

Girl From The North Country, review: Bob Dylan songs woven flawlessly into tale of Depression-era US

Adam Bloodworth Saturday 13 Jan 2018 6:41 pm



'Girl From The North Country plays through 24 March (Picture: Simon Turtle)

Pack your Kleenex: Conor McPherson's musical about America in the Great Depression, featuring the songbook of Bob Dylan, is stunningly realised and provokes an uncontrollably emotional response.

Girl From The North Country is built around the richly intense lyrical ballads of Bob Dylan. Although the musical will certainly tug at the heartstrings of Dylan's fans the hardest, Conor McPherson's production refreshingly uses the great master's music within the context of a newly-written show, with no connection to Dylan other than to give context to his music.

There's two majorly positive upshots to using Bob Dylan's music in a show which isn't about Bob Dylan. Firstly, a show about Dylan could plausibly be a dull and predictable back-slapping fest, and secondly, implanting his music into a real, textured new musical about other people gives Dylan's non die-hard fans (some of us exist!) a gentler entry point to his music.



Sheila Atim and Arinze Kene (Picture: Manuel Harlan)

Bob Dylan's songs sensitively respond to scenes, rather than halting dialogue; celebrating Dylan never takes precedent over the show's themes.

Set in 1934, in the mist of the Great Depression, Bob Dylan's songs have been masterfully etched into a show about the great hopes and fears of a nation experiencing unimaginable financial trauma. But, Conor McPherson's show is solely interested in the people, not the politics.

We're in Duluth, Minnesota, at a local guesthouse, run by owner, Nick (Ciaran Hinds), who is in a lifetime's worth of debt and lives with his wife Elizabeth, who is beset with dementia. Their daughter Marianne, who carries an illegitimate child, is propositioned by an elderly local gentlemen when a Bible salesman and boxer turn up, and signal that the worst is yet to come.

These are just some of a desperate bunch who frequent the guesthouse, all, united by financial strain.



The company and musicians (Picture: Manuel Harlan)

Set during the biggest economic downturn of the Twentieth Century, *Girl From The North Country* satirises The American Dream thanks to characters like Reverend Marlowe, a hapless Bible seller, played very well by Finbar Lynch, who will stop at nothing to make a sale, and in its poignant, elaborate moments of hope, illustrates why the term American Dream was coined in the first place.

While the characters at the guesthouse try their darnedest to get by, Dylan's songs pertinently soar. There are particular highlights. *Slow Train*, song solo by pregnant adopted daughter Marianne (wonderfully played by Sheila Atim), was bathed in pathos. *Hurricane*, *Like a Rolling Stone* and the eponymous *Girl From The North Country* were the most unsettling and raw, although, the musical bar is set so high, there's hardly any point naming particulars.

Conor McPherson, who wrote and directed the show, has a subtle way of making Dylan's songs feel as if they expand across the stage. Most of the tracks are solos, but harmonies from backing groups of the cast in clusters appear from corners of the simply-designed set, so Dylan's marvellous songs permeate every nook and cranny, every character, every situation.

It's joyous that the music, sound designed by Simon Baker, can be seen as well as heard at all times. All the live instrumentalists occupy the stage and sometimes sing and often act; Rae Smith's set design is similarly obvious, hauling characters between scenes as musicians re-arrange themselves on stage. The show feels remarkably casual, stitched artfully together like a patchwork kite rather than a big, glossy West End show.

The staging lends a potent intimacy to Bob Dylan's songbook, at home in this deeply sensitive, attentive and thoughtful staging. Conor McPherson's musical is an interpretation of the horrors faced by a community who live in fear – with the songs in place, it's so tactile you can almost feel it.