

Through The Shortbread Tin

Corn Exchange, Melrose

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Joyce McMillan finds sustenance in Martin O'Connor's packed shortbread tin.

Scotch myths eh? Back in the 1980s, Murray Grigor made a brilliant film of that name that was supposed to have nailed the whole business, laughing to scorn every last shred of Scotland's tartan-trimmed, tammy-wearing tourist image.

Forty years on, though, it seems that the image is still as powerful as ever; and Martin O'Connor takes on the task of debunking it in fine style, in his fierce, funny and challenging monologue-with-chorus *Through The Shortbread Tin*, now on tour across Scotland in a vivid production by Lu Kemp for the National Theatre of Scotland.

O'Connor tackles his theme through the tale of Scottish poet James Macpherson, who back in 1760 produced a wildly popular book of epic poetry which he claimed was translated the work of a 3rd century Gaelic bard, Ossian.

Macpherson's book was soon widely suspected of being a hoax, despite its huge impact on the nascent romantic movement across Europe. For O'Connor, though, there is something heroic about Macpherson's effort to create something grand and classical that might fill the gap left in Scottish culture by the banning of Gaelic language, song, dress and story after the 1745 rebellions. And he interweaves his response to Macpherson's book with his own story; the narrative of a poor, working-class Glasgow boy with a Gaelic-speaking mother and grandad, who nonetheless never learned a word of the language as a child.

O'Connor's monologue takes the form of a poetry cycle mostly written in hugely entertaining rhyming couplets, with set-piece riffs on aspects of this fraught cultural history intercut with wild, beautiful and sometimes haunting new Gaelic songs by Oliver Searle, superbly sung on stage by a chorus of three women, Josie Duncan, Claire Frances MacNeil and Mairi Morrison.

The intense performances of the singers, on designer Rachel O'Neil's vivid stage landscape of Scottish cultural clichés from stuffed stag to mountain views, help to keep the audience engaged and enthralled throughout.

And at the centre of it all, of course, is the figure of O'Connor, our unreliable narrator; with his sly and clever comedy, his sometimes brutal honesty, and his relentless questioning – not least about who gets to tell the nation's story, and whether we are finally ready to start telling it for ourselves, in all its rich and messy modern complexity.