

Girl From the North Country review: Bob Dylan's songs heard anew in magnificent, haunting show

Conor McPherson weaves the songs of Bob Dylan into an exquisitely heartbreaking piece of theatre, writes Fiona Mountford

By [Fiona Mountford](#), Thursday 27 July 2017



Exquisite: The cast of Girl From the North Country Manuel Harlan

The compilation musicals merry-go-round has, mercifully, so far skipped the work of [Bob Dylan](#). This is not, rest assured, the Bob Dylan [musical](#), but rather a play, by Conor McPherson, best known for his supernatural drama *The Weir*, with songs by Dylan silkily interwoven. It is, says McPherson in a programme note, a 'conversation between the songs and the story' and what a conversation it is, beguiling and soulful and quietly, exquisitely, heartbreaking. This is, in short, a very special piece of theatre.

McPherson, who also directs, has been given free rein here and what dividends that liberal approach pays. We're in Dylan's actual home town of Duluth, Minnesota, but the year is 1934 and the Great Depression is biting hard, with work mighty tricky to come by. 'We ain't

got no net to catch us', says Nick Laine (Ciarán Hinds), who runs a boarding-house drowning in debt. He lives there with his wife Elizabeth (that chameleonic screen star Shirley Henderson), a provocative child-woman succumbing to dementia.

A handful of guests, similarly afflicted by drifting lives and fading dreams, flit through the action in a fluid, slow-burn production unafraid to unfold to its own unhurried rhythms. It resembles nothing so much as a collection of meticulously rendered short stories, soaked in quiet melancholy. There's a faint shimmer of self-conscious American mythologizing – was poverty really ever so poetically elegant? – but no matter. Because then there's the music.

This is Dylan like we've never heard him before, 20 songs sculpted into plaintive but beautiful new arrangements by Simon Hale. Some numbers are familiar, others less so, but nearly all are delivered so hauntingly well by the 20-strong company that they send shivers down the spine as we hear the lyrics afresh. Where – and indeed why – has Henderson been hiding that wonderful voice all this time? She sings the final number, *Forever Young*, against a tableau of infinite poignancy, and I defy anyone to sit through it without sobbing softly. Magnificent.