The Quinntessential Review

Review: Through the Shortbread Tin Explores Scottish Myth

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A poetic journey through Scotland's stories and silences

Martin O'Connor's Through the Shortbread Tin is a poet/theatre maker's highly personal attempt to make peace with the national myth – and his own. With a mix of wry humour and a generous lacing of rhythmic speech, he introduces Scotland's legend as fronted by Landseer's 'Monarch of the Glen', only to dismantle its cultural origins, before asking whether it really matters if the stories we tell ourselves are the gospel truth.

Thus, enter James Macpherson, 18th-century poet and supposed re-discoverer of the 3rd-century Celtic poet, Ossian. Macpherson's painstakingly collected snippets of Ossian's words, passed down through oral tradition in the highlands and islands quickly go viral, establishing a new myth for Scotland, and a place for James in the least of this renaissance. The only problem being that Ossian never existed.

Memory, identity and the myths we inherit

Years later, in the 20th century, O'Connor begins weaving his own origin story, Pollock-born, but descended from Lewismen and women. Though his grandfather and mother have the Gaelic, it's not for passing on. Such a provincial inheritance isn't worth the effort – sentiments shared by Macpherson's greatest critic, Samuel Johnson, who couldn't believe ancient Celts capable of anything of much artistic value.

With the help of a 3-strong powerhouse Gaelic-chorus comprising folk-circuit powerhouse Josie Duncan, plus award-winning actor-musos Claire Frances MacNeil and Mairi Morrison, O'Connor dives into and between these timelines, following his own roundabout journey back to the Gaelic tongue, and Macpherson and Ossian's enduring, tartan-infused impact on Scotland's self-image.

The combo of cultural reclamation and latter-day quasi-trauma dump could all be a bit noble as theatrical adventures go, but heapings of genial humour and a rejection of absolutes keep the journey entertaining and thought-provoking. In any event, a droll, shortbread tin-worthy set provided by Emma Bailey, a poe-faced production, would be out of place.

Accordingly, Martin makes a highly personable host for this journey into his and the nation's past, present and future. There's a clear-sightedness to his and director Lu Kemp's vision which keeps its wibbly-wobbly-timey-wimey (sorry, not sorry) elements balanced and unmuddled from start to finish. The pair certainly make the most of O'Connor's poetic sensibilities to soften the show's otherwise quite didactic nature. Those with performance poet-phobia needn't fear – Through the Shortbread Tin never jumps off the symbolic cliff.

Music Director, Oliver Searle, is also wise to let the assemblage of Gaelic songs which punctuate and book-end scenes, speak – or rather sing – for themselves. As someone who spends a fair amount of time amongst trad music, it's not the first time I've felt the urge to learn Gaelic, but the show's combination of winning speech and gorgeous song is one of the stronger pushes I've felt. Readers feeling likewise could do worse than checking out Edinburgh Tradfest which touches down in the city next month.

That said, the discussion of Scotland's current self-constructed myth feels a touch underdeveloped, and though heartwarming, O'Connor's nascent journey as a Gaelic speaker could unlock more for the show. In truth, trying to sum up a country's story in 80 minutes is an ambitious task, so I suppose something has to give.

What's undoubtedly true is that this new look at Macpherson's work, and attempt to puzzle out his motivations and personality, creates some arresting passages. Martin's call to appreciate the happiest times in your life, which often masquerade as uninteresting or worse, is also a message to embrace.

This National Theatre of Scotland production, stuck between the truth that has been and could be, will doubtlessly resonate with audiences wherever it goes. It's worth noting that two years after Macpherson first published, the prohibition on Scots wearing tartan for the 42 years since Culloden was lifted. That is to say, never underestimate the power of poets bearing myths…