Theatre Review: Through the Shortbread Tin
★★★★

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Anna Burnside reviews ‘a show that examines the cringe factor without being cringe’.

Martin O’Connor bestrides a polystyrene rock. In his kilt, sash and powdered wig, he’s a cross between police chief Cameron Miekelson and Andrew O’Hagan.

For this National Theatre of Scotland touring production, O’Connor is borrowing the identity of James McPherson, the poet who “discovered” Ossian in the 18th century. He uses this as the jumping off point to have a good old poke at Scottish identity via the lies, myths and half-truths that we tell ourselves. And the rest of the world.

Soon the cut-out stag, thistle and giant shortbread finger that adorn the stage are pushed aside. The rock is wheeched round to reveal a video of a flickering fire. Three singers join O’Connor on stage and punctuate his narrative with Gaelic music.

O’Connor, a poet as well as a theatre maker, knows how to engage an audience and riff on a theme. There’s a particularly clever bit of set up at the top of the show, using the phrase ‘what’s the point’, playing on the ‘choose life’ scene in Trainspotting.

He jumps between the Ossian era - 300BC - McPherson’s lifetime and O’Connor’s own experience of growing up in Glasgow with his Gaelic-speaking grandpa. The fire changes to reflect each timespan, with a two-bar electric job standing in for his modest childhood home.

It’s a pleasing and effective theatrical device that ties together the strands of culture, language, class and privilege that take us from the caves and the shortbread tin to the scheme and back again.

Lu Kemp’s poky direction keeps O’Connor - the writer as well as the performer - from self-indulgence. The singers break up the paragraphs and change the pace. There are jokes.

Finally, a show that examines the cringe factor without being cringe. This is an achievement in itself.