

Girl from the North Country, Noël Coward Theatre, London — desperate, hopeful and sad

Conor McPherson's drama is interwoven with Bob Dylan songs to create a haunting theatrical collage

By Sarah Hemming



Shirley Henderson and Arinzé Kene in 'Girl from the North Country' © Alastair Muir

It's certainly a surprise to open a West End programme and see the credit "Music and lyrics by Bob Dylan". He's not exactly a natural fit for a stage musical. But then *Girl From the North Country*, written and directed by Conor McPherson and first seen at the Old Vic, is not a musical. It's not even really a play with music — rather it is a collage, interlacing snippets of drama and 21 songs from Dylan's back catalogue, in brilliantly unexpected arrangements, to conjure the mood of Depression-era America. It's original, beautiful and moving, combining the starkness of Steinbeck with haunting lyricism to create something restless, desperate, hopeful and sad.

McPherson homes in on a guesthouse in 1930s Duluth, Minnesota, where everyone is passing through and everyone carries a heap of troubles with their luggage. There's a black boxer on the run (Arinzé Kene), a crooked Bible salesman (Finbar Lynch), a family with a damaged, Lennie-like son trying to outrun a tragedy, and a bright-eyed widow (Debbie Kurup) hopeful of receiving a life-changing legacy. The owner himself (Ciarán Hinds) is struggling with crippling debt, a wife struck down with early dementia (Shirley Henderson), a boozing son and a daughter expecting an illegitimate child.

Put like that, it sounds schematic and not much fun. But McPherson frames the stories, visiting the characters through the memory of a narrator and sketching them with the sort of piercing vividness of figures in a ballad. The drama is fragmentary, in keeping with the uncertain times. Meanwhile the songs, ranging from 1963 to 2012, work obliquely with the drama to express

unspoken emotions. Sometimes characters step out of the action to deliver them directly to the audience, like soliloquies. Beautifully orchestrated by Simon Hale, performed live by the cast and onstage musicians, the songs emerge fresh, sometimes almost unrecognisable and often exceptionally moving.

Anger, energy and frustration drive through "Hurricane"; impossible longing steeped in a duet of "I Want You". The childlike son (Jack Shalloo) has a transforming solo in "Duquesne Whistle"; Sheila Atim, as the pregnant daughter, delivers a searing version of "Tight Connection to My Heart". Perhaps most haunting of all is a tender, desolate rendition of "Like a Rolling Stone", led by Henderson, which seems to express the condition of just about everyone in the story

It's not a flawless show by any means, but it builds into a unique and poignant evocation of lost lives.