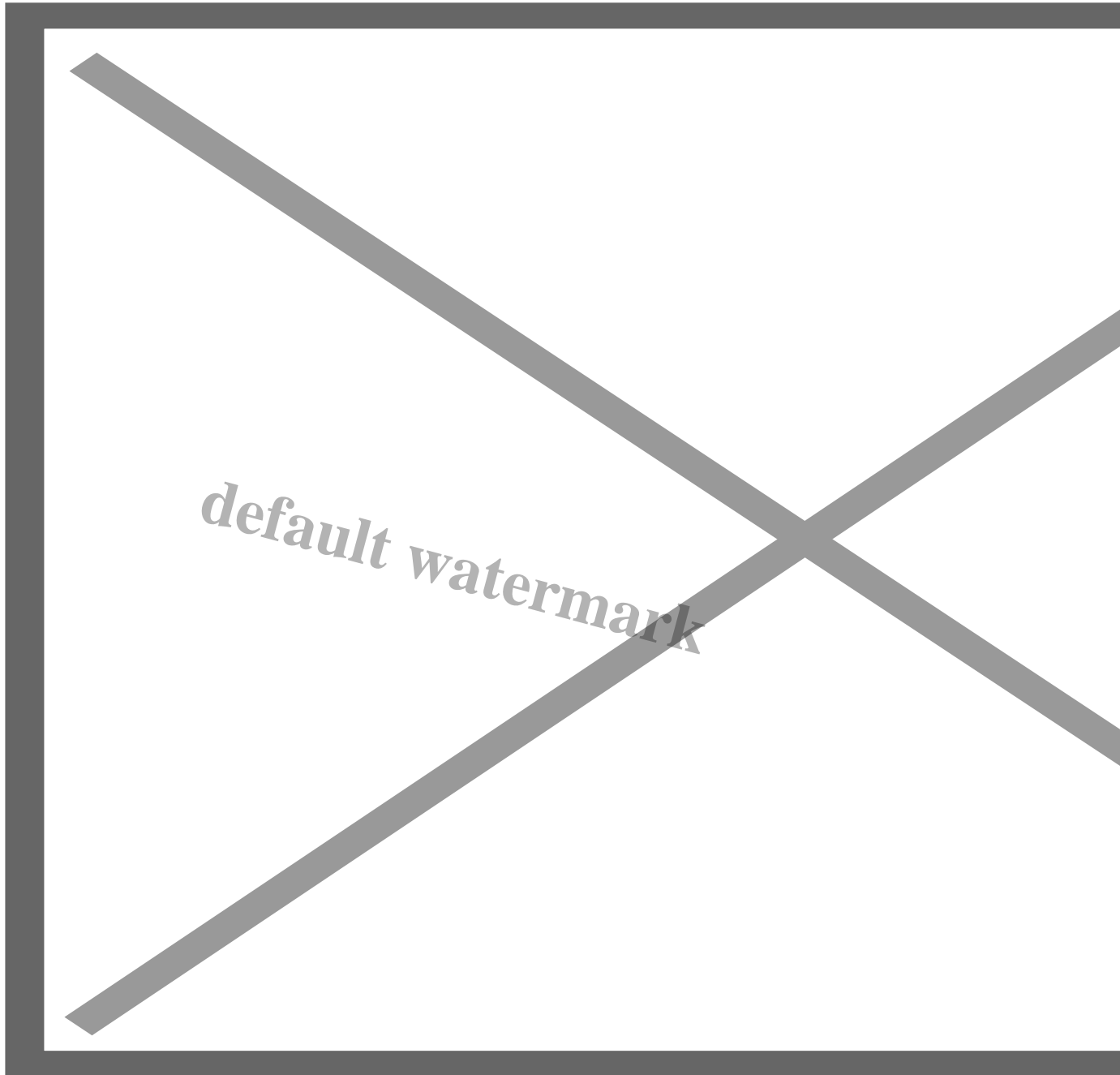




A Beautifully Melancholy Tune: Bob Dylan's Genius Reimagined in 'Girl From the North Country'

Description

SALT LAKE CITY's *Girl from the North Country* (with book by **Conor McPherson** and music and lyrics by **Bob Dylan**) is a Tony-winning production now touring across the U.S., U.K., and Australia and currently at **Eccles Theater** in Salt Lake City, Utah. This evocative and poignant musical skillfully blends Dylan's iconic songs with a compelling narrative set during the **Great Depression**. Premiering in London in 2017, the show has since captivated audiences with its unique fusion of folk music and theatre. While this show may not be everyone's cup of tea, **The Times** awarded it five stars, calling it "a show that transports the soul." And a five-star review from the [Financial Times](#) said, "It's original, beautiful and moving, combining the starkness of [Steinbeck](#) with haunting lyricism to create something restless, desperate, hopeful and sad." (Written by **Sarah Hemming**). I enjoyed it immensely and feel it is a moving and introspective piece of art that deserves packed audiences as it deals with important themes of the heart.



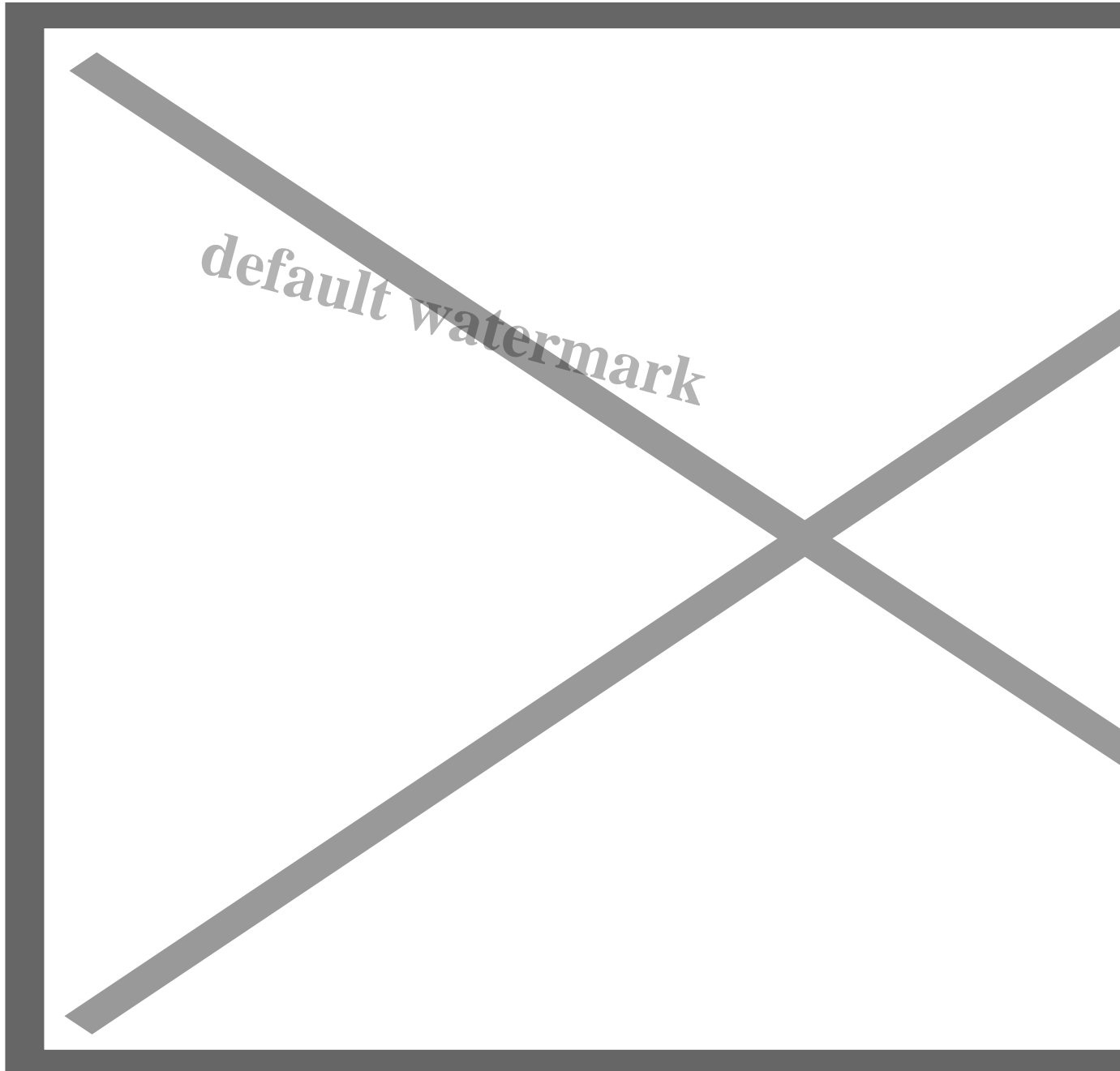
Matt Manuel in the GIRL FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY North American Tour (photo by Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade)

Set in 1934 in a guesthouse in **Duluth, Minnesota**, the story centers on the lives of its down-and-out residents. McPherson's script skillfully weaves together multiple storylines, creating a rich tapestry of human struggles and resilience. The setting is stark and evocative, capturing the bleakness of the era and providing a fitting backdrop for Dylan's melancholic and reflective music.

The show reimagines twenty of Dylan's iconic songs, which won him a Nobel Prize in Literature in 2016. Dylan's music, in essence, serves as the heartbeat of the show, and the selection of songs spans his extensive career. Songs such as "Like a Rolling Stone," "Hurricane," and "Forever Young" are reinterpreted with fresh poignancy, and the arrangements by **Simon Hale**

lend an ethereal quality to Dylan's already haunting melodies. The music enhances each character's emotional depth and experiences, although the songs don't always offer clarity or insight to the audience in the narrative story.

The traveling company is exceptional and brimming with extraordinary talent. Despite tackling the heavy storylines during a challenging period, at the height of the Depression. **McPherson** and the cast skillfully incorporate moments of relief with well-timed humor and numerous stunning performances.



The cast of the GIRL FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY North American tour (photo by Evan Zimmerman for MurphyMade)



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As Joe Scott, **Matt Manuel** delivers stunning vocals throughout the show, especially in "Slow Train." Opposite of Manuel, **Ashley D. Brooks**, in the character of Marianne Laine, brings authenticity to every word and gesture, as she steps into the spotlight. **Kelly McCormick** wowed me in her role as the matriarch of the family, Elizabeth Laine, offering some of the show's most heart-breaking and quick-witted comebacks, not to mention a set of pipes that deliver Dylan's lyrics like they were her own.

Rayla Garske was born to play Mrs. Nielsen; from the moment she opened her mouth to sing "Went to See the Gypsy," I knew I would gladly listen to anything she sang, even if it were just the ABCs. Garske is featured in the finale, "Pressing On," singing outstanding runs, and Garske delivers!

Aidan Wharton showcases his superb acting as the child-like Elias Burke. When "Duquesne Whistle" comes along in the second act, Wharton offers a profound and stunning performance. Musicians **Adam Overacker** on the upright bass and **Camille Vogley-Howes** on the fiddle and mandolin add a unique dimension to the show, often playing onstage. The drumset is primarily played by cast member **Jill Van Velzer** (Mrs. Burke), who even sings a solo while playing the drums—there are only a few musicians that I have seen successfully pull that off; Velzer can join that small list as far as I am concerned—she made it look and sound so much easier than it is.

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Not only does *Girl from the North Country* impress musically, but it also shines through its exceptional production design and creative team. The set and costumes, designed by **Rae Smith**, perfectly capture the era and mood of 1930s Duluth: stark yet hopeful. The set is appropriately sparse, reflecting the economic hardships of the time, while the costumes accurately depict the period's fashion. **Mark Henderson's** lighting design plays a crucial role in creating the musical's somber yet hopeful atmosphere, using shadows and muted tones to highlight the emotional gravity of the scenes. **Simon Hale's** orchestrations, arrangements, music supervision, and additional arrangements by **Hale and Conor McPherson** seamlessly integrate Dylan's songs into the narrative. **Simon**

Baker's sound design enhances the emotional depth of the production, while **Lucy Hind**'s movement direction adds a subtle, expressive layer to the storytelling. Associate direction by **Barbara Rubin** and music direction by **Timothy Splain** ensure that every element of the show comes together flawlessly. Produced by **Runaway Entertainment**, *Girl from the North Country* is a beautiful blend of music, narrative, and design that captures the essence of Dylan's timeless artistry.

While *Girl from the North Country* is a remarkable production, it is not without its flaws. The intertwining storylines, though compelling, can sometimes feel disjointed, and some characters' arcs are more fully realized than others. However, these issues do little to detract from the production's overall impact and the importance of its message.

Dylan himself praised the show in an interview with historian [Douglas Brinkley](#) that was first printed in the [New York Times](#):

Brinkley: It's too bad that just when the play *Girl from the North Country*, which features your music, was getting rave reviews, production had to shutter because of [COVID-19](#). Have you seen the play or watched the video of it?

Dylan: Sure, I've seen it, and it affected me. I saw it as an anonymous spectator, not as someone who had anything to do with it. I just let it happen. The play had me crying at the end. I can't even say why. When the curtain came down, I was stunned. I really was. Too bad Broadway shut down because I wanted to see it again. [\[28\]](#)

Overall, *Girl from the North Country* is a deeply moving and artistically ambitious musical that successfully marries Dylan's evocative music with a narrative exploring the human condition in profound ways. I've heard some say that they don't enjoy this type of show, that it is too sad. However, I believe it is good to listen to sad narratives from time to time.

The melancholy nature of the tunes and narrative reminded me of the following ***Hadestown*** lyrics:

It's an old song.

It's a sad song.

It's a tragedy.

It's a sad, sad song.

But we're gonna sing it anyway.

We're gonna sing it again, and again, and again, and again.

I find that notion of a story that is too sad somewhat absurd. Tragedy is part of the human experience, and listening to sad stories helps us be better humans because we learn to further empathize with the human experience, especially ones that may be unfamiliar to us. *Girl From the North Country* is a compelling story of heartbreak during a time when many souls were plagued with it. Despite minor flaws, the musical offers a rich, immersive experience that lingers long after the final curtain call. This show is only here for a short engagement. I hope you will take the opportunity to see it and support the arts.

Sources:

1. Brinkley, Douglas (2020-06-12). ["Bob Dylan Has a Lot on His Mind". *The New York Times*.](#)
2. Hemming, Sarah (January 15, 2018). ["Girl from the North Country, No Coward Theatre, London desperate, hopeful and sad". *Financial Times*.](#)

GIRL FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY's Original Broadway Cast Album was a 2022 GRAMMY Award nominee for Best Musical Theater Album.

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Thursday, June, 13th, 2024 at 7:30 PM

Salt Lake City, Utah - Zions Bank Broadway at the Eccles is proud to present the Salt Lake City engagement of the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical GIRL FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY at the Eccles Theater from June 11-16, 2024. Tickets go on sale Friday, February 9, and are available at Broadway-at-the-Eccles.com or by calling 801-355-2787 (Arts).

The GIRL FROM THE NORTH COUNTRY acting company includes Alan Ariano (Dr. Walker), David Benoit (Mr. Burke), Ben Biggers (Gene Laine), Paul Blankenship (Offstage Cover), Jennifer Blood (Elizabeth Laine), Ashley D. Brooks (Ensemble), Justin Michael Duval (Ensemble), Rayla Garske (Swing), Matt Manuel (Joe Scott), Kelly McCormick (Ensemble), Shara Moultrie (Marianne Laine), Hosea Mundi (Ensemble) Warren Nolan Jr. (Swing), Ali Regan (Swing), Jay Russell (Mr. Perry), John Schiappa (Nick Laine), Chiara Trentalange (Kate Draper), Danny Vaccaro (Swing), Jill Van Velzer (Mrs. Burke), Jeremy Webb (Reverend Marlowe), Aidan Wharton (Elias Burke) and Carla Woods (Mrs. Neilsen).

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