but I always feel at home in America, and I love the sense of family that exists on Broadway, especially because the theaters are so close

together. But it's also wonderful to be at my London home in Battersea, near my dear neighbor Ciaran Hinds [another McPherson regular].

**As a seasoned Broadway hand from Ireland, what were your thoughts on New York theater newbie Saoirse Ronan when you worked together last year in *The Crucible*?**

Saoirse took to Broadway wonderfully well. She's bright as a button, that young woman, just incredible.

**Was that a fulfilling production to work on?**

It was fascinating for me to do because [director] Ivo van Hove works in such a different way. With his rehearsals, you arrive knowing [the text], so there are no scripts, and everything is already prepared, including the sets and the lighting: it's like walking into your place in a photograph.

**What about *Of Mice and Men*, with James Franco, which you did on Broadway in 2014?**

That was a very happy show. James Franco is the most charming person you could ever hope to meet and very well-prepared. He never missed a performance, which isn't always the case on Broadway.

**Where do you keep your Tony?**

On top of the piano, beside my Olivier, but I wouldn't say they're on proud display or anything like that. I'm proud of my Broadway.com Audience Choice Award [for *Of Mice and Men*], which is right there beside it!

**What can you tell us about *Mary Poppins Returns* onscreen?**

David Warner and I play the two old sailors who live next door, and that was great fun since we both go back quite a way. It was lovely, too, working with Lin-Manuel Miranda. We both got our Tonys on the same night [Miranda's for *In the Heights*], but no one remembers much of that in the euphoria of the moment.

**Do you keep a bucket list of roles or plays that you would like to do?**

I used to but I don't anymore. I tend to go where the work is—it was great, for instance, playing Polonius [opposite Benedict Cumberbatch as Hamlet in 2015]. Acting is all I ever wanted to do, and I've been doing it for 60 years. I'm an actor for hire, and long may it continue!