



Louise Hoare as Elizabeth and Adam Slynn as Tom — Photo by Greg Veit

When one enters the small, cramped, performance space above the Hope & Anchor pub, Upper Street, Islington, a man lays sprawled on the floor, furiously tracing lines with chalk on the black floor. One cannot discern what it is he's up to, what sort of image this is. There are chains of small lamps draped across overhead, a galvanized wash tub on one end of the small stage, a ladder against a wall, and the chalk lines on the floor.

The lights dim, and rise again. A woman has entered the stage, and runs at the man, throws herself onto the floor, seeking to erase the lines he has painstakingly traced. Over the next several minutes this man and this woman engage in fierce embrace, violent struggle, erotic, vicious, beautiful, dramatic. Like an entire lifetime together, distilled into dance.

New Zealand poet Denis Glover, in 1964, penned the much beloved poem, *The Magpies*, about a farming couple and their struggles. Here it is:

When Tom and Elizabeth took the farm
The bracken made their bed
and Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle
The magpies said

Tom's hand was strong to the plough
and Elizabeth's lips were red
and Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle
The magpies said

Year in year out they worked
while the pines grew overhead

and Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle
The magpies said

But all the beautiful crops soon went
to the mortgage man instead
and Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle
The magpies said

Elizabeth is dead now (it's long ago)
Old Tom's gone light in the head
and Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle
The magpies said

The farm's still there. Mortgage corporations
couldn't give it away
and Quardle oodle ardle wardle doodle
The magpies say.

Louise Hoare and Adam Slynn embody Elizabeth and Tom in sweeping, near operatic fashion, in *Skin Tight* at the Hope Theatre through 6 November. This is a reprise of a 2017 production, also starring Hoare, which wowed critics and audiences alike. When **Pawn** made plans to celebrate his birthday in London, I chose this show to cap off the evening, neither of us quite knowing what it was about.

This is a very different sort of play. It's based on *The Magpies*, but only in the loosest of manners. It is dramatic, to be sure; intense and pressing. But it is really about memory, the sweep of time, the way one remembers oneself remembering. Elizabeth is gone, or is going. Tom once left her (off to war) and that betrayal is one she never forgave him for. She responded with her own betrayal, one he never forgave her for. They farmed, and loved, and had a family, and grew old. All the time their fierce love and devotion persisted. And now we are inside of Tom's mind (or that's how I choose to perceive it) and he is remembering over and over again their lives together. They are so beautiful and young, fit and passionate, but they are aging and infirm, arguing over their daughter's letters from her London discontent.

Throughout *Skin Tight* one sees echos of the opening dance, that violent pas de deux which started the show. Each gesture and move of that dance appears again, in sequence, in the following narrative. And each time we recognize this a small shiver erupts. But soon enough (the show is just under an hour) Elizabeth and Tom have fallen quiet, the music recedes, and all we're left with is the chalk lines on the floor.

Skin Tight was a lovely, moving piece of theatre. Much recommended.

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