



Tadgh Murphy in the Gate Theatre production of 'The Speckled People' by Hugo Hamilton. Photo: Pat Redmond

by Derek West Reviewed 04 October

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Hugo Hamilton's elegant memoir about a 1950s childhood in Ireland, with a German mother and a Gaelgeoir father, offers a unique perspective both on Europe, still scarred by the effects of the Third Reich and the Irish Republic, barely emerging from a condition of ingrown nationalism. The family serves both as autobiographical material and as a microcosm of a complex and disturbed continent.

Languages are central – German, Irish and English – each one a determinant of character and place in the world. The tension between the three, particularly as perceived by the father, underlines the severe difficulty of defining one's identity, especially when it is 'speckled, dappled, flecked, and spotted.' Hamilton chooses to address this issue almost entirely through English [for the convenience of both reader and playgoer] but it creates an air of uncertainty [never as apparent, for instance, in Friel's play on two languages, *Translations*]. Incomprehension and alienation lie at the heart of the fledgling state and within the Hamilton/Ó hUrmoltaigh family. Much of the strain arises from the authoritarian imposition of one means of communication over the others.

The play poses questions about its central function. Is it the story of a marriage? About a Don Quixotic dad [finely played in his

failures by Denis Conway] and a mother with a sordid secret, rooted in Nazi Germany, and which unfolds through the ominous appearances of Stephen Brennan as a menacing Stiegler? Julika Jenkins brings a refreshing sensitivity of gesture and voice to her characterisation of Irmgard, a woman unshakeable in her assertion of love and stoicism in the face of hatred and tyranny. One of the ironies is that the subjugation of the male in one jurisdiction is echoed by the high-handedness of her husband in another. What seems at first to be an unlikely marriage is sustained and deepened by the feminine principle of tenderness and solicitude.

Is it about the boy? The final shape of the piece is affected significantly by the death of the father – it draws a line below Hann's childhood, but there is some uncertainty as to where the focus lies. Hamilton adopts a specific narrative stance – Hann combines both the naivety of childhood and an adult's retrospective wisdom, while, at the same time, raising the reader's awareness the tragic undertones in the lives of both his parents – the visionary Irishman, fastened like some dying animal to his own narrow convictions; the loving mother suffering horrific abuse and seeing her country devastated by fanatical hatred. Turn this into a piece for theatre and the subtlety of the original narrative is unsettled, in the first instance, by the device of the adult-in-child's clothing carrying the burden of storyteller. Tadhg Murphy brings tremendous bursts of boy-energy and wide-eyed wonder to the role, but he is obliged to externalise what in the original prose was a lyrical and nuanced account of childhood.

Is this a reassuring exercise in nostalgia? Place it on a stage and immediately there are issues of design. Joe Vanek has made an open playing space that serves for home, for seaside, wherever the action requires, which is economical and functional, but he has covered his cyclorama with designer children's drawings and has, with great care, placed toys [an ark, figurines et al] in the foreground. They serve no direct purpose in the action, unlike the well-selected fifties furniture. But it's too pretty, too bright, for a story set in drab and insolvent times and which inclines, every so often, towards a palpable and disturbing darkness.

Is it a comedy, with echoes of Hugh Leonard? The adaptation plays tricks with the ironies – the book's observations of an insular myopia - 'dacent' folk who don't really know much about 39-45 ['We were neutral'] - is transmuted into broader strokes, managed particularly by Marion O'Dwyer's Aunt Eily. Her lines are among the sharpest of the evening, her comic timing impeccable, and while they liven the proceedings, they strike an oddly different note. Likewise, the intimidation of the bullies [John Cronin and Jonathan Delaney Tyman] is dissipated by the adult caricature of boys; Tom Hickey, as the shop-keeper, is left bumbling along genially and John Kavanagh underplays the zeal of the aging nationalist.

Patrick Mason's production engages with the political and the familial themes - the one generating considerable emotional force; the other calling for more analytical reflection – but even in the warm glow of shared grief and love, there is a lingering question about the central concern of Hugo Hamilton's play which is not wholly resolved.

*Derek West manages Creative Engagement, an arts programme for second-level schools, and edits publications for the National Association of Principals and Deputy-Principals (NAPD).*

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## The Speckled People by Hugo Hamilton

4 Oct - 5 Nov, 2011

Produced by [The Gate Theatre](#)

In [The Gate Theatre](#)

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