

Proctors Theater, Schenectady, NY

**Girl from the North Country**, Book by Conor McPherson. Music and Lyrics by Bob Dylan.  
Directed by Conor McPherson. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

**“You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere.”**

In one of the most gloomy musicals ever conceived the bright spots come in the usually depressing Bob Dylan songs. At least they add music and movement to this show which seems to want to be the musical theater’s answer to Eugene O’Neill or someone whose work is even darker, more dismal and distressing. There isn’t one character in this show who doesn’t suffer from something dire. Even the most “up” characters, Mrs. Neilsen, played by the divine Carla Woods, or Joe Scott, played by Matt Manuel are ultimately gloomy.



Aidan Wharton and the cast; Photo: Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade

At the Laine house in Duluth, now a depressing guesthouse, Nick Laine struggles to make a living and pay his bills. It is 1934, the height of the great depression. His wife, Elizabeth, suffers from depression and dementia and has violent episodes. Their daughter, Marianne, an adopted black girl, is five months pregnant by an anonymous man who invaded her bedroom and the son Gene can’t hold a job or a girlfriend and is marginally suicidal.



Chiara Trentalange, Ben Biggers;  
Photo: Evan Zimmerman



Sharaé Moultrie, Matt Manuel;  
Photo: Evan Zimmerman

Their “houseguests” include a recent widow, Mrs. Neilsen, who is now Nick’s mistress, Reverend Marlowe, a Bible salesman who is also a thief and Joe Scott, a boxer who is separated from his wife and children, all of whom live with her lover.

Among their friends are the Burkes, Mr. Perry and Dr. Walker who narrates the show. All of them have been hurt by the era and its financial woes.

Dylan’s songs range from 1963 to 2012 and seem to have a consistency that mirrors the characters lives. The most familiar is the first act closer, “Like a Rolling Stone.” The show won a Tony award for orchestration and I could see why. There is great beauty hearing Dylan’s music in this way.

Nobody’s story is a good one and it isn’t until Mrs. Neilsen pulls up her stakes to move away that we get a positive conclusion to a difficult relationship. Still, an extremely talented cast delivers all this misery in a most professional manner. Jennifer Blood is a truly terrifying Elizabeth Laine. John Schiappa as her husband is morbidly masculine and secure. Ben Biggers as their son, Gene, is overwhelmingly teen-aged with all the angst that requires and Sharae Moultrie brings a quiet, self-assured anxiety into her performance. Aidan Wharton as Elias Burke delivers well in a suit that turns white after he drowns in Lake Superior and Jill Van Velzer gives us a better understanding of anxiety as his mother. She also plays one outrageous drum solo in act two.

As Bible salesman Marlowe, Jeremy Webb delivers a new revelatory image of smarminess and Jay Russell matches him nastiness for nastiness as Mr. Perry who is only interested in how much money can be had in these dark days of destitution.

Not even Dylan’s songs can redeem these folks. What a pity!



Aidan Wharton, David Benoit, Jennifer Blood, Jeremy Webb;  
Photo: Evan Zimmerman

The production is extraordinary. McPherson's stage direction is augmented by Lucy Hind's movement direction and choreography. The costumes designed by Rae Smith literally smell of the period and her set design work complements the stage pictures. Lighting Design by Mark Henderson is as bleak and moody as the story itself and the sound design by Simon Baker works well for the show.

You need to be in a good mood, a very good mood, in order to survive the impact of "Girl from the North Country." If you are even marginally depressed you need "Finian's Rainbow" or "Call Me Madam," or in a Eugene O'Neill world "Ah, Wilderness." But go prepared and you'll have an evening you won't easily forget.

+ 12/07/2023 +

**Girl from the North Country** plays at Proctors Theater, 432 State Street, Schenectady, NY through December 10. For information and tickets go to [Proctors.org](http://Proctors.org).

