



BUZO ED

EDUCATION NOTES ON **NORM AND AHMED** by Alex Buzo

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

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RESOURCES

A comprehensive range of visual, audio and print resources including You Tube videos of television coverage of the play, radio interviews and related articles are available online at BUZO ED: <http://alexbuzo.com.au/education/education.html>

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

DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

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. As Buzo says,

"Norm comes into contact with someone who's an outgrowth of his worst fears. I mean, here's this black person, he's ethnic, he's well educated, got a future, is articulate, is of a higher social class, everything that Norm thought that he wouldn't have to confront he does have to confront, so it's a kind of nightmare experience for him." ³

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 the counter question *"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 as do Norm's well-placed bouts of physical aggression.

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?"* ⁴

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 defense 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..."⁵

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES FOR DRAMA STUDENTS

1. NORM, AHMED AND FRIENDS

Description: Students play various roles and act out the beginning of the play up until Norm holds out his hand.

Aim: To illustrate the conscious choices Alex Buzo made in the play.

How it works: The setting of the beginning of the play is altered and acted out in three different ways. Students take turns in being actors and audience members each time.

- Scenario #1: Norm begins the play onstage joined by a group (5 or so) of his mates. It is useful to imagine where they have been eg, at the RSL after a footy match. His friends are to support him throughout the exchange. They may make noise, laugh, comment, but are not to de-rail the scene and must listen and support Norm's dialogue at all times.
- Scenario #2: Similar to #1 but this time Ahmed enters with a group of his mates.
- Scenario #3: Norm and Ahmed begin the play as per the script, but there are a number of other people waiting at the bus stop. None of them know Norm, Ahmed, or each other.

Students then discuss how each 'lens' influenced the situation. How did Norm and Ahmed's behaviour change each time? Why do you think Buzo choose to set the play how he did?

2. CONSCIENCE ALLEY

Description: Using a section of the play that leads up to key decision from one of the characters, 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.

How it works: 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.

3. DEVISING ALTERNATIVE ENDINGS TO THE PLAY

Description: Students devise alternative endings to the play.

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

How it works: In pairs, students devise alternative endings to the one in the script. They act it out for the group. The group then discusses how different endings affect the overall message and structure of the play. Why do you think Buzo chose the ending he did?

4. POINT OF VIEW

Description: Students make a list of Norm and Ahmed’s attitudes to different topics.

Aim: Investigate the characterisation of Norm and Ahmed and examine the dramatic technique he has employed.

How it works: Students use butchers paper and brainstorm Norm and Ahmed’s attitudes to the following topics using the content given in the play. Suggested format below. They then evaluate Buzo’s choice to put these two characters on stage together.

	Norm	Ahmed
The military		
Law and order		
Sport		
Education		
A decent life		
Alcohol		
Leisure time		
Sex		
Homosexuality		

5. 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.

How it works: 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.

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. Buzo, A. 2001 *Recorded Interview with Alexander Buzo*, Frank Heimans, National Library of Australia, TRC-4567.
4. McCallum, J. 1987 *Buzo*, Methuen Australia, Sydney
5. Buzo, A. 2004, *Wary Asians on a Theme: Dramatising in the Near North*, *Quadrant Magazine*, November, 62-65

DRAMATIC TRADITIONS WORKSHOPS DELIVERED TO YOUR CLASSROOM

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(Head of Drama, The King's School, Parramatta)

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Emma Buzo – Director

<http://www.alexbuzo.com.au>

PO Box 833 Kingsford NSW 2032 AUSTRALIA

E: ebuzo@alexbuzo.com.au | M: 0411 399 923 | F: 61 2 9697 3927

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