THE FAILED NATIONALISM OF ALEX BUZO

by STEPHEN SEWELL

A response to:

Norm and Ahmed

by Alex Buzo

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THE PERFORMING ARTS PUBLISHER

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Author's Biography

STEPHEN SEWELL has been responsible for some of the most provocative and electrifying Australian plays of the past twenty-five years. Among those published by Currency are *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, winner of the New South Wales Premier's Literary Award and the Australian Writer's Guild Award, *The Sick Room*, *Traitors* and *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*, which won the 2004 Green Room Award, both the New South Wales and the Victorian Premier's Literary Award, and the Australian Writer's Guild Award for Best Play, making it the most awarded play in Australian history. Other plays include *It Just Stopped* and Stephen's most recent work, *Kandahar Gate*. He was script editor on the feature film *Chopper* and he has also written a number of screenplays, including *The Boy*s, the critically acclaimed and AFI Award winning adaptation of Gordon Graham's play of the same name, both of which are published by Currency Press.

Stephen chaired the Australian National Playwright's Centre for a number of years and is the recipient of numerous awards, including a two year Australian Council Literary Fellowship and the prestigious ANPC Award for Significant Contribution to Australian Theatre (2004).

Stephen is currently Head of Writing for Performance at the National Institute of Dramatic Art.

FAILED NATIONALISM

Nationalist movements, wherever they are, find a sense of identity in the language of the group trying to unify itself. Nation building is very much a question of language creation and celebration, with poets and playwrights always at the forefront of the process, and this is as true of the invention of Hebrew as it was of Poland's attempt to overthrow Russian domination in the 19th Century,[1] or England's rise and transformation of itself into Britain under Elizabeth I, with the works of Shakespeare and Marlowe thrilling audiences not only with uplifting versions of their history, but with the power of their language. The ebb and flow of Australian nationalism has similarly been accompanied by eruptions of myth and language making, from the time of the Bulletin bush poets, Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson, amongst others, through to the chaotic period following the Second World War when, as the United States replaced Britain as the pole of our national politics, there was a short space of time offering the promise of independence that was quickly occupied by writers such as Dorothy Hewett and Frank Hardy, once again celebrating a rough-edged Australian vernacular against the official English championed by the upholders of taste and the status quo.

This restless yearning for Australian independence re-emerged in the sixties as Australia was again drawn into another war not of its choosing, and for the first time in our history conscripts were to be sent to fight people in their own homeland in a place called Vietnam. Conscripts landed at Nui Dat in 1966 and the first conscript died there a few days later,[2] sparking an anti-war movement that within four years was threatening the hegemony of the Liberal-National Party that had governed Australia throughout the entire post-war period. By 1970, the various oppositional forces—political, religious, cultural—had coalesced into the formidable Vietnam Moratorium Campaign which was able to mount demonstrations of 100,000 people in Melbourne alone, and 200,000 people nationwide. And that same year, the Australian Performing Group, which had been gestating in Melbourne's *La Mama,* was formed—a theatre group *"influenced by*

the new politics of that era, (that) wanted ... to be political in a way that the conventional bourgeois theatre in Australia certainly wasn't",[3] but all dedicated to putting the Australian language onstage. Alex Buzo's *Norm and Ahmed* was one of the first plays performed.

Language is and remained Buzo's central concern. The tough, violent, sinuous vernacular filled with Australian history but somehow ignorant of it. Like all great writers, Buzo loved the cadences and rhythm of his own language, and thrilled to his virtuosity with it. *"Yes, he was a real ratbag, my old man. Mad Dan Gallagher..."*, Norm says, relishing the words as they tumble forth. Later he tells Ahmed, *"Sometimes when I'm out in the backyard, watering the frangipanis, I feel very lonely, I really do..."* and the menacing poetry entrances us as much as it does the hapless Pakistani who has had the misfortune to fall into the web of the darkly malevolent stranger.

Norm and Ahmed, two liminal figures of Australia's imagination: one the primal father, a Tobruk veteran and son of an Anzac—or so he says[4]—a figure loved and loathed by generations who had lived under his baleful eye as he punished them for the punishment he had received in our endless wars; the other a visitor from a half-imagined future, polite, educated, thoughtful and inevitably doomed at the hands of the castrating tormentor he happens to meet like an evil spirit at midnight.

Like a bad son, Buzo delights in teasing out the contradictions of his monstrous creation. Norm is alternately threatening and seductive, foul-mouthed and genteel, a conformist bully who thinks the coppers deserve "a fair go" but whose opponents, the "wobbly"[5] unionists, deserve a kicking because you "can't buck the system". Norm is very much a father figure, one that confronted anti-war protestors on the streets of Australia and who, in the form of the RSL, had already had Alan Seymour's play about Anzac Day, *The One Day of the Year,* banned from the inaugural Adelaide Festival in 1960, thus ensuring its instant success. But it is not so much satire, or even political commentary, that Buzo is interested in while unleashing Norm on the stage, as the sheer inventiveness and audacity of his language. *"That was my position, lock. Talk about cover defence! I used to hit 'em*

hard and low, round the knees, down they went." And a little later, *"I remember one bloke. A real coot...Tall bloke he was. A long, thin streak of pelican shit."* And on and on through all the delights of Australian slang. *Perv...creamer...Gyppos...easy pickings...flog your chops...*gems of a colourful language spill effortlessly from Norm's voluble mouth. Buzo was not himself working class, but had a fascination with the rough, muscular language of working class people, so his play bustles with the dark, filthy poetry of the demi-monde. *"You looked as if a kick in the crutch and a cold frankfurt'd finish you off",* he says to Ahmed soon after their meeting; and later, *"I floored this bloody kraut. Really laid him out. He was all over the place like a mad woman's lunchbox"*. This was the argot that soon made the prison playwright, Jim McNeil, famous, leading to his early release and catastrophic decline, and it was an argot that was vital, potent, angry and most importantly, *Australian.* Because for the people championing it, both the theatre-makers and the audience they attracted, *that* was the most important thing. That we were hearing *our stories* told *our way* in *our language.*

And language was what drove it. It heralded a new era when the Australian stage would be a platform for Australian voices, and so suited the times of change that were sweeping not only Australia but the world, culminating here with the election of the Whitlam Labor Government, the end of conscription and our involvement in the American war against Vietnam,[6] the unleashing of a reform program that was met almost instantly with an hysterical backlash from the institutional powers which had come to see themselves as the natural rulers of the country, a backlash leading to the constitutional coup of 1975 and Labor's loss of government in the subsequent electoral debacle when the Murdoch press pulled out all stops to ensure its defeat.[7] The experiment was over, and with it the fire that had burnt in the bellies of the cultural leaders, so closely allied and identified with Whitlam's challenge. But that was still in the future when *Norm and Ahmed* premiered at the Pram[8] in 1970, and in that moment it was the working class that was in the ascendant, slowly gathering strength to declare *It's Time*[9] two years later. It might seem strange to describe the brutal thuggish racist, Norm, as a working-class hero, but his centrality on the stage of Buzo's play betrayed the grim fascination a largely

tertiary-educated audience had for its working class forebears, brutes and killers who had taken this land and subdued it with a horrific violence that is still only grudgingly acknowledged, if at all, and more often than not denied. Norm was the Australia the new generation was confronting and struggling with to wrestle a future for themselves, and one hopefully that was able to deal with some of his crimes,[10] indicated so arrestingly in his verbal forays. And his final, sickening assault. This was a man whose endearing sentimentality camouflaged a blindly hateful savagery and who is, at heart, a psychotic killer who tips an unconscious and possibly already dead stranger over a handrail snarling, *"Fucking boong"* after tricking him into accepting his hand of friendship. A dangerous man, in other words, who is nevertheless our hero.

This was what Australian men were, before the seventies' resurgence of feminism hit,[11] and what our model of masculinity was; and we find him again and again in the literature of the time, in Williamson's *Removalists*(1971, La Mama), Romeril's *Floating World*(1975, Australian Performing Group) and even Hibberd's *Stretch of the Imagination* (1972, Australian Performing Group) where the irascible Monk O'Neil rants, *"it's as cold as a cunt on concrete."* The same man, alternately kindly and friendly or foul-mouthed and murderously cruel, stalked Australia's dreams amusing and terrifying in equal measure until the working class ceased to be of interest, and those hard men were replaced once more by middle-class concerns expressed with wit and easy charm in a world apparently far removed from factories and shipyards and abattoirs. A world, that is to say, of angry people being ground down by relentless tyranny while their betters got on with making money and having affairs.

But to raise the question of who working people are actually working *for* is to raise one of the most difficult questions of a self-declared egalitarian state; is to raise, in other words, a *political* question, and while Buzo and his fellow playwrights were clearly writing, at this time, within a highly politicised environment, their interests were not, by and large, explicitly political.[12] Thus we have the irony that while *Norm and Ahmed* depicts a racist assault on a Pakistani student, it is not

about racism, and consequently offers no analysis of Australian racism. Norm is merely a prejudiced bigot, an object of fear and derision. If Buzo has a lesson for us, it is not to be like Norm. We have no clues about what fuels Norm's anger and violence, or the real source of his fury; he is simply presented as an enigmatic force of nature, a dangerous animal that needs to be respected and perhaps admired from a distance, hence the dramaturgical question that every production faces: at what point does Norm decide to attack Ahmed? A question that really begs the question of whether Norm is capable of deciding anything, because really he is just an irrational force wrapped in a human skin; a monster that Ahmed mistakes for a man, our very own Caliban.

And who is Ahmed, anyhow? According to Bob Ellis,[13] the story of *Norm and Ahmed* came to Buzo from an incident involving a Pakistani friend, Mohammed Kazim, who was similarly menaced in a pub, but there is very little character detail in Ahmed's portrayal to give us any real sense of authenticity. Ahmed is more a cypher, a probe used to explore Norm, or rather, give Norm the opportunity to talk, and pounce. He is the tasty morsel Buzo dangles in front of the deadly Norm to get him to perform, and the decision by Jim Sharman in his premiere production[14] in Sydney[15] to black-up a white actor[16] rather than use a Pakistani one merely underlines the fantasy element of the role. Ahmed is an imagined Other to Norm's all-too-immediate Real. Ahmed is us, or perhaps Buzo himself, cool, detached, slyly judgmental and absolutely fascinated. And unable to tear his gaze away till the long-feared but totally inevitable barrage of blows makes escape impossible.

But while acting out a perverse Oedipal fantasy is certainly one element of *Norm and Ahmed,* as it was also on the streets outside in those tumultuous years of inter-generational conflict, it did not do much to illuminate the underlying issues behind so much discord or point to a possible solution, but to dismiss it in those terms would be as fatuous as to dismiss the anti-war revolt that gripped the world at the time as merely the tantrum of an over-privileged middle class.[17] For *Norm and Ahmed* is not a critical assault on a dinosaur lumbering its way to a well-deserved end, nor even a vaguely forgiving whinge about the blue-uniformed troglodytes breaking heads in George Street.

What it is finally, and subtly, is a celebration—a bracing celebration of what it apparently condemns, and the last image we are left with is of Norm triumphant, bare-knuckled and panting, the inner demon of Australian nationhood revealed in all his virile impotency; sad, perhaps, but still there, fighting and victorious, and the embodiment of the only genuine character Australia has to offer. There is no question that Norm is the one we remember, and the one whose witticisms and ockerisms we repeat in the pub afterwards, emboldened and playfully trying on his persona to see how it fits, and often finding it fits rather too well. But if Sylvia Plath is right in saying that *"Every woman adores a Fascist, The boot in the face, the brute Brute heart of a brute like you"*,[18] she at least left us with the hope of our own survival as she concluded, *"There's a stake in your fat black heart, And the villagers never liked you ... Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through"*, but Buzo offers no such solace. If every woman loves a fascist, so it seems does every Australian—and another thing we seem to love is defeat. Norm wins, and the Oedipal crisis is resolved not with the child's successful passing into adulthood, but rather his complete annihilation, perhaps anticipating the slap down of the Whitlam Government and the return to order in subsequent years; and it's here, in this strangely reactionary resolution, that we can see the real weakness of that nationalism of which Buzo was one of the brightest standard-bearers. For while Nixon and Kissinger were fearful revolution was knocking on their door, not many other people were, and even fewer in Australia, and while hundreds of thousands protested and sang "*We Shall Overcome"*as the batons rained down*,* few believed that power could actually be seized and the new world about which they dreamt turned into a reality. The reality, as Buzo depicted, was Norm, waiting to put out a friendly hand and punch the living daylights out of you.

And so he did. The Australian left never recovered from the Whitlam coup. By the time the ALP returned to power, under Hawke in 1983, it was a very different beast with a very different agenda, and within months he was in the United States assuring Ronald Reagan of *"the fundamental importance that we in the new Labor government attach to the relationship with the United States"*.[19] The nationalist experiment was over and Australia was now firmly back in the fold. That same

year, the Australian Performing Group closed shop and entered history as the epicentre, together with the Nimrod in Sydney, of the New Wave of playwriting that had produced Buzo, Williamson, Hibberd, Barry Oakley and John Romeril amongst others. The puff had gone out of the nationalist cause and by the time Bob Hawke was shaking Ronald Reagan's hand, Buzo was already writing about the language-mangling antics of sports journalists and handing out his annual Tautology Pennant, usually to football commentator Rex Mossop. The heyday was over, and the hard, angry language that had thrilled audiences had been replaced by pedantry, banter and repartee. And the nationalist cause was taken up by the monarchist, John Howard, and hitched once more to the Anzac legend and notions of patriotic duty.

Critical nationalism, subversive nationalism, nationalism looking to walk an independent road toward a future we chose ourselves, was dead, and what had replaced it were the platitudes about toeing the line, respecting superiors and not bucking the system. What replaced it was Norm, not Ahmed; the past, not the future.

Alex Buzo, of course, didn't have an agenda, apart from being a good writer, and if he had lived in one of the imperialist states, even a fading one, like Britain, that might have been enough, and he might have achieved the fame a Tom Stoppard, for example, did; but Buzo lived in a subaltern state whose primary purpose was to serve, and to provide soldiers for the imperial wars and the occasional entertainer, like Rolf Harris, to amuse. And so in his case, geography was destiny. We can't blame him for not solving racism. Racism at the time was barely understood and even the term itself was controversial. But looking back now from the vantage point of forty-five years, it seems profoundly sad that his play has hardly aged, and the vile opinions so fulsomely expressed sound so completely contemporary in an Australia where Aboriginal children are still malnourished and refugees from the wars we happily endorse are routinely locked up by the Government because they tried to *"jump the queue"*.

What would have happened if Buzo had tried to dig beneath the colourful language into the places where that language was forged, if

he had shown us not only *what* we were like, but *why* we were like it? What would Australia be like now if that moment of standing up and stretching our collective imagination had not been squandered under the illusion it would last forever, and the small changes that it was able to force through were not so quickly reversed. Because there was a revolution after all, a revolution in the traditional sense of a return to the former position. Australia was returned to its former position, supine at the feet of a foreign power, and in theatre the experiment of Graeme Blundell and his colleagues to challenge bourgeois theatre was over. There was still theatre, of course, and even more of it; and Australian, too. And very funny. And bourgeois was the new norm.

References:

1. Led by the Three Bards, Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński. Chopin, of course was a great Polish nationalist as well. See, Porter B. *When Nationalism Began to Hate: Imagining Modern Politics in Nineteenth-Century Poland,* Oxford University Press

2. 21 year old Errol Noack

3. Graeme Blundell, *Talking Heads with Peter Thompson*, ABC Radio, 29/06/2009

4. Noted because Norm soon proves to be something else as well, an inveterate liar.

5. The Wobblies is a nickname for the Industrial Workers of the World, a radical international union formed in 1905.

6. The Vietnamese, tellingly, refer to the conflict as "The American War".

7. "Kill Whitlam" Murdoch ordered his editors, according to a secret diplomatic telegram dated January 20, 1975 released by the US National Archives and reported in the Sydney Morning Herald, June 28, 2014.

8. As the building housing the resident Australian Performing Group was called.

9. The ALP'S winning slogan in the 1972 election, in which the arts played a prominent role.

10. It's worth remembering that 1971 was the first year Aboriginal people

were counted in the Australian census as *people*.

11. And sent them reeling.

12. John Romeril was one of the few avowedly political playwrights of the time, meaning that he took a position *critical* of entrenched power. Dorothy Hewett, from a slightly earlier period, was proudly communist.

13. Bob Ellis Obituary, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18/8/06

14. In fact, his discovery of the play.

15. 1968, Old Tote

16. Edwin Hodgeman

17. Though Jacques Lacan *did* famously retort to the student revolutionaries of 1968 "As hysterics, you demand a new master. You will get it!"

18. Sylvia Plath, *Daddy,* Ariel, 1963

19. Bob Hawke, June 13, 1983 "Remarks of the President and Prime Minister Robert Hawke of Australia Following Their Meetings ," June 13, 1983. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency*

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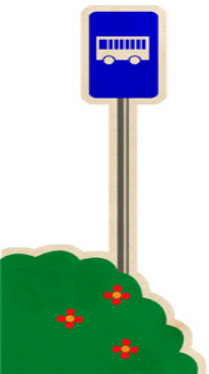

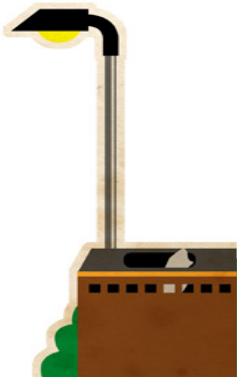

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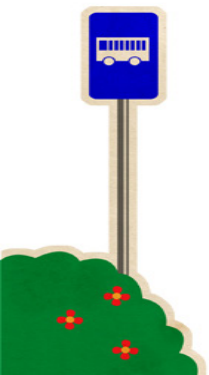

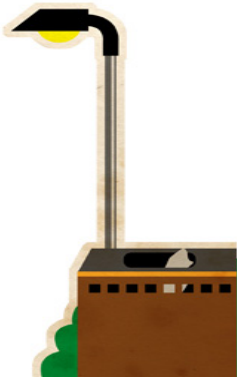

Copyright Agency's Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

'We developed the website and the resources with the specific aim of getting Australian literature back into schools', says Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund Manager, Zoë Rodriguez.

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