Through the Shortbread Tin review

“Explores the thistle-festooned fantasy of Scotland”

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An entertaining historical examination of Scotland’s public image

In the 1760s, Scottish writer James Macpherson published a popular cycle of poems, which he claimed to have translated from works originally by a Gaelic bard called Ossian in the third century. The truth, as protested by Samuel Johnson at the time, is that Macpherson had written them himself. The whole thing was a hoax. That didn’t stop it having a profound impact on Scotland’s public image, though. Fake or not, Ossian inspired a romantic branding that has helped and hindered the country ever since, a ‘Balmorality’ that persists everywhere from soft-toy Highland coos to schmaltzy series such as Outlander and the entrenched opposition to vital land reform.

This new work from performance poet Martin O’Connor and the National Theatre of Scotland, directed by Lu Kemp, uses the tale of Macpherson, his fraudulent verse and its far-reaching impact as the spark for an entertaining and intelligent investigation into the illusions and inconsistencies of Scottish history, culture and identity. Interweaving it with the story of his own relationship with his Highland heritage – he hails from Glasgow, but his Gaelic-speaking granddad lived his life on the Isle of Lewis – Macpherson tugs at the tartan threads of Scotland’s self-image until it lies in a tangle at his feet.

Over 80 minutes, this deconstruction takes place in chunks of subtly syncopated Scots poetry, stuffed with idioms, ironies and questions and delivered by O’Connor with an infectious, friendly charm. “What’s the point in myths if we don’t share them?” he queries. “What’s the point in having three languages if nobody understands them? What’s the point in being a great Scot if you’re not going to do anything that great?” Rarely does a show reach so deftly and deeply into the angst of the Scottish psyche.

Kemp’s staging sits in the makeshift school of Scottish theatre established by 7:84 in 1973 with The Cheviot, The Stag and the Black, Black Oil. Emma Bailey and Rachel O’Neill’s set consists of a fake rock, a projection of some hills and large cut-outs of a shortbread wafer, a thistle and Edwin Landseer’s Monarch of the Glen. A three-strong, all-female choir – Mairi Morrison, Josie Duncan and Claire Frances Macneil – accompany O’Connor with intricate, interwoven singing in Gaelic. Appropriately, the production tours around the Highlands and Islands next after stints in Glasgow and Edinburgh.

This is a big summer for the National Theatre of Scotland. After a patchy few years, it has some exciting shows on the horizon, including the world premiere of a new James Graham play starring Brian Cox. This is a great start. It’s not perfect – it could have more humour and scope – but it exposes and explores the tartan-trimmed, thistle-festooned fantasy of Scotland with questing brio.