Epic monologue goes beyond the Outlander effect

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By Neil Cooper Theatre critic
Theatre

Through the Shortbread Tin
Tron Theatre, Glasgow
★★★★

Dead poets don't always get second lives once they are lost to history. Once rediscovered and reclaimed, however, poetic license is up for grabs in a way where myth-making is often more interesting than the boring old truth.

So it goes with James Macpherson, the eighteenth century Scottish writer who caused a literary sensation with his apparent rediscovery of ancient Gaelic bard, Ossian. Trouble was, it was quickly debunked as fake news, with the artistic gatekeepers of the day led by Samuel Johnson dismissing Macpherson's apparent exclusive as a hoax of the highest order.

This is the starting point for Martin O'Connor's own dramatic poem that quickly goes way beyond Macpherson and Ossian's place in Scotland's cultural canon to a more personal reflection on what it means to be Scottish.

In a landscape as kitsch as the tartan tat shop Emma Bailey's set resembles, O'Connor explores his own family roots on the Isle of Lewis and the memory of a Gaelic speaking grandfather hanging over him. Arriving on stage in full Highland regalia before dressing down to modern day civvies, O'Connor himself might well be taking a leaf out of Macpherson's book as he creates a few myths of his own.

O'Connor delivers his seventy-five minute epic monologue in unabashed Scots in an attempt to get beyond what he calls "the first Outlander effect" of Macpherson's poetic canon. He is accompanied in Lu Kemp's National Theatre of Scotland production by a Gaelic girl band of sorts made up of Josie Duncan, Claire Frances MacNeil and Mairi Morrison.

The trio's renditions of Oliver Searle's new Gaelic songs punctuate each scene as O'Connor leaves himself ever more vulnerable.

The shortbread tin of the title becomes more of a Pandora's box in which a nation's hang-ups are unleashed after having a lid kept on them for so long.

As O'Connor, Kemp and co use the trappings of contemporary spoken word to rip up perceived notions of the past and look to a cultural future with all its insecurities laid bare, the result is a tartan wrapped gift of a show.