

# Girl from the North Country, Old Vic review – Dylan songs hit home, the rest is weirdness

Conor McPherson meets Bob Dylan in the Depression-era dustbowl with disconnected results

by [Bella Todd](#), Thursday, 27 July 2017



Shirley Henderson leads the dance as Elizabeth Laine in 'Girl from the North Country' Manuel Harlan

Plays with songs in, or more precisely plays with famous songs in, can feel like the uncanny valley of theatre. They're not quite musicals and not quite tribute shows. They deliver on familiar tunes and disconcert with fresh narrative. You're constantly wrongfooted by the rush of recognition.

*Lazarus* was good-weird – a mash-up of David Bowie and Enda Walsh with a vision so unique and uncompromising it didn't matter if anyone else could quite see it. *Girl from the North Country*, the new play by Conor McPherson for the [Old Vic](#) with [songs](#) from [Bob Dylan](#)'s back catalogue, is also very weird. Whether it's good is a slightly different matter. The cast, which includes stalwarts Ron Cook and Ciaran Hinds, rising star Sheila Atim and the wonderful Shirley Henderson at her most unhinged, are excellent. The live band settings and vocal performances demand a cast recording. And there are many lines to savour from the master of grim realism and ghostly unease. But you spend too much time squinting at the stage, trying to work out what's not quite right about the whole thing.

It's not the concept *per se*. *Girl from the North Country* is set in Dylan's birthplace of Duluth, Minnesota. But the action takes place in the winter of 1934, seven years before his birth, when the Great Depression was laying waste to farms and families, and suicide rates were soaring. There are lots of flowery tea dresses and backdrops of pylons. It's pure Woody Guthrie territory, though the Irish playwright shows no bias to Dylan's early Guthrie-indebted material. The piece has some of Dylan's DNA, without being bound by his biography or era.

The main issue is that McPherson, as both writer and director, tries to do too much. Dylan responded to his initial concept by issuing the writer of *The Weir* and *The Seafarer* with a set of 40 albums and a note saying, "Use whatever you want" and "Do whatever you like". The result sometimes feels like a game of "How many Dylan songs can you fit into a Conor McPherson play?" The answer is 21, if you sideline theatrical coherence, have sad people dance a lot and get a little scattergun with the plot.



Nick Laine (pictured left: Sam Reid and Ciaran Hinds) is the long-suffering owner of a guesthouse who has a tragic past, present and – let's face it – future. Hinds plays him with gentle but hulking stoicism, and a face so long it's as though his chin fell down the mineshaft that fated day along with his little sister. Laine loves the young widow Mrs Nielson (Debbie Kurup), who fires first solo "Went to See the Gypsy" lustily in his direction. But he is already married, to Henderson's Elizabeth, who announced she no longer loved him before promptly losing her mind to early-onset dementia. Now she writhes and dances round the guesthouse

like a rampant Id, ambushing conversations with sly indiscretions, and squeaking with distress in a manner that makes mating foxes sound positively reassuring.

The couple have a son, Gene (Sam Reid), a struggling writer, and an adopted daughter, Marianne (Atim), who is refusing to disclose the father of her unborn child. When he's not tucking rugs round his wife and scraping together a chicken stew for his guests, Laine is trying to marry Marianne off to Jim Norton's Mr Perry. The elderly cobbler returns for each clumsy wooing clutching the same bunch of flowers.

If this weren't enough to be getting on with, other barely-paying guests arrive at the house: a sleazy bible seller (Michael Shaeffer), a boxer who's been serving another man's time (Arinzé Kene) – Dylan fans might predict the inclusion of "Hurricane" – and a bankrupted factory owner with an unhappy wife and an adult son who has a behavioural age of four (and a harmonica).

Plus there's the bomber and Stetson-wearing Dr Walker (Ron Cook), who drops by with morphine for Elizabeth and doses of sentimental narration that verge on the parodic ("Nick's tryna take care of everything. Trying real hard"). There are mysteries, too. Who got Marianne pregnant? What drove Elizabeth mad? Is Mr Burke the bankrupt covering a crime for his son, or gearing up for one?



Remember that the two-and-a-half-hour show also needs to make space for 21 songs, orchestrated and arranged for guitars, violin, mandolin and double bass by Simon Hale. Even with the doubling up of "Hurricane" and "All Along the Watchtower", the harmonising of "Like a Rolling Stone" with the Adele-popularised "Make You Feel My Love", and the briefest of flirtations with "Lay Lady Lay", that's a tall order. Because McPherson doesn't want the songs to do anything so obvious as advance plot or character.

Occasionally there's a literal connection. "I Want You" is performed as a duet between Gene (Sam Reid in fantastic full-bodied voice) and – yet another character – his fancy love interest, who's just told him she's agreed to marry someone else (**pictured above: Claudia Jolly and Sam Reid**). The pair move towards each other as they sing. On the last lines the music drops away, leaving their voices in naked union.

At times there's a surreal connection. Dylan's newest song included here, a 2012 western swing railroad number called "Duquesne Whistle", goes to Burke's son, who loves choo-choo trains. Actor Jack Shaloo performs it in a white suit and dickie bow, revealing a startling soul voice and talent for showy knee-drops.

Often, though, the Dylan songbook feels uncontainable, more a force that is moving through the characters, transporting them somewhere else entirely. "Like a Rolling Stone" settles on Henderson's Elizabeth, with her pink dress and flower in her hair, and turns her into a rebel icon.

But something else stops this from being a brilliantly beguiling night at the theatre. The piece is crying out to be staged in the round, so that we are swept up in the swirl of activity, sat among the musicians. McPherson seems to sense this, and toys with the idea that the actors, who sometimes stand at vintage microphones, are broadcasting their performance. But this device is inconsistent, the musicians are often hidden behind a backdrop, and the scattering of chairs, lamps and bourbon bottles doesn't conjure the atmosphere of the guesthouse. Almost every song hits home, and yet the show leaves you with a curious sense of disconnection.