Bottom's Dream, Oran Mor, Glasgow
★★★★
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Martin O'Connor's latest show explores the challenges faced by working class actors trying to survive in an industry where the odds are stacked against them.
Review by Joyce McMillan

There's no question – if recent studies are accurate – that class, and the exclusion of working class voices, is a growing problem in British theatre; so it's perhaps not surprising that two of the four theatre shows I've seen, this past week, focus on stories of working class actors trying to survive in an industry where the odds are stacked against them.

The first was ThickSkin's of Wigan's powerful ghost story about exploitation down the ages, It Walks Around The House At Night, seen at The Studio and the Tron last week. And the second is Bottom's Dream, the latest show by brilliant Glasgow bard Martin O'Connor, who has only recently completed a triumphant tour of his powerful 2025 monologue Through The Shortbread Tin.

When it comes to theatre and class, of course, it's easy to feel that Shakespeare, and his continuing pervasive presence in established UK theatre, is part of the problem; but as O'Connor knows, and superbly demonstrates here, his matchless stage poetry can also fuel transformative change, and point towards solutions.

So here, O'Connor becomes a latter-day Glasgow Bottom, inspired by the character in A Midsummer Night's Dream. In the play, Nick Bottom is a weaver, and one of the "rude mechanicals"; here, he retains the day job, but is otherwise a 21st century self-educated working class guy with acting ambitions, running the gauntlet of drama classes dominated by posh kids who say they can't understand his accent.

With Martin O'Connor as with Shakespeare, though, the drama is all about the poetry, as he weaves fragments of Shakespeare's text together with contemporary reflections on the obstacles he faces, often in rhythmic poetic forms that reach towards a lyrical kind of rap. By the end – when he gives a beautiful performance of the character Helena's wonderful rebuke to those she believes are mocking her – this Nick Bottom is a man with a fledgling career, although one partly founded on his sheer novelty value as working-class Scot among actors.

And Shakespeare, or the character he created, seems like his true companion on that journey; the one who understands, in the very fibre of language, how it feels to come from the undervalued Bottom of society, and yet to dream of beauty and greatness, nonetheless.