

Girl from the North Country review at the Old Vic – ‘Bob Dylan’s music wins out’



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

by [Natasha Tripney](#) - Jul 27, 2017

How exactly would one go about staging a Bob Dylan musical? Conor McPherson, a man who knows a thing or two about haunting stories, has taken tracks from throughout Dylan’s decades-spanning career – from 1963’s title song to 2012’s Duquesne Whistle from the album *Tempest* – and used them as the spine for a play-with-songs set in Depression-era America.

McPherson, serving as both playwright and director, avoids ticking all the obvious boxes (there’s no *Blowin’ in the Wind*, this is not a greatest hits compilation). He favours a roaming approach, picking the songs that best sync with the story he’s trying to tell.

Girl from the North Country takes place in Duluth Minnesota, Dylan’s birthplace. In setting it in the 1930s, McPherson frees himself from the task of having to marry his material to the relevant time period. He instead explores the seeds from which Dylan’s songwriting sprang, a time of extreme poverty, forced migration and economic desperation.

Nick and Elizabeth Laine run a guesthouse. She has long been lost to dementia and is given to inappropriate episodes with male visitors, her cardigan forever rucking up, or sitting on the kitchen table with her legs splayed. Nick loves her, but he’s also having an affair with an

elegant widow upstairs. Meanwhile, the couple's adopted black daughter is pregnant and is having to make a decision about her future, while their writer son has developed a fondness for the bottle.

The guesthouse setting allows for a wider social cross-section, and the other characters include a talented boxer, who's spent time in prison, a malevolent bible-seller, and a married couple with a brain-damaged son stuck in permanent infancy.

McPherson crams in far too many characters. The Laines' drunken son Gene has a love interest, but she gets merely a handful of lines and half a song before she's forgotten. The great Ron Cook is underused as a narrator, and the story itself is three parts spun sugar to one part social commentary. Sentimentality and cliché abound. Yet this all matters less than it might because the cast is superb. There's not a weak link among them.

Ciaran Hinds is gruff yet vulnerable as Nick, while Shirley Henderson is small and far away as Elizabeth. On one hand it's the performance you might expect from her, but then she unleashes this mighty voice from her small frame for her rendition of Like a Rolling Stone. Sheila Atim displays a similar vocal prowess as the Laines' daughter Marianne, while Arinze Kene, as the boxer Joe, has magnetism to spare and a voice that could melt – well, pretty much anything.

Simon Hale's musical arrangements are glorious and the mixture of story (such as it is) and song works incredibly well. Even when Jack Shalloo, as the brain damaged young man seemingly liberated through death, breaks into song – a moment that should reek of cheese – it ends up being kind of wonderful, moving even.

In the end, the power of the music wins out and the show sends you out on a high, with Dylan's lyrics embedded in your head, destined to stay there for days.