

Valiant but derivative attempt to mine Dylan's back catalogue - *Girl from the North Country*, Old Vic, review



Shirley Henderson (Elizabeth) and Arinze Kene (Joe) Credit: Alastair Muir

By [Dominic Cavendish](#), 27 July 2017

[Bob Dylan](#) has sold more than 125 million records. His impact in popular culture is beyond reckoning. He's up there with the all-time great singer-songwriters. Oh, yes, and he just got that Nobel Prize in Literature.

When a new piece of musical theatre lands that derives from his back-catalogue and comes with his blessing (his people approached Irish playwright [Conor McPherson](#) in the first place, and then gave him the go-ahead, albeit Bob has yet to take any kind of look at the result), you bow low and give thanks, don't you?

Well, in the case of an earlier attempt to make Dylan's work sing, in a theatrical context, for its supper – the 2006 Twyla Tharp-directed *The Times They Are a-Changin'*; lots of dancing, lots of circus – even the mass devotion that attends the star wasn't enough to save the show. It was dubbed a “spectacle of torture” by the *New York Times* and folded fast on Broadway.



Credit: Alastair Muir

And ingrate that I am, I have to confess to being a mite underwhelmed by this valiant and undeniably accomplished effort to do something more oblique and intriguing with songs that will outlive us all. McPherson, whose early, masterly storytelling sensation *The Weir* is reason enough for eternal gratitude, has shepherded some 20 tracks – most of them not obvious choices (you can go whistle for *Blowin' in the Wind*) – into a populous, otherworldly play that combines the hard grit of the great Depression with something numinous and mysterious.

His instincts seem correct. If you don't try to express the spiritual qualities of this reclusive and elusive hipster-poet, sage, seeker, keeper of America's soul, what you will, then no matter how robust the songs, they run the risk of sounding flatter, more ordinary, when separated from the man himself. But in finding a means to channel such a potentially intimidating source, McPherson lets the shadow of other influences fall too heavily. Heartfelt truth in the writing sits alongside material that has a derivative aspect.

The initial route into *Girl from The North Country* – set in a struggling guest-house in Dylan's birth town of Duluth, Minnesota in the winter of 1934 – was Eugene O'Neill. So we get shades of *Long Day's Journey Into Night* in the fraught family set-up of Ciaran Hinds's work-sapped proprietor Nick, his out-of-it, past-caring, unloving wife Elizabeth, afflicted by dementia (in contrast to the drug-addled Mary Tyrone) and a restless, would-be writer son called, yeah, Gene.



Credit: Alastair Muir

Among the thinly sketched guests – many of them haunted, fugitive – there’s a couple whose simple-witted son has attacked a girl in the woods, a nod – voluntary or otherwise – to *Of Mice and Men*. And the meta-theatrical approach, with Ron Cook’s amiable old Dr Walker taking to a retro stand-microphone to introduce these troubled folk, is redolent of Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938).

The evening has a distinct air of *déjà-vu* about it, then. Even so, you won’t have heard Dylan’s music this way before: 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. McPherson, who also directs, creates a pleasingly folksy ambience, with the musicians intruding into the low-lit, barely furnished scheme of things.

There are moments of infectious almost evangelical rapture, particularly at the start of the second half (*You Ain’t Going Nowhere* heralding an outbreak of Thanksgiving jiving) and there’s a sublime closing rendition of *Forever Young* that helps bring the tale to a will o’ the wisp end. In between, much intermittent brilliance, but it’s no full-on Bobby dazzler.