Through the Shortbread Tin review – how Scotland's great literary hoax captured the spirit of the nation

★★★★

Tron theatre, Glasgow
Mark Fisher
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Martin O'Connor's witty and provocative show casts the 18th-century equivalent of the Hitler Diaries in a fresh light

Martin O'Connor calls it "the first Outlander effect". He is thinking about how an image of a country catches on and, factual or otherwise, comes to define it.

Just as the sexed-up Highland romance of Diana Gabaldon's Outlander projected a view of Scotland with questionable historical grounding so, in 1760, James Macpherson captivated the literary world with his rediscovered verses translated from the third-century Gaelic of the poet Ossian.

O'Connor is saying all this as he stands in front of a misty landscape framed like an oval shortbread tin, while wheeling off an outsize stag and a giant thistle from the dislocated set designed by Emma Bailey and Rachel O'Neill. He makes light of the cliches, but in this witty and provocative show for the National Theatre of Scotland, he takes a less expected route. It would be easy for him to ridicule Macpherson, whose discovery of the ancient bard turned out to be a hoax. That was after Ossian had been described by Thomas Jefferson as "the greatest poet that has ever existed". Although Fragments of Ancient Poetry was the 18th-century equivalent of the Hitler Diaries, O'Connor views it more benignly.

"It takes a lot of imagination to tell a true story," he says, aware that Macpherson's forgery established a narrative that influenced everyone from Sir Walter Scott to Friedrich Schiller. Fact or fancy, might these verses be as good an approximation of national identity as any? In Lu Kemp's precisely paced production, O'Connor reads Ossian's text aloud and hears it sung back to him in Gaelic, its supposed language of origin. Under Oliver Searle's musical direction, Josie Duncan, Claire Frances MacNeil and Màiri Morrison give gorgeous a capella renderings in harmonious rounds, using words once spoken on the Isle of Lewis by O'Connor's grandfather only to be neglected by an anglicised culture embarrassed by its own heritage.

Shifting registers in a sequence of spoken-word pieces, all buried rhymes and rhythmic repetitions, O'Connor is both angry at having been denied an identity and wise to the fallibility of any national story that claims to be true. "Scotland is a hoax," he says. The greater question, he argues, is who gets to tell its story.

On tour until 2 May