

# Aggression is the Norm

**NORM AND AHMED: La Mama.**

Alex Buzo's notorious play *Norm and Ahmed* opened at La Mama last week for the second time this year — performed now by students and a staff member from NIDA in Sydney.



by  
**SUZANNE SPUNNER**

Because both performances are fresh in my mind and a chance to compare two different and competent readings of a play is rare, I will avail myself of the opportunity. The comparison is instructive and illuminating of Buzo's writing because both productions were intelligent and dramatically exciting.

In both productions Ahmed was faultlessly acted in respect of the character's formal pronunciation of English and his Pakistani accent. The significant difference between the two productions was the interpretation of Norm, the typical Aussie RSL type.

In Mark Callan's production Cliff Ellen played down Norm's aggression and left it as a threat in the minor key, whereas in this production Peter Carmody's Norm goes all out right from the first encounter with Ahmed.

No excuse for physical confrontation is left unexplored and while this extreme violent physicality makes sense of Norm's loneliness and need for contact (and suggests a sort of repressed sexual dimension to the need) the intensity of the aggression and Norm's overtly menacing behavior makes the fact of Ahmed's not leaving at the first possible opportunity unconvincing.

In Callan's production the aggression was carefully kept ambiguous enough to pass for crude affection and we, like Ahmed, could not be sure what Norm was up to until the final outburst.

Similarly by making Norm thoroughly hasty, Carmody was unable to register the pathos of the other side to Norm — his Sunday mornings in the garden among the frangipanis and his tearful reminiscences of Beryl at the Leagues Club dances.

In Carmody's mouth these lines were Edna Everage caricature and good for a laugh, whereas

still bringing out the tragic poverty of experience behind them.

Now nearly ten years after it first created a stir for its obscene language, it is ironical that the real concern of the play is with language — Norm's cliché-ridden Australian phrases that hide the true sense of reality from him, and Ahmed's formally exact English that alienates Norm almost as much as his colour.

**PENETHAL GLABLOUS: La Mama.**

Local writer Valerie Kirwan is nearly as famous for her bizarre and consistently mysterious aliases as she is for her theatrical pieces.

Previously known as Chiloon, Benny the Dip and now as Too Loo, she presented at La Mama the first chapter of her forthcoming novel, *Penethal Glablous* in which the central character Hennett, has a new name foisted upon him by the benevolent dictators he works for.

You might wonder how anyone could read a chapter from a novel and make theatre out of it; well, in Kirwan's case it would be hard for her to perform her shopping list without flooring her listeners. The performance of chapter one was aided by what were called 'Toe Separations' by Jim Clayden.

Unfortunately these promised more than they delivered and I found cleaning the double barrel shot gun distracting without adding to Penethal's drama. The reading was done by Valerie Kirwan and Peter Finlay in alternating sections.

The novel sounds quite promising — a sort of fey Kafkaesque tale of a man beset by the frustrations of a routine job who escapes into fantasy. The writing is clear and free of the alluring obscurantism that Valerie's plays often ex-