Mary Woodward Review

Through the Shortbread Tin

April 10 2025 Brett Herriot

★★★★

“Spellbinding!”

Imagine the stage – dominated by a huge rock set in front of a misty Highland landscape, atop of which the Monarch of the Glen proudly stands. A giant thistle sprouts in the background, an enormous shortbread finger hovers above us, and a ‘jolly Scottish tune’ is perhaps designed to entice us to partake in ceilidh. On to this stage strides a tartan-clad, bewigged figure accompanied by a woman in a long brown dress with a matching plaid stole over it. We’re in Scotland, then, eh?

Martin O’Connor and Catherine King hold us spellbound as, with the assistance of Josie Duncan, Claire Frances MacNeil and Mairi Morrison, we are presented with interweaving narratives that invite and challenge us to ponder the nature of identity, language, culture, history, communication, myth, truth, and the fact that it takes a lot ae imagination tae tell a true story…

Martin’s story starts with the ‘discovery’ in 1760 by James Macpherson of the long-lost fragments of Gaelic poetry composed by the third-century blind bard Ossian. In what he called “the first Outlander effect”, these poems became all the rage in continental Europe, inspiring art and music, feeding into the development of the ‘Romantic’ period, and leading Napoleon to label Ossian his favourite poet. The English, who by now had taken over Scotland and were doing their best to suppress each and every manifestation of Scottish culture, scornfully dismissed the poems – they must be a forgery, because how could these northern savages ever have produced such amazing works?

Were the works of Ossian real, or a very clever con? Are they a part of Scotland’s history, or the invention of someone trying to write about what it ought to have been? Martin was led to look at his own life and the total vacuum where a knowledge of Scotland’s story should have been. When he was ten, his granda came from the isle of Lewis to live with him and his mum. Until then, he was unaware that his mum spoke Gaelic, the only language his granda had. Martin must ‘get ahead’ and learn only to speak ‘properly’ [ie English] – so he could only talk with his granda via his mum, which limited communication…

The narrative is mainly in Scots, the songs weaving their way around and through this are in Gaelic. Catherine is signing both, together with the occasional bit of English. How does it feel to be speaking and understanding the least-used of the three

languages in use tonight? I feel blessed that twenty years' residence in Scotland has enabled me to [mostly] grasp what's said in Scots, but my Gaelic is non-existent [and, unlike Netflix, there are no subtitles]. How much am I missing by my lack of understanding – I can try to guess what the songs are about, but I could be wildly wrong – just as I could be if I watched K-drama without the subtitles. How much are history, culture, and sense of identity bound up with language, how can they be understood from an outsider's position of ignorance? How arrogant to assume that something we don't understand is necessarily of less value than our mother tongue, our learned way of doing things? How isolating, how demoralising to feel that we are not understood, however hard we try to express ourselves, and that our history and culture are of less importance than that of the dominant power in the land.

It's a brilliant script. It's a superb performance from all five artists. The choreography is intricate and always an essential part of the drama. The music is incredible. The words tumble and spill and go round in circles, laughing, punning, crying, needling, scorning, challenging, revealing and obscuring meaning, showing the complexity of language and all its associations, assumptions and unvoiced undertones. Above all, they underline the importance, the life-enhancing essential nature of SPEAKING and, just as vital, of HEARING AND UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS SAID – not just nodding and smiling in incomprehension. Communication requires effort on the part of both speaker and listener.

What a world is contained in a journey through a shortbread tin…