All Edinburgh Theatre

Through the Shortbread Tin

Apr 10 2025

★★★★ Charismatic and witty

Storytelling Centre: Tue 8/Wed 9 April 2025
Review by Suzanne O'Brien.

Through the Shortbread Tin, written and performed by Martin O'Connor, is a captivating exploration of Scottish identity, history, myth and the truth.

What begins with a playful, stereotypical depiction of Scotland in this touring National Theatre of Scotland production, quickly evolves into a rich, multi-layered story about the nation's history and personal identity.

What is more Scottish than the iconic Monarch of the Glen, a thistle and a gigantic piece of shortbread? How about a man in a brightly coloured kilt and bold yellow sash? This is the first image presented on stage. However, the larger-than-life set designed by Emma Bailey, is swiftly deconstructed by O'Connor signalling that Scottish identity is more nuanced than the stereotypes.

O'Connor tells three stories spanning thousands of years, from third-century bard Ossian to 18th-century literary phenomena James Macpherson and on to contemporary issues of identity and the Gaelic language.

While explaining the "great literary hoax", in which Macpherson sold his own poems as translations of Ossian, and sharing his own relationship with his grandfather, O'Connor's script shifts fluidly between conversational storytelling, formal readings and cleverly written and delivered poetry.

A television disguised within a large rock serves as a clever storytelling device, helping to define the individual stories and ensuring the changes in time are clearly communicated.

The piece is as historically rich as it is humorous, with much of the comedy coming from playful commentary and jabs at Scottish culture, amplified by O'Connor's charismatic and witty delivery.

At the heart of the production is a philosophical inquiry: What does it mean to be Scottish? O'Connor leaves many questions unanswered—inviting reflection on the role of language, heritage, and national symbols like whisky and shortbread in defining identity. This open-ended approach is engaging and thought-provoking.

Additionally, it explores storytelling, exaggerating the truth and how stories, myths and tales change over time. While the legitimacy of Macpherson's work Fragments of

Ancient Poetry is questioned, his stories have undeniably shaped Scotland's heritage and culture, contributing to the nation's identity.

Despite delving into truth, lies, and hoaxes, the piece feels surprisingly honest, with real emotional impact. Whether O'Connor's personal story about not being able to communicate with his Gaelic speaking grandad is exaggerated or bends the truth it doesn't matter; there is truth in it which can be felt and resonated with.

The well-paced performance is enhanced by Gaelic songs, performed a cappella by Josie Duncan, Claire Frances MacNeil and Màiri Morrison, whose harmonies are quite beautiful. Director Lu Kemp integrates the singers into the storytelling, ensuring they contribute meaningfully whether you understand the language or not.

Though the space can sometimes feel cramped and overcrowded, limiting movement, the production succeeds in presenting a thought-provoking examination of storytelling, Scotland's past and its continuing relevance in contemporary life.