Through the Shortbread Tin

Reviewed at the Scottish Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh. The tour continues until 2 May 2025.

Star rating: four stars ★ ★ ★ ★

Written and performed by Martin O'Connor, this hugely enjoyable show examines Scottish history and identity through word and song. Starting way back in the third century, long before Ossian became a beer label, he was a legendary poet in the Gaelic culture.

Swathed in at least three types of tartan, the be-wigged O'Connor is part of the pastiche set of misty mountains, a stag and an enormous slice of shortbread. His first monologue is a sequence of questions, fired off in Scots – catchy rhythms and a fair dose of dry Scottish humour are set against him literally stripping back the tartans to speak of the times long lost. Asking what it is to be Scottish in the here and now.

Three 'muses' appear: Josie Duncan, Claire Frances MacNeil and Màiri Morrison, singing in the Gaelic the first of several beautiful songs composed by Oliver Searle. Their voices have the wonderful clarity associated with Gaelic singing and the harmonies are exquisite. And oh, the frustration for those of us who have no Gaelic to understand their words! But, in a way, this is the point the whole play addresses.

O'Connor's narrative is expanded through James Macpherson's 'Fragments of Ancient Poetry' – a 17th century 'best-seller' – generating a rise in interest in Scottish and Highland ways of life and an increase in tourism and cultural interest. The subsequent questioning of the legitimacy of Ossian's works became so great that it all but wiped out the popularity of Macpherson's book, in this bleak time of history where Scottish language and culture became outlawed.

What this National Theatre of Scotland show achieves in the space of 90 minutes is extraordinary. Relating the history in such an engaging performance with wit and sincerity is remarkable. O'Connor, under Lu Kemp's direction, has created a truly wonderful piece of theatre that looks to a future that holds hope for the renaissance of the Scottish identity, be it Highland or Lowland.

Fiona Or