Mark Brown: A dramatic reappraisal of the Ossian 'hoax'

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Entertainment
Theatre
Scotland
By Mark Brown

IMAGINE if Scotland had a great, 18th-century poet, who was buried – due to his literary renown among his contemporaries – at Westminster Abbey.

Imagine if that poet had been celebrated for his contribution to the European Romantic tradition by great figures like Goethe and Mendelssohn.

Imagine if – on account of his championing a Gaelic language that was under assault by the burgeoning nationalism of the new British state – many (maybe most) 21st-century Scots had never heard of this Inverness-shire poet, whose name was James Macpherson?

What would that be like?

It is with compelling questions such as these that theatre-maker and performer Martin O'Connor begins his thought-provoking and delightfully humorous show Through The Shortbread Tin.

O'Connor has been working on this piece – in which the literary (and socio-political) - controversy over Macpherson's "hoax" The Poems Of Ossian is viewed through the prism of contemporary Scottishness – for at least seven years.

The outcome – with the expert assistance of director Lu Kemp – is a neatly-crafted piece of boutique theatre that the National Theatre of Scotland is touring to medium-sized venues throughout Scotland, from the Borders, to the Western Isles and Shetland.

O'Connor – who, in this show, straddles the space between performance poet and stand-up comedian – is joined on stage by a trio of fine Gaelic singers (namely, Josie Duncan, Claire Frances MacNeil and Màiri Morrison).

The performers are surrounded by the paraphernalia of kailyard Scottishness; from a huge piece of shortbread, to a massive thistle, and The Monarch Of The Glen (English painter Edwin Landseer's iconic image of a stag), all represented in tongue-in-cheek cardboard cut-out. The storytelling is illustrated from time-to-time with the assistance of a TV screen that is embedded ironically in a black, fibreglass rock.

O'Connor tells – in poetry and poetic prose – the story of the Ossian "hoax", whereby Macpherson presented poems (likely inspired by fragmentary Gaelic poems passed down in the oral tradition through generations) as the collected works of the fictional, ancient poet Ossian.

We hear of the hostility of Samuel Johnson (who was more interested in exposing Macpherson's fraud than in the quality of the poems) and of the international renown achieved by this epic Highland verse.

O'Connor speaks of the deliberate marginalisation of Macpherson, the Ossian myth and the Ossian poems in the late 1700s by the culture warriors of Britishness. As he does so, he weaves through the tale a plausibly autobiographical story of his own separation – as a working-class boy in Glasgow – from the Gaelic of his Lewis-born mother and of the silences between himself and (the main figure of masculinity in his childhood) his Gaelic-speaking grandfather.

O'Connor's story – from the suppression of the Gaelic to his recollections of the denigration of his own working-class Scots and Scots-English vernacular – will be recognisable to audiences the length and breadth of the country. So, too, will his often humorous reflections on Scotland's capacity for self-mythologising.

Simultaneously modest, yet grand, educational, yet theatrical, this defiantly original piece is the kind of smaller-scale work that should be staged by our national theatre - company.

Touring until May 2: nationaltheatrescotland.com