

# Tom and Jarry

Director Tom Diamond brings *Ubu Unleashed* to York

Alcoholic madman or creative genius, however you perceive him, Alfred Jarry had astounding impact in the world of nineteenth and twentieth century art. He is most famous for his play *Ubu Roi* or *King Ubu*, the story of an absurd, grotesque, and obnoxious tyrant who is determined to conquer an imaginary Poland and become king. Jarry was so obsessed with his creation that he behaved like and actually became the living embodiment of Ubu.

Alfred Jarry is credited with being the father of surrealism. His style of theatre and theories such as "Pataphysics," have inspired the works of Picasso, Ionesco, and other surrealists such as Salvador Dali and Samuel Beckett. He was an alcoholic who died at age 34. The cause of death, however, was not alcoholism, but malnutrition.

His last request was for a toothpick.

The Department of Theatre at York University is presenting a new work, *Ubu Unleashed, the story of Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) from conception to death*. Its writer and director, Tom Diamond, conceived and wrote the play in collaboration with a fourth-year acting ensemble.

Diamond teaches acting and directing in the Department of Theatre here at York. A specialist in music theatre, he recently directed the world premiere of *Dreamplay* by Timothy Sullivan for the Canadian Opera Company. He has staged such productions as *Guys & Dolls*, *Dames at Sea*, and *Fiddler on the Roof* for Theatre Collingwood. His last production at York was a successful run of *Oh What A Lovely War!* last year.

*Excalibur* writer Frank Clarke recently talked to writer and director Tom Diamond about the new production.

**EXCAL:** This production is unique because most directors who delve into Alfred Jarry usually stage a production of *Ubu Roi*. Why did you decide to write and stage the life story of Alfred Jarry, creating something completely different?

**DIAMOND:** I was first approached by the theatre department to do *Ubu Roi* and I agreed to do it. When I started to work on it my instincts cringed at the thought of it possibly looking like an episode of *The Lucy Show*. Then as I started to research Jarry, this one phrase kept coming back to me: "After his metamorphosis into Ubu." After researching him, I discovered that this man was far more interesting than the play.

Also, I don't think *Ubu Roi* has the impact today that it had when it was first produced in 1896 at the Théâtre de L'Oeuvre in Paris. Back then the play was tremendously shocking because the word "shit" was used on stage. It is the very first line of the play and is used 33 times throughout the play. You can imagine the audience reaction to hearing the word "shit" used for the first time on stage. Today, an audience would hear the word "shit" and say "so?"

Back then his style of theatre was revolutionary because it went against the conventional style of the "well-made play" and it created a sensation. His style of theatre was like a dream with purple streamers. I've focused on Jarry because my belief is (that) where you place the emphasis is what gives it a freshness.

**EXCAL:** You mentioned Jarry's metamorphosis into Ubu.

**DIAMOND:** The metamorphosis into Ubu didn't occur until after the first production of *Ubu Roi* in Paris. The basis for his strange behaviour came from his upbringing. He did not come from a conventional home. His father was an alcoholic and his mother was a tremendously dominant woman who would dress up in these amazing costumes and take Alfred through town. Her favourite costume was a treader. You can imagine the impact that had, considering they were in a small town. This is the world he came from.

In school, he realized that he had the ability to charm and to be much more interesting than his professors.

In fact, Ubu originated as a mocking figure of Jarry's science teacher Professor Ebert, and Professor Ebert is a character in this production. In essence, Jarry became Ebert and the grotesque exaggeration of who his teacher was. Before the metamorphosis he was brash, aggressive, and he dressed strangely. He always wore a cyclist's costume with tennis shoes with the toes sticking out of them. After his metamorphosis into Ubu he painted his face white, or became very pale, plastered his hair down to

"His vision of the theatre was like a dream with purple streamers."

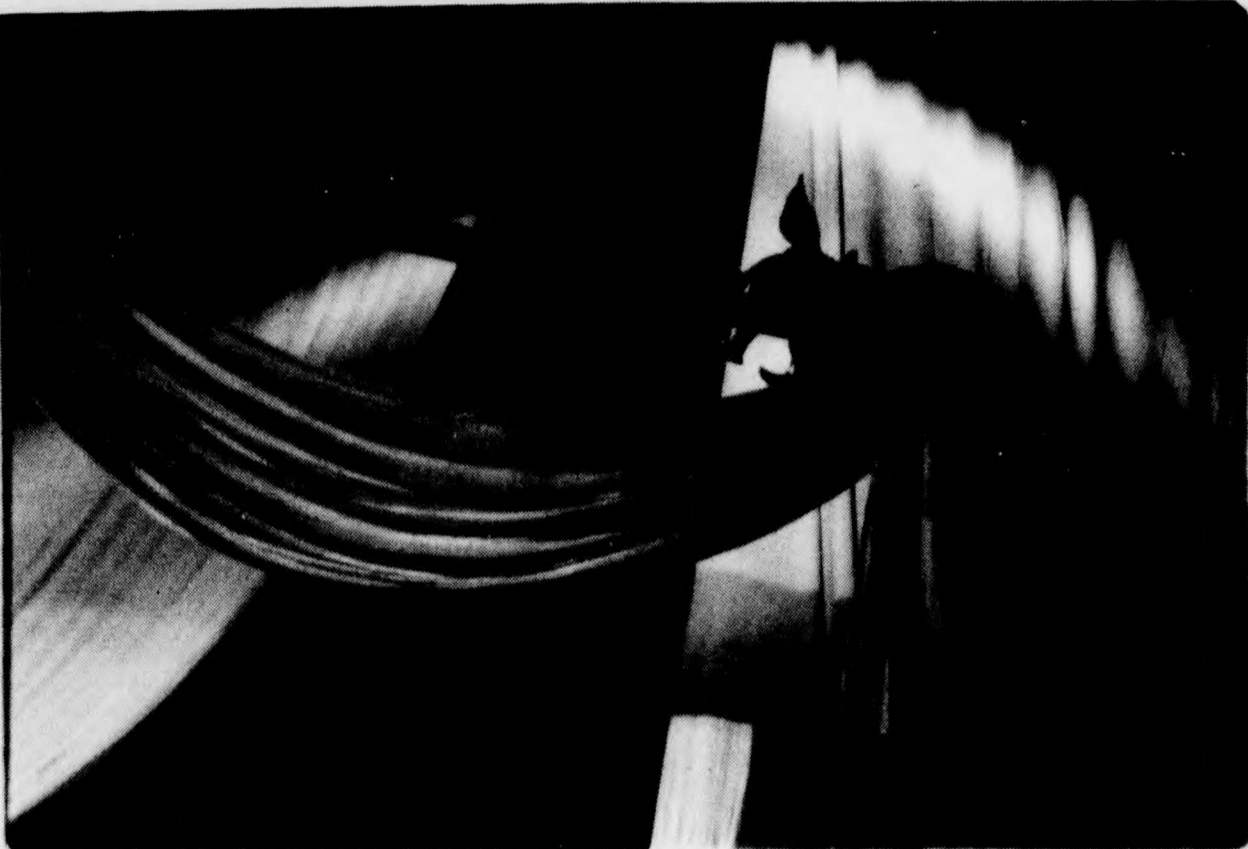
his head like a skull cap and he began to speak in the royal "we." He found particular ways to speak about inanimate and animate objects. For instance, a bicycle became "that which rolls," the wind became "that which blows." From that point his behaviour became incredibly exaggerated.

**EXCAL:** What exactly is Jarry's "Pataphysics?"

**DIAMOND:** Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, solutions to imaginary or real problems. For example, he did a piece on the notion of mailing a letter. He talked about how ridiculous it is that we bound with good faith to buy the stamp, to kiss the back of the stamp, to put it on a letter, to put it in a box and hope that it's going to get there. He said that the way that works, we could take a letter and throw it in the gutter and hope for the same thing. He would find odd ways of looking at everything. In a way they're not always so odd because through that crazy world of Pataphysics there's a strange logic that is quite profound.

**EXCAL:** What are your objectives in doing this show?

**DIAMOND:** My primary purpose is to let people know that Jarry existed



UBU SEARCH: Can you find the Ubu?

— to introduce, or for those who have heard of him, to re-introduce them to Jarry. To do this I created a piece in a sense in the style of Jarry, in the style of his theatre that would let the audience perceive the performance in a similar fashion to the way the audience first perceived *Ubu Roi* in Paris in 1896.

Jarry is primarily remembered for writing *Ubu Roi* and that's it. Most people don't think he wrote or did anything else. This production is a very sympathetic portrait of Alfred Jarry to show that there was a lot more to him than just this image of a one-play author who was an alcoholic madman. He was a painter, designer, and a prolific writer who wrote hundreds of poems, dozens of critical essays, and perhaps a dozen novels. What most people don't know about him is the fact that he was well admired by his peers and that he went on to influence artists around him and after him. The people around him who he influenced were Picasso, whom he knew, and Henri Rousseau. Artaud, who came after Jarry, was so influenced by him that he called his theatre The Theatre of Alfred Jarry. Salvador Dali was greatly influenced by Jarry's surrealist scenic descriptions. In fact, if you looked at a Dali painting you would think that he copied Jarry's description. All the way through history this man has had influence and impact upon people.

At the same time I want to entertain the audience and allow them to get involved in the work so that they won't sit there and say "Is it over yet?" Therefore, there is a lot of humour in the piece because Jarry was a very humorous character.

**EXCAL:** Since Jarry's style of theatre was unconventional for his time, what forms does your production take to reflect this eccentricity?

**DIAMOND:** The whole first part of the piece presents his life up to the point where he metamorphosed himself into Ubu. The first part is based upon factual research, but the information on him is terribly contra-indicated because there were numerous versions of who he was and what he was about. When I went and wrote it, I would make a choice on a moment to either keep a fact or completely toss it away as Jarry would have done if he was writing his own life story.

The whole second part is his life after his metamorphosis into Ubu.

At that time his point of view was not quite direct because he was a major alcoholic. The documentation of what he drank was unbelievable. Before breakfast he had two litres of wine and throughout the rest of the day he would just continue. He was also into absinthe, which was sort of a hallucinogenic liqueur distilled from wormwood and he was into ether, which was used as an anaesthetic. In this production people are going to see him inhaling ether and think that I stole the idea from *Blue Velvet*, but no, Jarry did this. The second part is this hallucination. It's like a nightmare, just as the second part of his life was like a nightmare. The second part of the piece uses primarily Jarry's own writings and the writings of his contemporaries, whereas the first part is fictionalized by me and improvised by the actors.

*Ubu Unleashed* is not a play, it's a performance piece. It has everything: lip-synced opera singing, music, dance, and acting. The music is very ecclesiastic, it's picked from all different styles and genres. Also, I'm attracted to what is big, which is why I like to direct opera. I like things that are operatic in scope and this will be the biggest production ever done in Burton Auditorium. It's huge.



A costume sketch for *Ubu Unleashed*

**EXCAL:** Are there any modern-day equivalents of Alfred Jarry?

**DIAMOND:** A primary artist who keeps popping up for me, who is very Jarryesque, is Prince. Based on my research of Prince it seems that in a way it's almost as if Prince has

copied Jarry. Prince uses language like no other mainstream rock artist — we're talking about the four-letter word and sexual, scatological references. When his Toronto concert was reviewed a few weeks ago, one of the words used in the review was "ether." Besides this, another connection to Jarry is the way Prince dresses. Jarry wore women's garments because he found men's clothing too restrictive. Prince is very androgynous.

To me, Jarry was like the first rock star, and this production is very much a testament on stardom. People started to dress, talk, and behave like him, and this is exactly what happens to rock stars.

## Unleashed at York

Diamond has taken some daring risks with this production. For example, actress Elizabeth McLaughlin portrays two characters at the same time. The two characters are complete opposites: the male character is Remy de Gourmont, a sophisticated publicist, while the female is Berthe de Courriere, an eccentric old woman.

Greg Danakas, who portrays Professor Ebert, commented that for York theatre this production is "the cutting edge of theatre. It's risky and controversial."

Michelle Martin, who portrays Alfred Jarry, echoed these sentiments. She also added that portraying the complex Jarry requires precision in movement and voice. While aware of technique, she added that it is even more important to "bring out his passions as a human being in theatre, writing, and visual art. Living one's philosophy was important to him."

The production, according to Martin, also explores Jarry's controversial sexual nature. It was rumoured that he had affairs with Berthe de Courriere and a poet named Leon-Paul Fargue.

*Ubu Unleashed* opens November 22 in Burton Auditorium, with a sneak preview on November 21. The production runs until November 25. Curtain time is 7:00 p.m., with a Friday matinee at 1:00 p.m. Tickets are \$7 for adults and \$5 for students and seniors, available in Central Square and the Fine Arts Lobby. Box office number is 736-5157.