



BUZO ED



NOTES: TEACHING “NORM AND AHMED”

NSW HSC Course Prescriptions 2010-2012 “Australian Drama and Theatre: Dramatic Traditions in Australia”

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A CONTROVERSIAL BEGINNING

When nascent playwright Alex Buzo returned to his Sydney flat from the pub late one night in 1969, the phone rang. It was the artistic director of a Queensland theatre company. The Vice Squad were threatening to have one of the actors in “Norm and Ahmed” arrested for using obscene language. The next night, the actor was arrested and charged, as were others involved in productions around the country, igniting a much-publicised campaign against censorship that spanned three states and ended in the Supreme Court in 1970. In a 2005 television interview, Buzo said:

“my aim as a writer was to put Australian drama on the front page. I didn't anticipate this sort of front page treatment but, I thought it did have a good result in the sense that people knew that Australian drama was alive and well, whereas up until that point it had no publicity whatsoever...I'd be disappointed if people didn't think the play had something to say about racism and generational envy...it is a literary play, it is an art play, it's meant to be humorous and imaginative, it's meant to have other things going for it other than the final two words.”¹

SIGNIFICANCE FOR AUSTRALIAN THEATRICAL HERITAGE

In terms of Australia's theatrical heritage, “Norm and Ahmed” was a watershed work. It was one of the first plays to link male aggression with insecurity and challenge popular Australian notions such as the Great Australian Dream, mateship, the “fair go” and the Anzac legend. An encounter between an urban, middle-aged blue-collar Aussie “bloke” and an articulate young Pakistani man living in Australia to attend university represented a slice of Australian life unseen in Australian theatre at the time.

Previous to the play's 1968 premiere in Sydney at the Old Tote Theatre (now UNSW's Fig Tree Theatre), Australians saw only a smattering of their own kind portrayed on stage and screen. Australian characters were nearly always depicted as bushrangers or explorers and even then, it was no guarantee they were played by an Australian. At the time of the 1969 censorship battle Buzo was also putting the finishing touches on the screenplay of “Ned Kelly” which featured an effete Mick Jagger in the title role.

In the 1960's, ethnic characters in Australian plays also tended to be subjected to stereotype. In Buzo's words,

“All ethnic characters were played in a pop-eyed ungrammatical greengrocer style. The spectacle of a well-educated, well-spoken salami fancier was something of an affront, so I made sure my plays were chock-full of people like Ahmed, Abidin, Anthony Martello and Samuel T. Bow”²

STYLE AND STRUCTURE

As with much of Buzo's early work, "Norm and Ahmed" deals with alienation from society. Buzo uses the tension created by the disparate match of working class Norm with articulate, educated Ahmed to drive the action of the play and gradually reveal that Norm is just as alienated from his supposed native culture as the visitor.

One of the most pondered upon questions in Australian theatre is why Norm lashes out at Ahmed when they appear to have eventually found common ground. Alex Buzo himself always responded with "what do you think?" The ambiguity of the play gives it its driving force and the ending is a deliberate move away from a conventional, predictable ending. Buzo's premise "never underestimate the power of difference" does, however, come the closest to providing an explanation.

To maintain the tautness of the action, the audience must warm to both Norm and Ahmed. Buzo makes this possible through humour, their mutual willingness to listen to each other and giving each character a chance to talk about their lives with depth and warmth. The key to an effective playing style with this text, is the balanced use of both Norm's aggression and insecurity. John McCallum writes "*If Norm is played as a complete ocker, aggression and all (as he sometimes is). Then Ahmed begins to look like a total fool. Why does he not simply walk away?*"³

It is also important to note that the play is a work of art, not reality: a study of humanity and the difference between truth and point of view, rather than a political drama. As Buzo says:

"I had been interviewed and photographed and presented by the media as a "young iconoclast". I managed to get in some good points about an author's right to call things as he sees them, but whenever I said that neither Norm nor ex-servicemen were being lampooned in the play and that it was not a piece of message drama, my words were never printed. As far as the press, the judiciary and the defence were concerned, the play was an 'attack on racism'. There was no questioning of Norm's reality, verbal or otherwise. No one said 'We only have Norm's word that he was in Tobruk'; the nature of theatrical truth was not investigated...But whatever the artistic shortcomings might have been, at least the public got to know that the theatre was alive".²

SIGNIFICANCE FOR ASIAN AUDIENCES

Further illuminating the concept of alienation and to note an interesting variation in the play's context, Buzo describes a Malaysian production in 1989:

"many in the audience had relatives who had studied in Australia. For them, the play was a background to letters home and the audience response was the most emotional and expressive I have seen in the piece's long history. It was first performed in Sydney in 1968, and Joe Hasham (a Lebanese Australian actor) had been an usher for that production. He would have been cast as Ahmed in any Australian production, but in Malaysia he played Norm to Mustafa Noor's Ahmed, who was turned by the audience into the main character. The premise of the play - "never underestimate the power of difference" - certainly held up, even though dramatically it was stood on its head."

"He challenged the gods," says the very secular Norm of his boss and in this production Ahmed gasped. Mustafa Noor was a superb actor and as a Muslim he was shocked by

*this and then so was the audience, whose gasps were equally audible. I had always subconsciously believed this was the right response, even if I had not fully plotted the Muslim attitude to "the gods" - you don't have to if you're the author - and I felt the final click of the play go into place. "I have now heard every possible response," I thought to myself on that draining opening night in Kuala Lumpur. If I had been an American television personality, I might have said "We have closure..."*⁴

SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL RELEVANCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001 brought a new wave of relevance for the play. When it was produced in Sydney in 2007, director Arne Neeme set the action in the present day, merely changing Norm from a WWII veteran to a Vietnam veteran and giving Ahmed a backpack instead of a briefcase. Many audience members new to the work were unnerved when they realised it was, in fact, a 40-year old play. It seemed to reflect the all-too-familiar racist undercurrents of Australian society epitomised by recent high-profile incidences such as the Cronulla riots, the Haneef saga and the backlash against the Muslim school in Camden.

In 2009, "Norm and Ahmed" is to find a companion. A new play by Alana Valentine will be premiered in response to the themes and concerns in Buzo's "Norm and Ahmed." Forty years after its controversial premiere, what has become of the generation of "Ahmed's" who migrated to Australia and assimilated into Australian society?

Suggested Classroom Activities for Drama students

CONSCIENCE ALLEY

Description: Using a key moment in the play, students form an "alley", each side with an opposing attitude, while one student walks down the middle.

Aim: To engage with the characters' choices in the play.

Example: Using the moment near the beginning of the play when Norm puts out his hand and Ahmed must decide whether to shake it, have the class standing in two lines facing each other forming an "alley." One side tries to convince Ahmed not to shake Norm's hand by saying a sentence each. (eg "he's going to beat you up"). The other side tries to convince Ahmed to shake his hand (eg "don't offend him"). One person is Ahmed and must walk down the alley. As they pass, class members say their sentences. When Ahmed gets to the end he must decide whether to shake Norm's hand or not.

FORUM THEATRE (IN THE STYLE OF AUGUSTO BOAL)

Description: Two students perform a section of text while the rest of the class are divided into "Team Norm" and "Team Ahmed".

Aim: To investigate the characters' points of view.

Example: Two students perform the section of the play from when Norm says "Anyway, Ahmed, what do you do in your spare time?" to when he says "Sounds like a real rort". The other students are divided into two teams in support of each character. They must watch the scene concentrating solely on their given character's point of view. "Norm" and "Ahmed" are then put in the "hotseat". The class as a whole can ask either

character questions about what they think/feel about the situation in the chosen text. Students playing “Norm and “Ahmed” are in character when they answer and must observe a “cone of silence,” pretending they can’t hear the other character talking. The two groups then go away and come up with a short statement in support of their character’s opinions and attitudes to present to the rest of the group.

DEVISING ALTERNATE ENDINGS TO THE PLAY

Description: Students devise alternative endings to the play

Aim: To elucidate the effectiveness of Buzo's chosen outcome and explore how different endings change the premise of the play.

Reference List

1. “Remembering Alex Buzo”, 2006, DVD, ABC TV, Sydney
2. Buzo, A. 1988 *Young Person’s Guide to the Theatre And Almost Everything Else*, Penguin Books Australia, Melbourne
3. McCallum, J. 1987 *Buzo*, Methuen Australia, Sydney
4. Buzo, A. 2004, “Wary Asians on a Theme: Dramatising in the Near North”, *Quadrant Magazine*, November, 62-65

FURTHER INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

Further visual, audio and print resources are available to be viewed and downloaded at BUZO ED: www.alexbuzo.com.au

BUZO ED also presents workshops tailored to every class size and budget delivered straight to the classroom. Contact Emma Buzo via email: ebuzo@alexbuzo.com.au or phone: 0411 399 923

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