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Dramatic Publishing



Among the Thugs

**Drama adapted by Tom Szentgyorgyi
from the book by Bill Buford**



Among the Thugs

"This is bloody brilliant theatre in every way, shape and form—guaranteed to alter your pulse rate. *Among the Thugs*, the testosterone-primed anatomy of soccer hooliganism ... is the real thing a primal ritual dance driven by a vibrating brain and a steadily injected stream of near-psychotic behavior ... Playwright Tom Szentgyorgyi [has] created a remarkable stage adaptation ... that uses just ten hypercharged actors to suggest a thundering stadium mob."

—Chicago Sun-Times

Drama. Adapted by Tom Szentgyorgyi from the book by Bill Buford. Cast: 10m. *Among the Thugs* follows the adventures of Bill, an American writer in England, as he explores the world of soccer hooligans, "the lads," whose explosions of violence have fascinated and shocked onlookers for years. Setting himself the task of understanding why young men in England riot and pillage in the name of sports fandom, Bill travels deep into a culture both horrific and hilarious. His journey takes him from the pubs of London to the stadiums of northern England and the streets of Europe. Along the way Bill gets to know the lads—Steamin' Sammy; Roy Downes, recently out of prison, who surveys an assemblage of thugs "like a general inspecting his troops"; and Mick, Bill's first guide to hooliganism, an epic drinker and "quite simply the most repellent human being I'd ever seen in my life." In their company, Bill witnesses acts of violence so brutal and senseless they seem like real-life examples of the ultraviolence practiced by Alex and his droogs in *A Clockwork Orange*. But rather than being repelled by the thugs' casual viciousness, Bill is fascinated, and his investigation draws him ever further into the hooligans' world. Weeks of research turn into months, and then years. The act of observing begins to turn into something more sinister, as Bill begins to uncover some dark truths about the lads—and himself. *Unit set. Approximate running time: 2 hours.*

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Among the Thugs

Szentgyorgyi / Buford

Dramatic Publishing



AMONG THE THUGS

A play by
TOM SZENTGYORGYI

Based upon the book by
BILL BUFORD

This excerpt contains strong



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(AMONG THE THUGS)

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Among the Thugs had its world premiere at the Next Theatre (Kate Buckley, artistic director; Allison Sciplin, managing director; Stephanie Tackett, business manager) in Evanston, Illinois, on May 1, 2000. The cast was as follows:

BILL. Christian Kohn
 SUPPORTER. Aaron Christensen
 SUPPORTER. Dominic Conti
 SUPPORTER Scott Cummins
 SUPPORTER Eric Hayes
 SUPPORTER R.J. Jones
 SUPPORTER Brad C. Light
 SUPPORTER Andrew Micheli
 SUPPORTER John Sierros
 SUPPORTER Mark Vanasse

Kate Buckley directed the production. Sarah Gubbins was the dramaturg; the assistant director was Jay Paul Skelton. Rick Paul designed the sets. Jack Magaw designed the lights. Vicky Strei designed the costumes. Lindsay Jones designed the sound. Ann Noble Massey provided props. Birgitta Victorson choreographed movement. Robin McFarquhar choreographed fights. Jacki Singleton was the stage manager; Dan Michel, production manager.

AMONG THE THUGS

A Play in Two Acts

CAST: Ten men. One plays BILL; the remaining nine play everyone else.

A note on how characters are identified: when a supporter is named by a number (SUPPORTER ONE, SUPPORTER TWO, etc.) it refers to that character's identity within that scene only. SUPPORTER ONE on page 23 isn't the same character as SUPPORTER ONE on page 74, nor need he be played by the same actor.

Overlapping dialogue is indicated by a slash:

BILL. I said / I don't...

ROY. Shut up, will you?

The slash indicates where the second line begins.

LOCATION: Various places in England and on the continent.

SETTING: Like the terraces, the stage is raked. There are ten wooden chairs. Other pieces as called for.

For Kate Buckley

ACT ONE

(As the audience comes in it hears an ANNOUNCER calling a football match. As the houselights go down, another sound intrudes: many voices chanting and clapping. Faint at first, then louder.)

VOICES. United! *(clap clap)*

United! *(clap clap)*

United! *(clap clap)*

United! *(clap clap)*

United! *(clap clap)*

(A goal is scored. The crowd's shout bursts through the theater. BLACKOUT.)

In black, the sound of the crowd fades. It's replaced by the rumble, squeak, and sigh of a train pulling into a station. Lights up on three people. BILL stands center, wearing black pants, a white shirt, and a tie. The MAN to his left reads a NEWSPAPER. The MAN to his right listens to a WALKMAN. BILL speaks to the audience.)

BILL. Some time ago, I came home from Wales by train.

(An ANNOUNCER—British, male—is heard.)

ANNOUNCER (*O.S.*). The next train to arrive in the station will be an *unscheduled* train. I repeat: the next train to arrive in the station will be an *unscheduled* train.

(*BILL looks offstage. The MAN WITH A NEWSPAPER looks up. BILL looks around curiously. The MAN WITH A WALKMAN pays no attention.*)

ANNOUNCER. The train about to arrive in the station is an *unscheduled* train. Please step back from the platform. I repeat: the train about to arrive in the station is an *unscheduled* train. Please step back from the platform.

(*BILL and the MAN WITH A NEWSPAPER step back.*)

BILL (*to MAN WITH A NEWSPAPER*). Perhaps it's a military train of some kind.

(*The MAN answers by snapping his paper shut and leaving at a quick walk. Two POLICEMEN enter and take up positions at either side of the stage.*

SOUND: an approaching train. With it, VOICES half-chanting, half-singing.)

VOICES. Liverpool, la la la. Liverpool, la la la.

ANNOUNCER (*O.S.*). The train now arriving in the station is an *unscheduled* train. I repeat: the train...

(*The VOICES and sound of the train drown the ANNOUNCER out. BILL looks in the direction of the ap-*

proaching train. The MAN WITH A WALKMAN looks straight ahead.)

VOICES. LIVERPOOL, LA LA LA. LIVERPOOL, LA LA LA.

(As the VOICES and train noise crescendo, a group of SUPPORTERS is revealed, posed as though squashed into a crowded train car. The SUPPORTERS burst out of the train car and run offstage, yelling and taunting the POLICEMEN. One dazed SUPPORTER is left behind. His face and shirt are bloody. The SUPPORTER begins to sing loudly.)

SUPPORTER. LIVERPOOL, LA LA LA! LIVERPOOL, LA LA LA!

(The two POLICEMEN descend on him. The SUPPORTER fights back, but the POLICEMEN subdue him and drag him offstage.)

SUPPORTER. Fuckin' bastards! Fuckin' bastards! Fuckin'—

(They're gone. BILL looks over at the MAN WITH A WALKMAN.)

BILL. Who *are* those people?

(The MAN WITH A WALKMAN doesn't respond.)

BILL *(louder)*. I said—

(The MAN WITH A WALKMAN looks at BILL.)

MAN WITH A WALKMAN. It's the supporters. Innit?
(He exits.)

BILL *(to audience)*. I didn't get home until one-thirty in the morning. I had to change trains four times; three were taken over by...“supporters.” *(A loud crashing noise offstage, as though furniture were being broken up.)* Hoping to avoid trouble, I sat in a first-class carriage.

(A CIVILIZED GENTLEMAN enters carrying a chair and a book. He places it, sits, and starts to read. BILL gets a chair and sits with him. They nod to each other. A SUPPORTER comes out and looks them over. BILL looks away; the CIVILIZED GENTLEMAN concentrates on his book. The SUPPORTER reaches into a pocket, pulls out a matchbook, lights a match, and throws it at the CG. The CG brushes the match off and looks up, angry. The SUPPORTER flicks another lighted match at the CG. The CG brushes the match away and lowers his eyes to his book, rises and walks away. The SUPPORTER lights another match and holds the flame close to BILL's face.)

BILL *(to audience)*. Who are these people?

(The SUPPORTER exits as MARTIN and SIMON enter, both dressed for office work.)

SIMON *(cheerful)*. They're supporters, aren't they?

BILL. Supporters?

MARTIN. The lads. On their way home from the match.

BILL. Lads? Match?

MARTIN (*to SIMON*). The American. (*To BILL, with an exaggerated American accent.*) Soccer fans.

SIMON. Who've just attended a—

MARTIN (*same accent*). Soccer game.

BILL. Oh. Oh, *English* football.

SIMON. Precisely.

MARTIN. They're quite devoted, the supporters. It's their Saturday.

SIMON. Every week they're out there, cheering the team.

MARTIN. They travel all over the country.

SIMON. All over the world.

MARTIN. Wouldn't miss Man United!

SIMON. No sir!

BILL. Man United?

MARTIN. Manchester United. (*The accent again.*) A soccer team.

BILL. And does this always happen?

SIMON. Does what always happen?

BILL. Well. After the *lads* have their *Saturday* watching *Man United*, do they usually run through the country ripping apart trains, beating up people, and destroying anything that gets in their way?

(*MARTIN and SIMON exchange a look.*)

MARTIN. Well.

SIMON. *Well.*

MARTIN. Well, yes, I suppose they do.

BILL. And you don't think that's strange? You don't think that's bizarre?

SIMON. I'm not sure *bizarre*—

BILL. I mean this event, this riot, this...whatever you want to call it, it was not spontaneous, it was not hysterical, it was willed in some way. I could feel it. There must be some *sociological*—as, as rebellion of some kind, I mean, so many people out of work, so many people who never *had* work, and I would think, I would *imagine*, all that frustration, all that anger looking for some sort of outlet, some sort of, of, of I don't know. (*Beat.*) I don't know.

MARTIN. Bill.

SIMON. *Bill.*

MARTIN. It's just the way they are.

SIMON. It's just what they do.

MARTIN. You've been to a match, you know what it's like.

BILL. Actually, I've never. Been to a match.

MARTIN. *Never?*

SIMON. Never been to a match?

MARTIN. How long have you *been* in England, Bill?

SIMON. I mean.

MARTIN. If you've never been to a match. How could you understand any of it?

(*MARTIN and SIMON exit.*)

BILL (*to audience*). Seven years. I'd been in England seven years. I came as a student. I liked England. I started a magazine. Made my home here. And over the years—living here, working here—I came to believe that I knew England. Understood it, in some way. Not as a native. As a fan. A supporter. But what happened on the

trains—I'd never seen anything like it. It was no part of the England I knew. And I wanted to understand it. So I went to a match.

(SOUND: a helicopter swooping overhead. Seven SUPPORTERS enter and form a ragged line. Two POLICEMEN enter and start frisking them as BILL continues.)

BILL (*cont'd*). On the way, I saw police everywhere. In the Underground stations they held dogs on short, thick leashes. Outside they were on horseback, holding four-foot truncheons. *(The helicopter roars again.)* I entered the grounds—

(The POLICEMEN frisk BILL. One finds a comb, holds it up accusingly, and pockets it. The POLICEMEN exit.)

BILL (*cont'd*). —and joined the mob pushing its way onto the terraces.

(The actors gather in a CROWD that all but swallows BILL.)

BILL (*cont'd*). Except that there was no place to go. I couldn't move left or right, let alone go back. There was only one direction: forward. *(BILL squeezes out of the CROWD.)* How to move forward. *(The CROWD, as one, turns ninety degrees.)* The most common technique for moving forward is the simple squeeze. *(As BILL points the CROWD demonstrates.)* One lifts one's arm from between two bodies crushed at one's sides and slips it ahead between the two bodies crushed together immedi-

ately in front of one. One then twists oneself so that one's body, obeying natural principles, follows one's arm and advances a few inches forward. The simple squeeze is successful unless interrupted by a shove. *(Someone shoves. Various cries of protest.)* Nobody falls because each person is so tightly pressed against the person in front, who is in turn so tightly pressed against the person in front of him. So there's no danger. No apparent danger. *(Another shove. More shouts.)* Except that there must be a person at the front against whom all these bodies are pressing, someone who knows that eventually the pressure from behind will grow so great that something will break, pop, give way. Thus, the counter shove. *(More shoves, more cries. The CROWD is now in constant motion, squeezing, shoving, cursing. BILL watches. The CROWD freezes.)* I had always assumed a sporting event was a paid-for entertainment, like a night at the cinema. You gave up a small part of your earnings and were rewarded by a span of pleasure. I thought this was normal. I could see that I was wrong. What principle governed the British sporting event? It appeared that, in exchange for a few pounds, you received one hour and forty-five minutes characterized by the greatest possible exposure to the worst possible weather, the greatest number of people in the smallest possible space, and the greatest number of obstacles to keep you from ever attending a match again. And yet, here they all were, having their Saturday.

(The CROWD comes to life.)

SUPPORTERS. UNITED! *(clap clap)*

(The CROWD turns ninety degrees so that it faces downstage. SOUND: a match in progress.)

BILL. So there I was. Standing with “them.” (*SUPPORTERS react enthusiastically to something on the field.*) But how to get to know them? (*SUPPORTERS react negatively to something on the field.*) How to start the conversation? “Hi, you look ugly and violent, can I buy you a drink?” (*Beat.*) I pondered the question.

(BILL looks at one MAN at the edge of the crowd. BILL clears his throat. As he does, the crowd noise cuts off and, led by the MAN, every face in the crowd swivels toward BILL.)

MAN. Stop staring at me like that.

BILL *(to audience)*. I did not judge my first outing a success. So I went to more matches.

SUPPORTERS *(singing, tune of your choice)*.

You can stick your fuckin’ Chelsea up your arse.

You can stick your fuckin’ Millwall up your arse.

You can stick your fuckin’ West Ham, You can stick your fuckin’ Arsenal,

You can stick your fuckin’ Leeds up your arse.

You’re the worst fuckin’ team we’ve ever seen.

You’re the worst fuckin’ team we’ve ever seen.

You’re the worst fuckin’ team, You’re the worst fuckin’ team, You’re the worst fuckin’ team we’ve ever seen.

BILL. I went to East London to watch West Ham play.
Then to Ibrox Park in Glasgow. I went to Wimbledon,

Millwall, Roker Park, Hampden, Hillsborough. Wembley and the Den on Cold Blow Lane. Nothing happened.

Finally, I went to Old Trafford stadium in Manchester to watch Man United play Juventus, an Italian team from Turin. And it was there that I met Mick. Actually, I met him on the train.

(Chairs are brought out to make a train compartment. SOUND: a train. MICK sits in a compartment. Over T-shirt and pants he wears a large gray overcoat. It has many pockets stuffed with food and drink. Mostly drink.)

BILL. I knew when I found him that he was my man. He was, quite simply, the most repellent human being I'd ever seen. *(To MICK, regarding the empty seat next to him.)* D'you mind? *(No reply. BILL sits. A beat.)* So. Going to see Man United play?

(MICK looks at BILL. Then he drains his can of lager, throws it behind him, reaches into his coat, pulls out a bottle of vodka, opens it, and starts to drink.)

BILL. My name's Bill. I'm writing—well, thinking about writing about soc—that is, *football* supporters, and I was wondering if I could ask you—

MICK. You a journalist?

BILL. What? Yes. I guess, that is, I suppose I am. Anyway, I was *wondering*—

MICK. All Americans. Are wankers. All *journalists*. Are cunts.

BILL *(to audience)*. We had established a rapport.

(The sound of the train fades as the SUPPORTERS clear the chairs and form a “pub,” i.e., a crowd upstage representing drinkers at the bar. Their backs are to the audience.)

BILL. On our way to the match, we stopped at a pub.

(A jovial man wearing an apron—TOM MELODY—approaches BILL.)

TOM. Hello. Tom Melody. Welcome to The Bridge. Don't think I know you...

BILL. Bill. I'm just, um, visiting.

TOM. Visiting. Well. Good luck with that. Watch yourself.

(He turns back upstage as MICK appears with two pints of beer. He hands one to BILL.)

BILL. Oh. Um. Cheers. *(But MICK is already draining his glass. BILL watches for a beat, then starts draining his own glass. They finish more or less together.)* So, anyway, Mick, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about yourself and the— *(But as BILL has spoken these words MICK has taken the empties, handed them through the line at the bar, and come back with two full pints. He offers one to BILL.)* Oh. Thanks. *(MICK drinks again; BILL follows. They empty their glasses.)* Whoa! That's quite a— But as I was saying, I'm curious about— *(MICK has returned with two more full glasses.)* Yes. Uhh. All right. *(They drain their glasses. BILL reacts to the alcohol he's consumed.)* Listen, Mick, maybe we should—

MICK. C'mon.

BILL. Huh?

MICK. The *match*.

(The SUPPORTERS surge forward around MICK and BILL and become the crowd at the match.)

SUPPORTERS *(singing, tune of your choice)*.

Keep the red flag flying high

'Cuz Man United will never die.

Keep the red flag flying high

'Cuz Man United will never die.

(SOUND: a match in progress. MICK and BILL fight their way downstage to the front of the CROWD.)

BILL *(to audience)*. As the match was against Juventus, an Italian team, the proceedings had a certain internationalism.

VOICE IN CROWD. Where were you in World War II?

OTHER VOICES. Where were you in World War II?
Where were...

(Several more VOICES briefly pick up the cry, but it quickly dies out.)

2ND VOICE IN CROWD. Mussolini was a wanker!

OTHER VOICES. Mussolini was a wanker! Mussolini was...