

TRC-4657



**ORAL HISTORY SECTION**

**Recorded interview with  
ALEXANDER BUZO  
b. 1944**

**Interviewer: Frank Heimans  
Date of interview: 25 January 2001**

**Conditions of Access**

**Open access for research use and public use.**

**Frank Heimans:** So we're talking now sort of in the 1967 period, aren't we?

**Alexander Buzo:** Yes, late sixties, going into 1970, '71. This was the heyday of La Mama, the Australian Performing Group and the Nimrod Theatre.

**Frank Heimans:** What makes a play come into your head?

**Alexander Buzo:** Oh, generally it's a series of images that starts it off. A lot of my plays project a sensibility and so I suppose it's the development of that sensibility. With *Norm and Ahmed* it was the incident that happened that so shocked me. With *Rooted* it was a series of images of people flying kites and things like that on the northern beaches of Sydney, it was the dislocation of that area from reality, I suppose. *The Front Room Boys*, that came out of the office work I did where there was a Swiss calendar on the wall so that whenever we were freezing in winter it was showing a beach scene, people swimming, and in summer when it was hot they were showing snow-capped wintry scenes, and, of course, it had a special irony for me, having lived in Switzerland and gone to school there. So it was sort of an image of how out of reach things were for the front room boys, as opposed to the backroom boys who run society.

**Frank Heimans:** Let's talk about some of your plays in detail. The first one, of course, was *Norm and Ahmed*. It's really a meeting, isn't it, between an Aussie bloke and a Pakistani student, and you've already told us how the idea came into your head. What basically happens in that particular play?

**Alexander Buzo:** What happens is that Ahmed, the student, finds that the real world's not quite what it seems to be. It also brings into conflict these two very different characters. It's not purely a racial thing, if it were just purely racial I think it would be a pamphlet play rather than a really dramatic play. 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 a nightmare experience for him. But that's similar to *Rooted* where the central character,

Bentley, is confronted by his nightmare which is that all his possessions, his home unit, his car, his stereo set, are taken away from him. I suppose in these early plays the values of the society were being questioned by confronting pillars of that particular community by their worst fears, their worst nightmares, and seeing how they'd react.

**Frank Heimans:** Now, *Norm and Ahmed*, what were you really trying to express, what was the big theme in that? Was it because there was a racial problem in Australia against Pakistani students or against Asians, or what? What were you trying to say?

**Alexander Buzo:** Well, I was trying to say that the way we confront ... can you stop the tape for a minute? [Break in interview]

**Frank Heimans:** Resuming recording after a short break. Alex, what did you want people to carry away with them from that play? What was it really about?

**Alexander Buzo:** The premise of *Norm and Ahmed* is never underestimate the power of difference, that although superficially things may be moving in a certain direction, it's the job of the playwright to try to dig beneath that. The differences that I've outlined between Norm and Ahmed are just so great that Norm's only response is to set out to try to destroy them through the act of violence at the end.

**Frank Heimans:** That was a very brutal scene. Were people prepared for that last scene where he's really violently kicked and so on, and punched?

**Alexander Buzo:** No, there were gasps from the audience. When the play was later produced in Kuala Lumpur in 1989 there were people in tears because they'd heard of similar things happening to their relatives when they'd gone to study in Australia. They took the play to be a contemporary one, set in '89, and they thought, 'God, I had hoped that that kind of thing had gone', and these three women I remember were just hysterical afterwards saying how that had happened to someone they had known, a Malaysian student.