

Girl From the North Country theatre review: Bob Dylan musical has the tunes but loses the plot

By [Dougie Gerrard](#), Thursday 27 July 2017



It is a brilliant conceit; a musical formulated around the songs of Bob Dylan, set in his hometown of Duluth, Minnesota. The prodigious talents of writer/director Conor McPherson add to its promise. It's a genuine surprise, then, that the lasting impression *Girl from the North Country* leaves is of opportunity squandered.

The central problem is that McPherson's reach somewhat exceeds his grasp. The play, set during the Depression, seven years before Dylan was born, follows Nick Laine, the longstanding owner of a Duluth boarding-house, his wife Elizabeth, their children, and a host of their guests.

It is 130 minutes long, with an ensemble cast of thirteen and a set-list of twenty. The logistical question of how to marry all this is answered in the second act; you heavily indulge the theatrical properties of ambiguity, abandon the knotty business of plotting and character development, and occasionally use a song to resolve a particularly challenging scene.

Each character is given roughly equal stage time, which often means the more interesting voices are neglected and the lesser ones amplified. The most intriguing of them, a creepy Bible salesman who reeks of violence, ends the first act obliquely engaging in blackmail, and then is seen precisely once in the second hour.

These feel like frustrating diversions, but from what? Despite stellar work by Shirley Henderson and the wonderful Ciaran Hinds, the nominal leads are as flimsily fleshed out as the rest of the cast. Henderson's character suffers from early-onset dementia, which came on just as their marriage was collapsing and has unburdened her of any inhibitions. It's a lot of fun watching her

rampage around the stage, her id freed of its super-ego, but the emotional content of their relationship goes mostly unexamined.

Still: Dylan. It is never a hardship to listen to his music, which adapts seamlessly to the register of musical theatre. The songs are shrewdly chosen (McPherson wanted to be a musician as a teenager), even if they don't always bear much relation to the action.

Drawing heavily from the much-derided Gospel period was a smart choice, and every cast member sings so beautifully you forget they aren't seasoned musical theatre pros. The tunes illuminate the misery and heartache of the Depression better than the script, and just about rescues McPherson's play from utter confusion and discord.