Through the Shortbread Tin

Martin O'Connor
National Theatre of Scotland
Tron Theatre
1 April–2 May 2025

What is it with lying historical Scots? We don't hear about any for ages and then along comes a metaphorical literary bus and two get off at the same time. Having already heard the legend of Gregor MacGregor and The Land That Never Was, here was I sat sitting listening to the tale of Scottish poet James Macpherson, who, in the midst of the 18th century, claimed that he had found and translated the works of Ossian.

Ossian's cycle of poems translated by Macpherson, from the original Gaelic, was to have a massive effect not just upon literature in Scotland, but how the thon ithers would see us. The effect of finding something so ancient, so beautiful and so wonderful meant that we had a connection to a culture that went further back than last night's dinner.

Unfortunately, it was a hoax.

The truth was that Macpherson had made it all up but provided the beginning of our cultural kitsch (or is it keech?) that has led to all things to be found in a shortbread tin, hence the title.

The man who called it all out was Samuel Johnson. He of the disdain for, well, just about everything, especially, the Highlands. I mean, what are they for?

In this new work, Scottish poet of today Martin O'Connor weaves the story of Macpherson's triumph and challenge alongside his own upbringing, charting not only his awakening to culture, but his development within it.

In the end, there is a distinct possibility that the gift shop brand that Macpherson gave us has been so well understood by O'Connor himself, there's every possibility that what we have just heard may well be as fictional as that of Macpherson.

What is certainly not fictional is the verve, vitality and verse of O'Connor himself. Telling a wonderful story of how his grandfather moved in after his grandmother died, speaking Gaelic, a language to which O'Connor had no access as a child, this manages to weave that development of a young, enquiring mind of a man alongside the connections of fakery that Macpherson brought.

We cast our eye upon the Highland vision in the set of a rolling fog amongst static, pointy hills, with an eponymous jaggy thistle, that bloody stag, a piece of shortbread, alongside a rock that has a television embedded where Ossian, at 300 years AD allegedly, apparently, but never did, sit to contemplate life.

Directed by Lu Kemp, this is a bristling production that has plenty of pace and lots of humour. It manages to weave cliché in a new formula that makes it sound just exactly why it

is a cliché in the first place: a truth, an opportunity to hear again those oft-heard words by children up and down working-class communities in Scotland, the aphorisms that make little or no sense but are parroted out to make us fall in line by wur maws and das.

The staging is enhanced beautifully by Scotland's three languages, and yes, Martin, Scots is a real wan, but so is BSL, making four, which reminds us that the Lauder-style tradition of that shortbread-tin mentality has real heritage. It may be something we scoff at, it may be something we deride, but it will always be something out of which we are making a quick buck or two from the American market—tariffs dependant.

The inspired use of Josie Duncan, Clare Frances MacNeil and Mairi Morrison as a Gaelic choir means that this has true lyricism in the vocal range and blend of melodies accompanying O'Connor's well-skilled narrative. O'Connor uses the simple, connected, communicated language of every day and makes them feel beauty and transcend the footlights in a way which allows us to giggle, to laugh, to nudge each other in acknowledgement, but more importantly, they make a very bold, understandable statement.

O'Connor's presence is key to the delivery of this. He manages to come across at the very beginning as a slightly hesitant, possibly even nervous performer that engages you in a manner that you're on side willing him to win—he repeats the feat when reciting his letter to his grandfather. It matches his point—we begin with nervousness, discover there is nothing to be nervous about and dig in the gallus. The doubt or lingering concern over our heritage is an engaging Scottish comprehension of the difficulties we have had with our history. Difficulties because, being a little older than O'Connor myself, I was never able to understand why there was a Scottish History Department at the University of Glasgow, because as a child, I thought there was none. Schools were, of course, to blame.

O'Connor frequently flits between personas for effect, demonstrating that he kens the words are his platform and his delivery the key. It unlocks the relationship between audience and performer theatrically, making O'Connor a keen student of the stage. He knows its sweet spots and how to use the metier to communicate. The boy can perform.

It is important to give credit to Catherine King, the BSL interpreter. A wee lie down after every performance is probably needed, as the hour and twenty minutes of effort spent on keeping up with the incredible pace throughout must leave her frayed at the fingertips!

It led to one of the most ironic and interesting moments I've had in a theatre for some time. O'Connor, having lost his grandfather and then finding himself working in the Kelvingrove Art Gallery, a place which, as a child, during the year of culture, he had been dragged along to, he was in Gaelic classes provided by his employer. Nobody took them seriously, aside from him of course. He could now write to his grandfather. O'Connor then spoke this letter, in Gaelic, Catherine King translated it into B(ritish)SL. And here was I, amongst the only people who could understand, aside from those Gaelic speakers around us in that audience: the deaf, unable to access much of the theatre that is on show and available for them at any other time. I sat blissfully in my ignorance because communication is at the heart of Through the Shortbread Tin. And by being unable to understand the little, I was able to comprehend it all.

O'Connor has given us a show for our age, a question for the ages, just exactly like us. Complex, maddening, enlightening, special and we may screw up the tea towel and chuck it away because the truth is all o Jock Tamsin's Bairns should follow tenuous links because they make great trips. Can we not all imagine that?

Reviewer: Donald C Stewart