UBU ROI

by

Alfred Jarry
(1873–1907)

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Play Notes

From the Sublime to the Pedestrian

Perhaps the major changes in drama from classical to avant garde are most obvious through a study of characterization. For example, in Sophocles' play *Oedipus* the emphasis is on Oedipus, a superman of sorts, and his struggle with the gods, who are, of course, even greater than he is. *Macbeth*, Shakespeare pitted kings against one another so that the actions of the characters are great numbers of people. The characters in both works are of epic proportion: larger-than-life heroes fulfilling the promise of their awesome potential. We identify with aspects of Macbeth and Oedipus' character; yet, we are also awed by them. The schism in our view of them all us to step back and study them in a more detached way than we can today's "hero." The modern "hero" does not make decisions of great magnitude, nor does he even commit the clear-cut action of a Moliere, Congreve, or Goldoni character. To characterize the modern "hero" is difficult because of his obtuseness. In fact, it is this very lack of definition that sets him apart from the more definable progenitors. With the dissolution of the clear-cut character, comes an end to the plot structure. The order and logic so important to earlier dramatists becomes the subject of a play. The 20th Century avant-garde playwright reflects the collective doubts of the age which in essence reflect the aware individual's suspicion that his fate, whether in the stars or himself, is incoherent.

Modern philosophy, literature, and drama suggest that our only greatness is in the recognition that there is no longer any way to be great. Alfred Jarry's play *King Ubu* mocks the "great hero" that was an integral part of characterization for centuries and explores what can happen when one accepts that greatness is only a delusion.

Influence of Artaud

When in 1938 Antonin Artaud published a selection of his essays entitled "The Theatre and its Double," he crystallized into text theatrical implications which had arisen as early as the 19th century in *King Ubu*. Indeed, the close relationship Artaud felt to Alfred Jarry is signified by the name he and Roger Vitrac gave to the experimental theatre they founded at Paris in 1927: The Theatre of Alfred Jarry.

Describing the program of the Theatre Alfred Jarry at its inception, Artaud stated that proposed "... to contribute by strictly theatrical means to the ruin of the theatre as it exists today in France." He elaborated: "The Theatre Alfred Jarry has been created to... return the theatre that total liberty which exists in music, poetry, or painting, and of which it has almost curiously benefited up to now."

In "The Theatre and its Double" Artaud placed the blame for the poverty of the conventional French theatre on "culture." By culture, Artaud meant the patterns of artificiality which civilization—especially Western civilization—had imposed upon human nature, and, indeed, Artaud's concept of the theatre obviously stemmed from an intense desire to do justice to what he considered the essentials of the human personality, as well as from purely artistic considerations. Artaud, who yearned for a theatrical innocence reminiscent of Rousseau, believed that the human was crushed by the restraints imposed upon it by a corrupting civilization. For Artaud, the heart of art was pure emotion; only human desires (anger, hate, longing, and the most intense physical desires) were worthy of consideration by the artist. The theatre, he believed, should...
the artificial hierarchy of values imposed by "culture" and be consistently uninhibited to dem-
onstrate the true reality of the human soul and the mercilessly savage conditions under which the
soul operates. An expression of this oppression is what Artaud called "Theatre of Cruelty."

Cruelty in the theatre does not mean, Artaud was careful to point out, the mere dramatization
of the techniques of physical laceration. Artaud thought that, above all, there had to be theatrical
expression of an impersonal, implacable cruelty, lying essentially outside of man: the cruelty of
the universe itself, in all its natural, violent force. "Everything that acts is a cruelty," Artaud
wrote. "It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed to its limits, that the theatre must be built."

Artaud realized that in order to express best his idea of primordial theatre, a state would be
necessary that would completely overwhelm its audience. He therefore recommended the abolition
of all physical barriers between theatre goer and actor. "We abolish the stage and the auditorium
and replace them by a single site," he wrote. "Without partition or barrier of any kind . . . a
direct communication will be reestablished. . . . The spectator, placed in the middle of the action,
is engulfed and physically affected by it." He also recommended the intensification of the theatrical
means itself and utilized the full theatre, drawing upon dance, song, and pantomime.

The Balinese theatre, which used words in a ritualistic, incantatory sense only and presented
a perfect antidote to " . . . purely verbal theatre, unaware of everything that makes theatre,"
inspired Artaud. Emphasizing special vocal intonations, spectacle, ritual, actors' masks, as well
as fresh concepts of lighting, scenery, and costuming—in short, as many techniques specifically
at the disposal of the theatre as possible—Artaud outlined a system of almost totally antirealistic
drama. Even today, Artaud's dramatic prescriptions are among the most technically and philo-
sophically revolutionary in existence; and there are few avant-garde playwrights today who have
not been influenced by Artaud's comprehensive and esthetic crystallizations.

**Story and Plot Summary**

All the following events have a wild, extremely undignified quality; they are a deliberate
burlesque of the dignity usually associated with established society.

Ma Ubu urges Pa Ubu to go after the crown of Poland, rather than remain a mere captain
of dragoons. She tempts him by reminding him that as king he could wear better clothes and eat
whatever he liked. In a scene filled with oaths and insults, Ma plants the idea of assassinating the
present king.

Guests arrive for dinner—Captain MacNure and his companions. Ma names what she has
prepared for a magnificent meal. Pau Ubu throws food around, calls names, exhibits a toilet brush.
Eventually, he evicts all guests except MacNure, whom he promises the dukedom of Lithuania
in return for help in killing the king. MacNure agrees.

Pa Ubu is summoned by the King in honor of past services. He is asked to be present the
next day for a great review. Ubu presents the King with a toy musical instrument. The conspiracy
goes forward. The King is to be murdered, after a not-so-solemn oath in which Ma Ubu stands
in for a priest.

The next day, the Queen urges the King not to go out. She has had a dream foretelling Pa
Ubu's treachery.

The King is murdered in a deliberately ribald manner, at odds with the "dignified" murders
of leaders in Shakespearean plays. (In this sense, Jarry's play raises consciousness, challenging
assumptions about the nobility of characters in *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar* in which stately deportment and blank verse lend serious meaning to horrible events.) Jarry's characters perform in the manner of children shouting "Bang bang, you're dead," which is no more unreal than the lofty speeches that Macbeth and his lady deliver when they murder Duncan. (Perhaps such adolescent behavior is a more fitting depiction of the aftermath of a violent murder.)

Pa Ubu, as King, enjoys the wealth of the royal treasury and ignores Ma Ubu's warnings about possible enemies. He puts to death nobles, financiers, and judges, sending them down a chute. He intends to run the country without help. The widow and son of the dead king have fled to the mountains. Massacres are widespread, and Ubu has doubled taxes. He intends to make his fortune and continue the killing.

Opposition arises: Captain M'Nure, who was denied the promised appointment, raises an army to help re-establish the young prince as ruler and he receives aid from the Russian Army thus beginning the downfall of the lusty, crude monarch.

**Objectives**

After studying *Ubu Roi*, you, the student should be able to

1. recognize avant-gardism as a revolution in theatre that reflects a break from convention as epitomized by the spirit of social revolution in the 1960's.
2. identify the changes in dramatic conventions created by Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty."
3. appreciate avant-gardism as an experimental form of theatre that continually violates conventions in order to maintain the responsive, ever-changing nature of theatre.

**Program Notes**

*Ubu Roi*

This anarchic travesty makes fun of revered traditions when *Macbeth* is parodied by the earthy Pa and Ma Ubu. Not for the squeamish, the play has a parade of pin-striped gangsters, a grotesque "heroine," a king who plays the kazoo, the execution of national leaders ("Down the chute!" cries the new King Ubu.) and such nonrealistic theatrical conventions as the paper sign "Russian army" carried by a bedraggled actor.

Alfred Jarry wrote the play in the last decade of the 19th Century. It was outrageous at the time. Events in our own century have made it ominous as well, as reality has caught up with mockery. A minidocumentary explains how the play is tied to modern expressionist drama. Jarry, in his preliminary address at the first performance of *Ubu Roi*, said, "We are going to make do with three complete acts, followed by two acts incorporating some cuts." The BBC production omitted the scenes involving Tsar Alexis and most of the battle scenes.

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Act I, Scene vii

Ubu's house, smoke-filled and beer can littered (GYRON, HEADS, TAILS, PA UBU, MA UBU, MACNURE)

PA UBU Well, my good friends, it's high time we planned our little conspiracy. Let each give his counsel. With your permission, we will begin with mine.
CAPTAIN MACNURE Speak, Mister Ubu.

(UBU sits down)
PA UBU Very good, my friends. I am of the opinion that we should simply poison the King by stuffing his lunch with arsenic. The moment he starts the browsing and scoffing, he'll drop dead and I shall be king.

GYRON O, you wicked old thing, you!
PA UBU What, you don't like that idea? All right then, let's hear from M'Nure.
CAPTAIN MACNURE My suggestion is that I fetch him a good wallop with my sword and cleave him from top to toe.

ALL Ah yes! That's noble and gallant.

PA UBU But . . . but supposing he kicks out at you? I've just remembered; for his Grand Parades he wears iron boots which can be jolly painful. If I had half a chance, I'd snitch on the lot of you. That way, I'd be rid of the whole beastly business, and very likely pick up a reward in the bargain.

MA UBU Oh, the traitor, the coward, the rotten, mean skunk!

ALL Down with Old Ubu!

PA UBU Shut your traps, gentlemen, or I'll turn you all in. Very well, I'll take on the risks on your behalf. Uh, Captain M'Nure, is it agreed that your job is to split the king down the middle?
CAPTAIN MACNURE Wouldn't it be better if we all jumped on him at once, shouting and yelling?
ALL That way, we'd have a better chance of winning over the troops.

PA UBU No, look, I'll tell you what. I'll try to tread on his toe, he'll kick out at me, I'll yell "PSCHITT," and that will be the signal for you all to hurl yourselves upon him.

MA UBU And then the moment he's dead, you'll pinch his crown and sceptre.
CAPTAIN MACNURE And I and my men will go in pursuit of the royal family.
PA UBU Keep a sharp lookout for young Boggerlas.

(They start to go)

One moment, gentlemen, we are forgetting an indispensable ceremony. We must all take an oath to quit ourselves like men.

CAPTAIN MACNURE How can we? We haven't got a priest.

PA UBU My old woman will be the priest.
ALL All right, so be it.

PA UBU Do you all swear on the head of Madam Ubu to kill the King good and proper?
ALL We swear it. Long live Old Ubu!

(UBU group gives thumbs up salute and chants "UBU"

Act II, Scene i

The Palace: WENCESLAS, QUEEN ROSAMUND, DOLESLAS, LADISLAS, BOGGERLAS, GYRON.

THE QUEEN Really, Sire, are you quite determined to attend this parade?
THE KING And, pray, madam, why not?
I'll tell you once more. I saw him in a dream, smiting you with mass weapons and throwing you into the Vistula, and an eagle like that which figures in the Arms of Poland placing the crown on his head.

On whose head?

Old Ubu's.

Oh, ridiculous! Master Ubu is a most worthy gentleman who would let himself be dragged apart by wild horses rather than betray my interests.

May God and the great Saint Nicholas protect you!

Act II, Scene ii

The parade Ground—Polish Army, The King, Doleslas, Ladislas, P.A. Ubu, Captain Macnure and His Merry Men, Gyrion, Heads, Tails.

Ah, noble Master Ubu, enter the royal enclosure with your followers, and we will review the march together.

Look sharp, you clots. (To the King) Coming, Sire.

Ah, there's my regiment of Danziger Horseguards. Oh, what a magnificent spectacle! You really think so? Looks like something the cat brought in. Look at that one! (pointing to a soldier) You, there! When did you last have a shave, you lousy slob?

But this fellow is very well turned out. What on earth is the matter with you, Old Ubu?

This! (He stamps on the King's foot)

Treason! (King stamps on Ubu's Toe. There's a delay as Ubu remembers the word)

Pschitt.

At him! Hurrah! (All strike the King)

Help, help! Holy Virgin, I'm dying.

(UBU REMOVES THE KING'S CROWN AND PUTS HIS OWN HAT ON THE KING'S HEAD)

Ha! I have the crown.

Death to the traitors!

(The King's sons flee. All pursue them)

Act II, Scenes iii and iv

The Palace

Help, help! Those maniacs have forced their way into the palace. They're coming up the stairs.
(The din grows louder)

THE QUEEN AND BOGGERLAS (on their knees) May God protect us.

Boggerlas Oh, that vile Ubu, wretch, rascal, I'd just like to get my hands on him. . .

pa UBU Oh, you would, would you? And what, pray, Boggerlas, would you do to me?

Boggerlas By God’s will, I shall defend my mother to the death. The first man to take a step forward is as good as dead.

pa UBU M’Nure, get me out of here. I’m scared.

A SOLDIER (advances) Boggerlas, surrender.

Boggerlas Here's one for you, you dog.

(He slits his skull) (sor-orEn falls to earth)

The Queen That’s the spirit, Boggerlas, keep it up!

(Heads, tails, gyrón pick up soldier and throw him into combat again)

SEVERAL (advancing) We promise to save your life.

Boggerlas Blackguards, wine-bladders, mercenary scum. (He flourishes his sword)

pa UBU Oh, bother, but I’ll still win in the end.

Boggerlas Mother, escape by the secret staircase.

The Queen And you, my son, what about you?

Boggerlas I’ll follow you.

(Queen tiptoes away)

Pa UBU Capture the Queen. Drat, she’s got away. As for you, you little worm! . . . (He advances on Boggerlas)

Boggerlas By God’s will, here’s my vengeance.

(Boggerlas wraps mace round Ubu’s brolly as he rips open pa Ubu’s boodle with a sword thrust.)

Boggerlas Mother, I follow you!

Act III, Scene i

The palace, Pa Ubu. Ma Ubu (Pa is on the throne eating dates.)

pa UBU Behold me, monarch of this fair land. I’ve already got the guts-ache with overeating, and soon they are going to bring in my great bonnet.

Ma Ubu We owe a great debt of gratitude to the Duke of Lithuania.

pa UBU Who’s that?

Ma Ubu Why, Captain M’Nure.

pa UBU (getting down from throne) For god’s sake, woman, don’t ever mention that slob to me. So far as I’m concerned he can whistle for his dukedom, but he’s not going to get it.

(Ma Ubu switches off throne lights)

Ma Ubu You’re making a great mistake, Pa Ubu. He’ll turn against you.

pa UBU I should worry! So far as I’m concerned, he and Boggerlas can go and jump in a lake. (Ubu switches throne lights back on.)

Act III, Scene ii

The great hall of the palace—Pa Ubu, Ma Ubu, Officers, Gyrón, Heads, Tails, Nobles, Financiers, Judges, Registrars.
The Conventions of Theatre

PA UBU Bring out the chest for Nobles, and the slasher for Nobles, and the boat hook for Nobles, and the account book for Nobles, and then bring in the Nobles.

(The NOBLES are brutally shoved in)

MA UBU For pity's sake restrain yourself, Pa Ubu.

PA UBU Gentlemen, I have the honour to inform you that, as a gesture to the economic welfare of my country, I have decided to liquidate the nobility and confiscate their goods.

NOBLES Horror of horrors! Soldiers and citizens, defend us.

PA UBU Bring on the first Noble and pass me the boat hook. Those who are condemned to death shall push through this door here where they will fall down into the bleed-pig chambers, then proceed to the cash-room, where they will be debrained. (To the NOBLE) What's your name, you slob?

NOBLE Count of Vitebsk.

PA UBU What's your income?

NOBLE Three million rix-dollars.

PA UBU Guilty. (He grabs him with the hook and pushes him through the door. Dooms open, and MAUBU pushes COUNT through. Doors close.)

MA UBU This is base brutality!

PA UBU You, there, what's your name?

(NOUBLE doesn't answer.)

COME on, answer, you slob.

NOBLE Grand Duke of Posen.

PA UBU Excellent! Excellent! I couldn't ask for a better. Down the hatch. You, there. What's your name, ugly mug?

NOBLE Duke of Courland, and of the Cities of Riga, Revel, and Mitau.

PA UBU Oh, very good. Are you sure that's the lot?

NOBLE That's all.

PA UBU Get down the hatch. What's your name, number four?

NOBLE Prince of Podolia.

PA UBU What's your income?

NOBLE I'm bankrupt.

PA UBU Take that for disobedience. (Hits him with hook) Now get down the hatch. Number four, what's your name?

NOBLE Margrave of Thorn, Count Palatine of Polock.

PA UBU That's not very much. Are you sure that's all you are?

NOBLE It's been good enough for me.

PA UBU Well, it's better than nothing, I suppose. Get down the hatch. What's eating you, Ubu?

MA UBU You're too bloodthirsty, Pa Ubu.

PA UBU I'm getting rich. Now I'm going to have them read out the list of what I've got. Register read out my list of my titles and possessions.

GYRON Count of Sandomir... Count...

PA UBU The princedoms first, stupid bugger!
GYRON Princedom of Podolia, Grand Duchy of Posen, Duchy of Courland, Count of Sandomir, Count of Vitebsk, Palatinate of Polock, Margravate of Thorn.

PA UBU Go on.

GYRON That's the lot.

PA UBU What do you mean, that's the lot! Oh, well, I'm going to make some laws next.

GYRON That'll be worth watching.

PA UBU I shall begin by reforming the judicial code and then turn my attention to financial matters.

(Enter Judges)

SEVERAL JUDGES We are strongly opposed to any change.

PA UBU So, pschitt. In the first place, judges will no longer receive a salary.

JUDGES And what shall we live on? We are all poor men.

PA UBU You keep the fines you impose and the possessions of those you condemn to death.

FIRST JUDGE It's unthinkable.

SECOND JUDGE Infamous.

THIRD JUDGE Scandalous.

FOURTH JUDGE Contemptible.

ALL We refuse to judge under such conditions.

PA UBU Down the hatch with the judges. (They struggle in vain)

MA UBU Oh, what have you done, Pa Ubu? Who will administer justice now?

PA UBU Why, I will. You'll see how well it will work out.

MA UBU Yes, it'll be a right old mess.

PA UBU Aw, shut your gob, clownish female, I am now going to turn my attention to financial matters.

(Enter Financiers)

PA UBU In the first place, I intend to pocket half the tax receipts.

FIRST FINANCIER But that's ridiculous.

SECOND FINANCIER Quite absurd.

THIRD FINANCIER It doesn't make sense.

PA UBU Are you making fun of me? Get down the hatch, all of you.

(The Financiers are pushed through the door)
A Listing of BBC Actors and Productions Coordinators

**UBU ROI**

by

Alfred Jarry

**CAST**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Actor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UBU ROI (PA UBU)</td>
<td>Donald Pleasance</td>
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<tr>
<td>MA UBU</td>
<td>Brenda Bruce</td>
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<tr>
<td>CAPTAIN MACNURE</td>
<td>Neil Cunningham</td>
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<tr>
<td>KING WENCESLAS</td>
<td>John Evitts</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOGGERLAS</td>
<td>Oengus Macnamara</td>
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<tr>
<td>GYRON</td>
<td>Christopher Asante</td>
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<tr>
<td>HEADS</td>
<td>Bunny Reed</td>
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<tr>
<td>TAILS</td>
<td>Paul Toothill</td>
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<tr>
<td>QUEEN ROSAMUND</td>
<td>Jacqueline Delhaye</td>
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<tr>
<td>BOLESLAS</td>
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<tr>
<td>BEAR</td>
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<td>COUNT OF VITEBSK</td>
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<td>JUDGE 1</td>
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<td>FINANCIER 1</td>
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<td>HORSE</td>
<td>Glen Cunningham</td>
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<td>LADISLAS</td>
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<td>DUKE OF POSEN</td>
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<td>JUDGE 2</td>
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<td>FINANCIER 2</td>
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<td>COUNSELLOR 1</td>
<td>Roger Neil</td>
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<td>YOUNG PEASANT</td>
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<td>DUKE OF COURLAND</td>
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<td>JUDGE 3</td>
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<td>FINANCIER 3</td>
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<td>COUNSELLOR 2</td>
<td>Michael Cullen</td>
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Focus in Viewing

Viewers of this production should be prepared for an out-and-out assault on their senses and sensibilities. Of all the productions in this series, this program contains the most outrageous humor. The director has interpreted his mock heroic extravaganza in a most contemporary way and uses some of the techniques which have been developed in movies and television for presenting caricature and farce. The production includes elements found in a Punch and Judy puppet show and a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Comic routines are reminiscent of those of Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers, and even Monty Python. The viewer should surrender to the absurdity, rather than attempt to analyze it.

Content Viewing

1. Does Ubu Roi have an overall message or theme? What, if any, is it?
2. How is this play a presentation of bourgeois grossness? Does it reflect a political position or attitude?
3. What emphasis does Jarry place on violence in the play?
5. The characters in the play, most often Pa Ubu, use words which are inventions of Jarry’s. What effect do these words have in the play? What meaning do they convey?

Craft Viewing

1. What are some conventions you need to know or accept before you can understand how this play satirizes tradition? How would you describe the portrayal of violence in this production?
2. Based on your viewing, the reading of the plot summary, do you recognize a plot structure? If so, what is it? Does Jarry seem to capture the spirit of the traditional commedia dell’arte? Explain.
3. Can you determine a directoral concept or interpretation? Did the director emphasize the general lampooning of heroic attitudes and the order they glorify? Explain. In what way, if at all, would you have directed the production differently? (For instance, what might have been other deliberate anachronisms?)
4. Do you agree, or disagree, with the characterizations and interpretation of a character and discuss.
5. Do you think the costumes and props supported the stageplay?
6. Is there one moment or scene which stands out in your memory? More than one? Which ones, and why?

Critical Viewing: Overview

1. Compare Pa Ubu to Oedipus or Macbeth. Can you think of another tragedy that Ubu might parody?
2. Now that this play and its production are part of your experience, what significance does Ubu Roi hold for you?
Additional Plays That Demonstrate Similar Concepts

*Waiting for Godot*—Samuel Beckett
*Rhinoceros, The Bald Soprano*—Eugene Ionesco
*The Blacks, The Balcony*—Jean Genet
*The Zoo Story, The American Dream*—Edward Albee

Films:
*Duck Soup* with the Marx Brothers

Stage Terms

**Anachronism**—A person or thing that is chronologically out of place.

**Avant Garde**—The development of (or those who develop) experimental concepts in the arts based upon an intellectual eye for the "new."

**Episodic Plot**—A casual, illogical arrangement of incidents; the opposite of the pyramidal plot structure.

**Parody**—An art, literary, musical, or dramatic work that imitates the style of a related work in order to make fun of it.

**Theatre of the Absurd**—Refuses to employ verisimilitude or definite symbolism and is generally predicated on the existential view that we exist with little or no meaning. This meaninglessness is represented in dialogues and situations that seem to be nonsensical and ridiculous.