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NORM AND AHMED
and
ROOTED

BY ALEX BUZO

TEACHER'S NOTES

BY TERRY STURM



ALEX BUZO'S *NORM AND AHMED* *AND ROOTED*

by Terry Sturm

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1. Introducing the plays

Norm and Ahmed and *Rooted* (first performed in 1968 and 1969) are the two earliest plays of a playwright who has established himself as one of the most gifted of that younger generation of Australian writers attracted to the theatre in the late 1960s and 1970s. Alexander Buzo has now had a dozen plays—on a wide range of contemporary themes—performed by the main professional companies and little theatres throughout Australia, and many of them have been performed outside Australia (in England and the United States) as well.

Yet his work has not been without its detractors. His verbal flair and comic vitality, and his capacity for sharply-edged social comment, have been generally acknowledged; but he has also been criticised as deficient in skills of construction and characterisation. The ending of *Norm and Ahmed*, for example—on which so much of the play's effect depends—has been seen as arbitrary, insufficiently motivated by anything that occurs earlier in the play. And Bentley, the protagonist of *Rooted*, has been seen as an inadequate characterisation. A more realistic presentation, it has been argued, might have made him less helpless and passive, less willing to acquiesce in his own humiliation and defeat.

Criticisms like these are based on the assumption that Buzo is striving after realism in his plays, and failing to achieve it. If they were correct, the plays would indeed be badly flawed. It may be, however, that the assumption itself is wrong. A great deal of fine drama has been

written according to this naturalistic formula—according, that is, to criteria which make verisimilitude (the naturalness with which real life is represented on stage) the dominant aim of a play's action, characterisation and speech, and of its set design, lighting and costuming. One of Australia's best known plays, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll* (1955), was a major achievement in this mode, and it remains important in the work of dramatists like David Williamson.

Our habit of thinking about and judging plays in such terms is so ingrained that it may seem difficult, if not self-evidently absurd, to think about them in any other terms. Yet a moment's reflection about drama—about any art—might make us aware that this is a very partial, incomplete view of the range of effects which many different kinds of drama have achieved in the past, and continue to achieve, through methods that are not tied to the literal or documentary representation of reality at all. Some of the main theatrical conventions of Shakespearean drama—the playing of female roles by boy-actors, the use of poetry and the habit of having the actors address the audience through soliloquies—are quite implausible, according to real-life criteria. The use of a chorus in the great Greek tragedies, both to comment on and add emotional depth to the main action, is also a non-realistic or stylised device in such plays. In twentieth century painting, to take an example from a very different art form, the representational aesthetic has been almost wholly eclipsed by forms of painting ranging from

various distortions of reality, to pure abstraction, in which no 'real world' is recognisable at all.

Alexander Buzo has on occasion disassociated himself from readings and productions of his plays which interpret them primarily as literal representations of reality, insisting that they are not 'documentaries', but 'works of fiction... intended to work on the audience's imagination'. Rejecting the labels of realist or social realist, he has related his drama to a general impulse, in modern theatre, away from the conventional means by which naturalism structured its apparently plausible, life-like actions:

I would like to think that we are moving away from the well-plotted, well-made exposition-climax-denouement kind of form into a new and freer style where the structure of a play is dictated by the energies of what is being expressed.

Comic techniques and effects are important in the 'freer style' Buzo develops in plays like *Norm and Ahmed* and *Rooted*. His imagination draws on many traditional comic methods of deforming or transforming the real world, and on recent techniques of the absurd, to produce his characteristic effects of surprise, humour and shock: exaggeration of speech or behaviour; an emphasis on the character type, rather than on the individual, defined by some mannerism or obsession irrationally pursued (Norm and all the characters of *Rooted* are comic characters in this sense); and an emphasis, in the structuring of his plays, on comic or bizarre contrasts between one scene or incident and the next, between types of language, and between different characters. (Simmo and Hammo in *Rooted*, and Norm and Ahmed are examples of characters deliberately contrasted in this way.) Comedy achieves its effects precisely through its ways of disrupting what we might normally expect to happen or to be said, in a particular situation. Effects of these kinds, throughout Buzo's plays, are complemented by his interest in introducing unusual visual or audio-visual images into his plays: the use of Sandy's voice in the tape-recorder in *Rooted*, or the odd setting—the scaffolding, white fence and wire mesh of the construction site—in *Norm and Ahmed*.

We need also to remember, in considering the comic elements in Buzo's drama, that comedy

throughout its history has provided dramatists with a medium for serious statements about life. The spectacle of people behaving absurdly or irrationally, even as we laugh at it, invites us to ponder the gap between the way the world is, and the way we would like it to be—to reflect on the human capacity for self-deception, or on social abuses and evils. The eighteenth-century writer Horace Walpole once wrote, in a famous definition, that 'This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel'. Buzo's plays also generate this thought-provoking quality of detachment, forcing us to think about the predicaments of his characters, and to ponder the issues which his comic mode of presenting them raises. His plays do not offer us exact reproductions or reflections of our society, but imaginatively heightened images of our social behaviour, using effects of surprise and shock to force us into disturbing recognitions.

Norm and Ahmed

Norm and Ahmed is a particularly good example of Buzo's desire to move away from 'the well-plotted, well-made exposition-climax-denouement kind of form into a new and freer style'. In this one-actor there is no plot, in any conventional sense, and very little action until the explosive moment of physical violence on which the play concludes. This is not to say that the play lacks a structure. Its basic aim is to create suspense about Norm's motivations, to intensify the audience's uneasiness about how the encounter between Norm and Ahmed will end—playing on the humour of the situation but increasingly undermining it in a pattern which might best be described as a rhythm of alternately heightened and relaxed tensions, as we follow the ebb and flow of the emotional undercurrents between the two characters.

These transitions of mood and feeling are crucial in the developing momentum of the play. An atmosphere of uncertainty is created right at the beginning—well before anything is actually said—simply through the oddness of Norm's behaviour: his restless movements in a strange setting at an unusual hour (midnight) and, especially, his puzzling action in throwing his cigarette away and putting another in his mouth, unlit, as the stranger approaches. There are

several other moments, spaced throughout the play prior to its climax, in which significant action triggers a shift in mood—in each case injecting uncertainty into the play and intensifying our sense of menacing suspense. For example, as the initial tensions of the encounter relax, there is a sudden shift (p. 9), when Norm abruptly turns on Ahmed, re-enacting in fantasy his violent treatment of the German prisoner-of-war. Almost immediately afterwards Norm offers Ahmed a cigarette, apparently as a gesture of apology, lighting it for him with his own cigarette lighter. But this apparently innocent recovery of good humour is a profoundly unsettling moment for Ahmed, since he becomes aware at this point that Norm's initial reason for stopping him ('Got a light?', p. 3) was a ruse masking some other intention.

Actions like these are all of the simplest kind, but they demonstrate Buzo's skill in controlling the pace and rhythm of the play. The physical attack on Ahmed at the end of the play is thus less 'arbitrary', less unpredictable, than it might initially appear, and it creates an image of race prejudice as a profoundly irrational force in the behaviour of ordinary Australians. One of the most disturbing aspects of the play is that Norm knows all the 'arguments' for racial tolerance. His mind is saturated with a liberal-minded rhetoric of tolerance, goodwill, neighbourliness and respect for the rights of others:

We're forging the bonds of friendship with our Asian neighbours. Knowledge is the key to the door of understanding and friendship. (p. 11)
... we've got to learn to understand the problems of others and not worry too much about our own... In this world there's too many blokes getting in for their chop and not worrying about their mates. (pp. 17-18)

But it is, for Norm, merely a rhetoric, a set of clichés and slogans masking and rationalising deep-seated resentments which the play ultimately brings to the surface, as the veneer of polite or friendly talk gradually disintegrates.

The play's dialogue reinforces this image of underlying hostility and irrationality. Although the various speech registers used in the play are rooted in the actual speech habits of ordinary Australians like Norm, and outsiders like Ahmed, Buzo's aim is not simply to reproduce that speech

in a documentary, but to create imaginative patterns in order to emphasise comic or disturbing contrasts and ironies.

One of the major ironies in the play, for example, is that Ahmed, the foreigner, speaks from Norm's point of view in better English than that of the average Australian: a brand of cultivated, literary English which for Norm is a deeply threatening sign of superior education, status and intelligence. Norm's pause, in the following exchange, introduces this kind of undercurrent into the play:

AHMED: One always experiences difficulties when one is seeking to adjust to an alien environment. But once the initial period of adjustment is over, it is easier to acclimatise oneself.

[Pause]

NORM: That's very true. (p. 5)

Some of the funniest moments in the play are built on this comedy of misunderstandings, but it also conveys the deeper theme of the crucial connection between language and identity. For Norm, Ahmed's ability to speak educated English so fluently is a threat to his sense of superior identity as an Australian.

Another significant level of irony occurs *within* Norm's speech, in its comically disconcerted shifts of register between relatively friendly formality and aggressive familiarity. Much of the comedy of the language resides in Ahmed's increasingly baffled uneasiness at these disconcerting shifts. Often they occur within a particular speech, like the following, in which the movement from friendly formality to vigorously colloquial language points to a loss of emotional control, belying the assumption of fair-mindedness with which it begins:

NORM: It's nice of you to say that, Ahmed, because these blokes [Egyptians] were hard to understand. There were faults on both sides, of course, and there's two sides to every question, as you well know, but, well, there it is. I just didn't take to them. Might have been my fault. You see, they're a cunning lot, those Gyppos. Take you down as soon as look at you. Some of our blokes were easy pickings for those bastards. Fruit on the sideboard. That's what they were. (p. 8)

The image of Norm as an Australian norm—a typical Australian who embodies the country's dominant attitudes and myths—is carefully

constructed throughout. At its centre is the belief that all Australians are basically humane, tolerant and freedom-loving ('We're not such a bad mob out here, you know. We might be a bit on the rough-and-ready side, but our heart's in the right place.' p. 24). However, it also includes subservience to authority, the belief that 'important people... blokes in an official capacity' deserve a little bit of respect, and Norm lives in awe of a boss who once condescended to have a drink with him. In addition to his love of such Australian institutions as sport, Leagues Clubs and the R.S.L., Norm is the stereotype in his domestic attitudes:

NORM: I'm doing all right for meself. Making a bit of money, got a nice big house, everything laid on, I'm doing fine. (p. 15).

And his sentimental nostalgia for home life and marital bliss is evoked in grotesquely inflated Hollywood clichés:

NORM: Those magic moments that make life seem worthwhile now I sit at home alone and think of yesteryear. (p. 16)

I stop and look up at the stars in the sky and think what a wonderful world it is we live in. (p. 22)

All these attitudes are ironically undermined in the course of the play, not least through their contrast, as sentimental clichés, with other tendencies in Norm's speech. There is a sustained undercurrent of violence in many of the stories Norm tells, and in the texture and imagery of much of his slang. Contemptuous racial tags—Gypos, Krauts, Chows and Boongs—are part of this violent texture. Early in the play Norm describes Ahmed as looking 'as if a kick in the crutch and a cold frankfurt'd finish you off' (p. 6); and he describes his encounter with the German prisoner in such terms as 'knocked one of 'em down with me bare hands', 'jobbed him one' and 'floored this bloody Kraut. Really laid him out' (pp. 8-10).

Language like this (and there are many other examples in the play) reveals how dangerously unstable Norm really is, how close to the surface is the impulse to lash out and solve problems with the fist, as he does at the end of the play.

Norm and Ahmed does not offer any solution to the issues it raises so dramatically. In fact much of the grimness of the play's ending comes from

the general insistence that racism like Norm's can hardly be reached by conventional appeals to reason or decency, and in doing so it challenges one of Australia's cherished myths: its toleration of people from different cultures and races. Perhaps this larger connotation is symbolically hinted at in the play's unusual setting: offering an image of Norm, as the self-appointed guardian of white Australian society, on the look-out for those (like Ahmed) which the white fence, with its prison-like mesh-wire top, is designed to keep out.

Norm and Ahmed also offers considerable scope for varied interpretation in production. One of the more interesting questions to be decided would be how far Norm is made to seem an 'innocent' character, unaware of the contradictions in his behaviour. Greater or less stress might be put on the motive of loneliness, as a reason for Norm's being out on the streets looking for someone to talk to—or a foreigner to beat up—at midnight. The scene in which Norm takes out his lighter (according to the stage direction, 'beamingly benignly') could be presented, depending on the tone of the production, as a deliberately provocative act on Norm's part, or an unconscious, innocent act, in which it is assumed that he has genuinely forgotten his ruse at the play's beginning. The latter emphasis would make for a 'softer' production, stressing both the comedy and pathos of Norm's situation. The former emphasis would require a 'harder', more uncompromising production, stressing the blackness of the comedy and the deliberate aggressiveness of Norm's character. Yet another type of production might try a mixture of these Norms, making the audience's uncertainty about Norm's motivation the basic effect aimed at. Each of these Norms would require a different Ahmed, also: a more passive figure, presented as an 'innocent' victim, or a more active figure, perhaps ironically goading Norm at certain points in the play. Such differences of emphasis in production would not fundamentally affect the general aim of the play, but they would create a different balancing of the elements of comedy, pathos and shock.

Rooted

Rooted, even more than *Norm and Ahmed*, offers bizarre images, comic distortions of reality, in

order to make us think about the situations of its characters and about the issues which their absurd behaviour raises. Like *Norm and Ahmed*, the play lacks a plot in the conventional sense. Instead of developing to a climax, in which characters are brought to crucial recognitions about themselves and their situations, the structure of *Rooted* traces an inevitable downward curve in the fortunes of its protagonist, Bentley. None of the characters (including Bentley) ever comes to an understanding of his or her situation, and of the system of values to which they all mindlessly conform:

GARY: Just assert yourself a bit. Throw your weight around. Remember, in this life it's up for grabs. You've got to go out and get it. (p. 91)

The social system of the play suggests a medieval wheel of fortune, on which all the characters are trapped. Its extremes of absolute social success and absolute social failure are measured by the two absent characters, Simmo and Hammo. The other characters compete with each other for status, power and possessions, and occupy varying degrees of ascendancy or decline. The gradual humiliation of Bentley—the main action of the play, in which he is successively stripped of the possessions he has prided himself on acquiring (his wife, his home unit with its admired consumer goods, his job, his friends)—is balanced by the relative success of the others. Yet success is likely to be as transient for these characters as it is demonstrated to be for Bentley, in a system which sacrifices intrinsic values and loyalties for merely temporary, ego-boosting satisfactions. If *Norm and Ahmed* challenges the myth that Australia is a tolerant society, *Rooted* challenges the equally entrenched myth that in Australia the ethic of competitiveness—competing with others for higher status, more power, a better job, more admired possessions—is a natural source of personal freedoms.

Simmo and Hammo embody the drive for status and the fear of failure in an extreme form. Their absence from the stage (especially that of Simmo) is one of the most unconventional of the play's absurdist devices. Buzo's aim, with this deliberately non-realistic effect, is to suggest that Simmo's domination is primarily psychological. He exists primarily, that is, as a powerfully motivating illusion in the minds of the other characters. As

such, his influence is shown to pervade every aspect of their lives. He is the ultimate achiever in the world of big business, controller of Simmo Enterprises Ltd, a vast, expanding empire employing the most sophisticated technology and the most up-to-date concepts. He is also Mr Big, the man whose reputation is so notorious that policemen and lawyers refuse to take action against him (p. 73), and an Australian-style John Wayne, taking a back-country Australian 'hick town' by storm:

GARY: He backed five winners at the picnic races, floored three locals in a brawl, demolished a niner, and torpedoed the minister's daughter. (p. 77)

In his school days, we learn, Simmo was the bully who ran the playground (p. 66). And he is also—in this comically inflated composite image of every character's dream of power and prestige—a sexual athlete of immense prowess, irresistibly attractive to women. Simmo's name, which (like the names Hammo and Davo) is meant to suggest a typically Australian nicknaming habit, also suggests a pun on 'simian', and an ironic allusion to man's evolutionary descent from the ape. Simmo is the winner, the fittest survivor in a society based purely on self-assertion, and on the ethic of winner-takes-all. Hammo, on the other hand, whose name suggests the ham-actor—the out-of-date, bungling, inexperienced performer—is the born loser, the down-and-out that Bentley is destined to become the victim spurned by the system.

As a fantasy image shared by all the characters, Simmo has a permanence and stability throughout the play which is in comic contrast to the actual situations of the other characters. These are marked by their continually shifting, temporary quality, as allegiances shift and fortunes change in the frantic drive for success. Buzo draws on many traditional techniques of high and low comedy, as well as on more recent techniques of the absurd, to emphasise the rootlessness of his characters' lives, their restless pursuit of temporary gratifications. The steady decline of Bentley's fortunes is traced through different phases in the play's three acts, each of which contains an unusual mixture of short and longer scenes: four scenes to each act, including a scene without words. The effect of these

variations is to keep shifting our focus on Bentley (and to a lesser extent, on Sandy): to see him, in the longer scenes, in relationships with others, and to focus on him, in the scenes without words, as an increasingly isolated figure. A composite portrait of Bentley is thus gradually constructed, revealing his social situation and its bearing on his personal life.

The mixture of short and long scenes varies the pace of the play, giving it something of an episodic character as it shifts from one scene, one moment in Bentley's experience, to another, within the overall design of a downward curve in his fortunes. It also enables Buzo to introduce farce-like complications into the actions and relationships of the minor characters. Six liaisons occur (all within a period of ten weeks!), in a shifting pattern typical of the comic action of farce: Sandy-Bentley, Richard-Diane, Simmo-Sandy, Gary-Diane, Richard-Sandy, Simmo-Diane. And these relationships are complicated by other rivalries and betrayals: Diane's jealousy of Sandy; Gary's and Richard's friendship and betrayal of Bentley. The movement of characters into and out of Bentley's unit (Acts One and Two) and Gary's room (Act Three) also suggests the typically complicated movements of farce. At the beginning of the play Bentley and Sandy occupy their unit, and Richard occupies Gary's room. Subsequently Bentley moves out of the unit and Simmo moves in; Richard moves out of Gary's room and Bentley moves in; Simmo moves out of the unit and Richard moves in; and finally Bentley moves out of Gary's room.

These farcical elements, offering a comic image of transient relationships, are reinforced by the proliferation of comic incidents throughout. The play's visual imagery—its inventive use of stage design and props to illuminate the situations of the characters—is particularly important. No scene in the play is without examples of purely theatrical symbolism of this kind. It ranges from the simplest kind of visual gag—for example, Bentley's production of a bowl of blue punch (p. 36), absurdly matching the blue armchairs—to the sustained symbolism of the decor and furnishings of Bentley's unit itself. Its colour scheme of blue and white, and its ostentatious display of expensive furniture and latest-model sound equipment (stereo,

tape recorder and transistor) suggest a cold, sterile atmosphere, an obsession with status and appearances. Sandy's introduction of a vivid red abstract painting into this setting (p. 44) suggests the passion which is absent in her relationship with Bentley, and which she seeks in shifting her attention to Simmo.

Many of the incidents involving Bentley offer images of him as comically inept, a clown bungling even the simplest of actions. His inability to keep two tennis balls bouncing on his racquet (p. 35) is one example. So is the first of his 'scenes without words', in which he throws and misses with all five of the quoits he carries on stage, while Sandy—dressed in the same sterile white as he is—silently ignores him as she reads a newspaper. This brief, wordless scene encapsulates their situation, making its point through its direct visual impact. All the scenes without words, in fact, typify Buzo's aim for a 'freer style' of drama, in which the 'energies of what is being expressed' generate their own theatrical force, without overt authorial manipulation: a style in which action is allowed to generate its own unspoken comment.

Other incidental actions and details inserted into the longer scenes suggest pure farce. The meat pie dangling from the ceiling (Act Three, Scene One) is a ludicrous illustration of the pretentious art world to which Richard belongs, as editor of an underground magazine with the equally ludicrous title, *The Inevitable Tarantula*. The third scene of Act Two opens with a succession of farcical actions by Bentley: he makes inept attempts to train a hose on the lovers through a peephole into their bedroom, then aims an air rifle at them, which starts to 'move up and down, rhythmically', comically miming the offstage movements of the lovers in bed. These are old circus-clown gags (especially the water squirting back into the face of the practical joker, Bentley), but they are given a new significance here, revealing Bentley's inability to fulfil the role of a betrayed husband, and rendering absurd his sense of outrage. At several points in the play, also, the tape-recorder which is Bentley's most recent and proudest acquisition is ironically made to broadcast Sandy's voice, abruptly announcing to him the facts of her bitterness towards him and her infidelity: 'Why

don't you shut up?' (p. 37); 'Bin having it off with Simmo.' (p. 53); and (her final words to him as he leaves the unit), 'Piss off.' (p. 74).

If farcical action in *Rooted* both comically characterises and judges the behaviour it depicts (in much the same way as a cartoonist offers an exaggerated and simplified image of behaviour in order to make some moral comment about it), the play's language continually creates the same effects—defining the characters (especially Bentley) as victims of empty clichés, unable to communicate other than superficially with each other. As in *Norm and Ahmed*, it is important to recognise that although the language used by the characters is rooted in the everyday speech habits of most Australians, the play does not present such speech realistically. At the very beginning of the play, Buzo builds a comic exchange out of a series of repetitions, revealing Bentley as a man obsessed with appearances, totally dependent on the approval of others (especially Sandy):

BENTLEY: You hear that, Sandy? Gary reckons our unit's immaculate.

SANDY: Yes, I heard.

BENTLEY: You hear that, Sandy? Gary reckons it was a great turn.

SANDY: Yes, I heard.

BENTLEY: You hear that, Sandy? Gary reckons Davo enjoyed himself.

SANDY: Yes, I heard.

BENTLEY: You hear that, Sandy?

SANDY: Gary reckons we've got a great stereo set.

BENTLEY: Yes, I heard. (p. 30)

The exchange finally becomes absurdly mixed up, as Sandy deliberately breaks the ritual pattern of question and response. This is a typical example of the way Buzo builds purely imaginative patterns out of speech, comically accentuating mannerisms in order to create witty theatrical images of his characters' obsessions.

Many of the repetitive exchanges in the play present language as an empty social ritual. There are several exchanges (for example, pp. 53-6 and pp. 69-71) in which Bentley is ritually smothered in clichés by his friends (Diane, Richard, Gary) in what amounts to a mocking chorus. Buzo is particularly fond of revealing the emptiness of clichés by building them into absurd patterns of mixed metaphors ('Pull your socks up and have a bash'; 'Chin up and toe the line, you'll soon be

back on your feet'), or by creating ludicrous visual images out of them.

Individual characters are identified by the meaningless jargon of the circles they move in, of their occupations, or of the books and magazines they read. Bentley constantly speaks of his personal life and relationships in cant or jargon phrases absorbed from his job as a Grade Three bureaucrat in the public service, from the world of advertising, and in the later stages of the play, from glossy magazines promising instant success and instant problem-solving in personal relations. Bureaucratic double-talk provides him with the ridiculous evasiveness of his answer to a simple question about whether he likes his job:

BENTLEY: I can't supply you with an unqualified categorical 'yes' or 'no' answer to that particular question. However, I should like to make it abundantly clear that I consider the position eminently suitable on a number of counts, but equally unsuitable on a number of other counts. (p. 48)

Psychoanalytic jargon, and the sentimental clichés marketed by popular women's magazines like the *Ladies' Home Journal*, provide a pathetically inadequate language to explain or cope with the facts of his personal demoralisation, sustaining him in the illusion that he is 'adopting a meaningful stance' (p. 94) or 'establishing a point of reference' (p. 95), or 'undergoing some reorientation of the underlying factors governing my basic attitudes to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' (p. 80).

At other points in the play (especially in its earlier scenes) Buzo inserts longish monologues in which Bentley and Sandy reveal something of the repressed inner world, of real needs and desires, which their commitment to stylish social surface has gradually choked and thwarted. Bentley's monologue at the end of the play's opening scene (pp. 31-2) contains a typical mixture of delusions about his predicament and genuine solicitation for his wife. Another, at the beginning of the play's third scene, reveals a genuine feeling for nature and for values other than the superficial, which becomes progressively lost in the course of the play.

The success of a play like *Rooted* depends to a great extent on the effectiveness of its vigorous theatricalism—its unusual structure and

disposition of scenes, its inventive use of farcical situations and gags, its visual excitements, and its witty and varied creation of unusual patterns of speech—in providing an immediately humorous and thought-provoking vision of a recognisable world. The world of the play is immediately recognisable as the society, characterised by increasing affluence and consumerism, into which younger Australians grew up in the 1960s. Buzo offers a delightfully comic image of that world; but it is also a satirist's image, conveying a sharp comment on the superficiality of the values on which it is based. Bentley, the play's sad clown, is its central symbol: the innocent, vociferous defender of its values, and its most complete victim.

1. Note in The Australian Performing Group programme of *The Front Room Boys* at the 1970 Festival of Perth.
2. All page references are to *Three Plays: Norm and Ahmed, Rooted, The Roy Murphy Show*, Sydney, 1977.

2. The critics' views

Griffen Foley, *Daily Telegraph*, 10 April 1968

Buzo has something real and immediate to say about Australian attitudes. He makes the audience uneasy about the unperceptiveness of an 'average' Aussie confronted by a well-mannered, educated Pakistani student. Norm parades many of the proper, accepted attitudes which... are shot through the fabric of the Australian character. Again Buzo makes us uneasy by demonstrating that some of our attitudes are shams.

Rex Cramphorn, *Bulletin*, 30 August 1969

When I first saw *Rooted* at a PACT reading it was about an ineffectual young husband (Bentley) and his errant wife (Sandy) in the context of old schoolmates, surf lifesaving clubs, chunder and fluff. The plays remarkable originality lay in its implicit suggestion that language is an exact coefficient of life—the characters are shown literally living their banal obscenities and slang rituals. The observed dialogue is funny, but the lives involved are still 'rooted'. So when the second-last scene ended with, 'What shall we drink to?'—'Bugger all', I expected a last scene of group sexuality (Sandy and the three men in

the cast) to represent the collapse of Bentley's last vestiges of individuality and affection for Sandy. Instead the last scene was a despondent morning-after-the-night-before which left me feeling cheated of an essential element of the action.

This Jane Street production gives it a good deal more than a new ending. Rearrangements, cutting and lots of new dialogue change the shape and, to some extent, the intention of the whole play. The introduction of a second girl reduces the Bentley-Sandy relationship while the concentration of attention on the off-stage super-mate, Simmo, who always wins the fights and gets the birds, turns the play into a sarcastic comment on the nature and power structures of 'mateship'—the closely personal look at a weak man drowning in his environment has been sacrificed to a rather more conventional playwrighting point of view.

The new version is still a very good play. It is certainly a neater and more efficient dramatic structure... I hope Mr Buzo will not leave it at this stage of its development; here are further possibilities, yet to be realised, in the original draft.

Katharine Brisbane, *Australian*, 28 November 1970

Buzo is at his best in the one-act play pursuing a simple idea to a single conclusion and allowing himself to play upon the variations of an idea ...

The first thing *Norm and Ahmed* does is set Australia for the first time in an Asian setting. The second thing is to define with a terrifyingly funny accuracy the Australian's aggressive-defensive attitude to life.

Ted Robinson's production... is deliberately exaggerated to ensure that nothing of Norm's one-eyed opinions, uncertain judgements or sentimental expressions is lost to the viewer. What struck me for the first time, however, was a moving sense of alienation in both characters.

Ahmed is the alien, frightened by his strange element and anxious not to offend; but Norm, it soon emerges, has spent his whole life in an alien environment and does not understand it any better than Ahmed. And he can't do much about it except go out and kick a stranger ...

Norm and Ahmed is quite an important little play because of the density of its thought and language. It is also very funny.

The ending is still not quite right but through John Clayton's performance Norm shows himself

as something much more dangerous than the Barry Humphries' barrel of clichés for which he was taken.

**Eliot Norton, *Record American*, Boston,
26 January 1972**

Rooted is a strange free-form farce about a man doomed to lose, deliriously funny and, at the same time, deadly serious. To appreciate it fully would probably require an elaborate glossary of Aussie slang, which seems to be more picturesque than Cockney English. To enjoy it in its American premiere by the Hartford Stage Company, the playgoer needs no more than a liberated sense of humour and a passionate devotion to all those men of good will and bad luck who are habitually rooted, or uprooted, or booted by the frauds, the phonies, the predators and the perennial winners ...

Rooted is a black comedy, or, to borrow a line from another playwright, it is 'a farce to make you sad'. It jeers at the optimists of the world, who, like Bentley, believe in love and friendship, and at the same time, at the smiling cynics and opportunists who take advantage of them. It reduces to a kind of sad pipe dream the belief that modern man can live by the old golden rule while lacerating with the whip of Mr Buzo's wit the smiling enemies of innocence.

Bob Ellis, *Nation Review*, 20–26 May 1972

I liked the way the play *Rooted* showed how we go through cycles of roles in life (artist, swaggie, advertising man, public servant, cuckold, bum, apprentice mogul) but our friends stick with us, until we actually fail, and then they cast us out.

Other people will like it for other reasons. There's a great deal in it, and it has to be the best written Australian play I've seen.

Katharine Brisbane, *Australian*, 27 May 1972

The new production of *Rooted* raises a number of interesting questions. It is a good production... and tackles in a firmly naturalistic manner head-on, the problems raised by this totally original style...

At one level we have a complete cartoon of the world of the young middle-class Sydney man. On another we have the author's criticism of it; on still another the familiar persecution nightmare which at some time has enveloped all of us.

As punishment for being so boring, acquisitive and pathetic, Bentley has everything

taken from him bit by bit—his home unit, his wife, his status. The last we see of him is a borrowed blanket being thrown out the door.

It is a very witty play and the audiences who are packing it are in ecstasies of joy over the code language. But there are problems which neither the Melbourne nor the Sydney productions solve and which are leading me to the belief that a whole new approach to the treatment of plays like this is needed...

Buzo has not in this early play solved all the problems of style which he has set himself but there is a precision in the rhythm of the writing which demands a new approach to orchestration. Behind the apparently rambling scenes there is a backbone of formality. For example, there are two almost identical scenes in which two unexpected guests catch Bentley at a disadvantage. When embarrassment reaches its height the couple hastily make their departure incanting over the unfortunate Bentley a liturgy of aphorisms. In the Melbourne production this was done formally, in the Sydney production naturalistically. Neither really worked because the emphasis was placed on the situation rather than the words.

Phrases such as: don't let it get you down; live it up; have a bash; play it cool; are only approximations of language. We are not used to listening to them. What writers like Buzo and Kenna are doing so well is to make us listen. But we will only listen if the actor shows us how.

Thomas Schick, *Nation*, 10 June 1972

Max Phipps stands out with his portrayal of Bentley, the public servant. In his hands the character acquires a sense of vulnerability and lostness and so gains our sympathy much more than Buzo's writing would, in fact, warrant ...

Mr Buzo has a knack for the Australian vernacular, for the trivia of life, for the empty small-talk between man and man, between men and women. The trouble is that he doesn't know what to do with this technique. *Rooted* is a series of emotional and/or satirical vignettes, each having precious little to do with its neighbour. The first sequence is the most promising, with Bentley, wife and friend discussing the house-warming party. Sharp dialogue, painfully recognisable platitudes work for good effect. Suddenly the tone changes ...

The first half is written purely for laughs, for cruel laughs at that. Buzo shows no interest in his people, or understanding and compassion for

them. Granting that some of us live that way, it's still not enough to show only the superficial layer of existence. For meaningful, constructive art there must be concern and a need to understand.

In the second half, without bothering to tell us what has caused the change, Bentley is a drop-out from the rat race. He becomes fully reliant on his 'protective' circle of mates who in the end discard him and we leave him all alone in a presumably alien world. While the second half is more dramatic in content, with fewer laughs, it has absolutely nothing to do with the first half. It could well be another play using the same people, or the same names. First half, second half, or the two together, *Rooted* says very little beyond the story line which seems culled from numerous fashionable synopses adapted at random for the Australian scene—the marital bickering of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the ambivalent hierarchies of *Deathwatch* and *Fortune and Men's Eyes*, the 'inspirations' from *Waiting for Godot*, the theatre-of-the-absurd touches in the 'friends'. It's all there except compassion and care.

Mr Buzo has the technical expertise for a writer for the stage. Time will tell whether the fashionable playwright with the fashionable means will turn into a worthwhile one as well.

H. G. Kippax, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 September 1973

The Front Room Boys of 1969 is, despite its satirical flights of eloquently patterned dialogue, an inflated and eventually tedious thesis exercise; and *Macquarie* of 1971, a departure, finds him groping, not very rewardingly, beneath the surfaces of social relationships towards the mysteries of human temperament and motivation. As yet Mr Buzo is too doctrinaire a social critic to be able to dramatise complexity.

This limitation may explain what is unsatisfactory about his first short play, *Norm and Ahmed* (1967). Yet it deserves its place in this volume not only because it brought him his first success but also because with it he announced, with considerable theatrical bravura, the stance from which, with a peculiar blend of detachment and fascination, he sees—or imagines he sees—his world...

The play is a study in covert aggression, tautly effective in its earlier stretch in suggesting menaces... The menace established,

the play idles along as Mr Buzo anthologises, through Norm's compulsion to explain himself (an Australian trait?) the various kinds of prejudice, incomprehension, self-deception and insecurity which have launched so many sociological or psychological theses... The play becomes a thesis, the less convincing as drama because the stalled and static Ahmed speaks like a Peter Sellers character. The theatrical outbreak of violence at the end has something of the smug finality of QED.

The play's strength is in the accuracy of its ear for jargon, cliché, platitude and evasion and the force of critical implication in the way these are patterned to make each point. *Norm and Ahmed* belongs to the theatre if only because, thesis notwithstanding, it becomes in the acting so vivid a demonstration of its generalised propositions about behaviour.

Rooted is Mr Buzo's best play to date. Here the targets are Norm's successor-generation, indubitably middle class, and the affluent worlds of the fast motor car, the surf club, the avant-garde art gallery, the wholesale-retail market place—and brilliantly Mr Buzo cartoons them in sustained passages in which his ear for jargon reinforces his eye for the conventions and compulsions of group behaviour.

In *Rooted* the group is all; and it is because his hero, Bentley, the civil servant, with outdated and misplaced faith in mateship and the values of the old school tie, and in superannuation and the security of his unit and its electronic trappings, can find no acceptance in his chosen group with its opportunistic rationale, that he is systematically destroyed.

... it is perhaps because it is a nightmare that the reservations one has about the puppets in *Norm and Ahmed* and other plays seem less relevant. True, the destruction of Bentley is schematic, and he himself jerks mechanically, mindlessly and bloodlessly, like any puppet, as Mr Buzo methodically pulls a string, presses a switch, probes a nerve, to show how he thinks it is.

But we don't look for psychology in *The Importance of Being Earnest* (where also a 'world' lives wholly in terms of a language honed as a weapon against reality and responsibility) or in any other fairy story. *Rooted* is a fairy story, the nastier because its torture rooms vibrate

with echoes from the more tawdry or predatory streets of our world of common day.

**Charles Lewsen, *The Times*, London,
January 1976**

Alexander Buzo's witty and powerful short play presents an encounter between two men in a Sydney park at midnight. With the one overtly aggressive and the other courteous in the face of determined provocation, it feels at first like an Australian *Zoo Story*. However, while Albee cast light on a disturbed fifties New York by showing an individual forced into violence that is apparently not his nature, Mr Buzo arrives at a study of individual paranoia via a piling up of stereotypes; and then he shocks us by showing his characters behave precisely as we would in the first place have expected them to do.

In an extended piece of shadow boxing, Norm, a veteran of the Second World War, reveals, by condescension born of fear, his firm support of the White Australia Policy... And Gregory de Polnay delivers a line in praise of Norm's daughter with enough emphasis to suggest that the man is the victim of incestuous longings, and with enough restraint to prevent this becoming a too easy key to the mystery of an unhappy personality.

Darien Angadi plays a Pakistani student who has imposed on himself the task of imbibing a liberal education at Sydney University and of abiding the condescending insults of white Australians—all as preparation for returning to his own country and there bringing about social revolution. Mr Angadi nicely balances courtesy and wit, so that, to the end, one cannot tell for certain whether the young man will end up as Fidel Castro or Uncle Tom.

**Suzanne Spinner, *Theatre Australia*,
March–April, 1977**

Norm and Ahmed was staged in the car park outside La Mama against the tin fence... Cliff Ellen managed to make Norm's most innocuous question pregnant with imminent aggression and implicit racism: a sense of foreboding aggression is built up not merely verbally, in the words or the tone in which they are spoken, but rather in the ambiguous gestures of mateship; the too-heavy handshake, the too-emphatic slap on the back and the too-insistent staring into the other's eyes; the suggestion of questionable intimacy and unconscious homosexual

overtones. The acting portrayed this invasion of privacy superbly without overstating its case.

In the final moments of the play *Norm*, with no warning or obvious provocation, turns on Ahmed. The violence which erupts is horrifying and shocking. One's first response is to wonder where it came from, then instantly we are drawn back to the clues in Norm's character and realise the latent menace was always present, and it would only be a question of time before it was unleashed.

Norm and Ahmed has not dated, one only need consider the racist overtones of the press coverage of the recent 'Paks' cricket tour to realise how little things have really changed, irrespective of the demise of the White Australia Policy.

3. Questions for discussion

1. Buzo has often said that he does not think of himself primarily as a playwright with a social message for his audience: 'I am not a social writer in that I'm not just writing about Australia'. What bearing does this view have on your understanding of the aims and themes of *Norm and Ahmed* and *Rooted*?
2. Discuss the character of Bentley in *Rooted*. How far would you agree with any of the following comments:

'The play creates in Bentley a figure of vast compassion.' (Martin Gottfried, *Women's Wear Daily*, New York, 14 January, 1972)

'Alexander Buzo sheds no tears for his unheroic hero... He laughs at the man he calls Bentley.' (Elliot Norton, *Record American*, 26 January, 1972)

'Bentley... is a cardboard silhouette of the "little man"... He is rendered weak, silly and contemptible... He does not fight back and so fails to win sympathy.' (Leslie Rees, *A History of Australian Drama*, Vol. 2, p. 76)
3. Use the following comments as a starting point for discussion of the characters in *Norm and Ahmed*:

'What struck me... was a moving sense of alienation in both characters.' (Katharine Brisbane, *Australian*, 28 November 1970)

'Ahmed... nicely balances courtesy and wit.'
(Charles Lewsen, *The Times*, January 1976)

'Norm contains just too many contradictory elements and pretences and his racial prejudice, though it might be real enough in particular Australians... is too southern American for a portrait that aspires to be strongly representative of the club-going, sports-loving older Australian working man.'
(Keith Thomas, *Nation*, 27 April 1968)

4. Discuss the language of Buzo's plays. How important is language as a theme in *Norm and Ahmed* and *Rooted*? In what ways does Buzo identify characters by their manner of speaking? What sorts of imaginative patterns does he make out of his characters' language, and what kinds of humour? How important is the 'Australian' content of the characters' speech?
5. Identify the comic elements in the plays, as you see them. What is their purpose?
6. Is the ending of *Norm and Ahmed* effective? How does the play achieve its dramatic force, as something more than a conversation piece? How important is movement and gesture in the play? How important is the setting, and the lighting?

4. Further reading

Other published plays by Alex Buzo

The Front Room Boys, in *Four Australian Plays*, Melbourne, 1970.

Macquarie, Sydney, 1971.

Coralie Lansdowne Says No, Sydney, 1974.

Tom, Sydney, 1975.

Martello Towers, Sydney, 1976.

Makassar Reef, Sydney, 1978.

Articles and interviews by Alex Buzo

'Buzo: One Step Further', interview with Richard Zachariah, *Sunday Australian*, 4 June, 1972.

'From Comic Strip to Comparison With Brecht', interview with Virginia Duigan, *National Times*, 29 January–3 February, 1973.

'Alexander Buzo Talks to Ian Moffit', *Australian*, 6 May, 1974.

'The Day of the Playwright', *Theatre Quarterly*, 7, Summer, 1977. This issue is devoted to contemporary Australian drama.

'Organised Niceness', Kirsten Blanch talks to Alex Buzo, *Theatre Australia*, June, 1978.

On Alex Buzo

Arnold, Roslyn, 'Aggressive Vernacular: Williamson, Buzo and the Australian Tradition', *Southerly* 35, 4, 1975.

Bladwell, Frank (ed.), 'Standards of Decency' (an account of the charges of obscenity against *Norm and Ahmed* in 1969); and R. D. Eagleson, 'Dramatic Language'; in *Norm and Ahmed* (Buzo) and *The Woman Tamer* (Esson), Currency Double Bill series, Sydney 1976.

Fitzpatrick, Peter, *After 'The Doll': Australian Drama Since 1955*, Melbourne, 1979.

Holloway, Peter (ed.), *Contemporary Australian Drama: Perspectives Since 1955*, Sydney, 1980. This book includes reprints of the articles by Roslyn Arnold, Terry Sturm and Margaret Williams' 'Mask and Cage' listed here.

Rees, Leslie, *A History of Australian Drama*. 2 Vols., Sydney, 1978. An appendix to Vol. 2, 'Norm and Ahmed, the Police and the Courts', outlines the history of prosecutions for obscenity in 1969, arising from the play's final words.

Sturm, Terry, 'Alexander Buzo: An Imagist With a Personal Style of Surrealism', *Southerly* 35, 4, 1975.

Williams, Margaret, *Drama, Australian Writers and their Work*, Melbourne, 1977.

Williams, Margaret, 'Snakes and Ladders: New Australian Drama', *Meanjin* 31, June 1972; 'Mask and Cage: Stereotype in Recent Drama', *Meanjin* 31, September, 1972; 'Australian Drama—A Postscript: Some Comments on Recent Criticism', *Meanjin*, 31 December, 1972.

Reviews of productions of *Norm and Ahmed* and *Rooted* are listed in the Annual Bibliography of Australian Literature, *Australian Literary Studies*, from 1971 onwards.