

1977

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Recommended Citation

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Parodos

by

Karl John Boyken

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
Major: English

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1977

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This thesis has been accepted by the Department of English in lieu of the research thesis prescribed by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

Characters

Alex Hacketts
 The Beauty Queen
 The Nurse
 The Doctor
 Mr. Hacketts
 Ms. Hacketts
 The Parade (The Chorus)
 John
 The Literary Critic
 The Old Woman

A spotlight illuminates an empty chair in the center of the stage. The lights gradually come up. Stage right, an unclothed manikin sits in front of a TV. Stage left, another sits, wearing stereo earphones. Upstage left, a naked manikin knits. Upstage right, two play chess. There are two doorways, right and left, and one window, at the back of the stage.

Alex enters, stage left, pushing an empty wheelchair. He is in his late twenties, and wears a dark suit, white shirt, narrow dark tie, and black wingtips.

Alex:

John! John!

He searches the stage, winding up near the empty chair.

John! John? It's not like him to forget his wheelchair.

Especially considering he can't walk.

He sits.

I wish he'd finish his story. Now, how did it go?

He takes a notepad from his coat and reads.

"Once, three people were told when they would die. The fool cried and said, 'I have but a short time left to live!'"

The smart one grinned and said, 'At least now I know I shall live until my time comes!' But the wise one..."

Damn! I wish I knew how it ends!

Loud march music, "John Brown's Body", suddenly fills the stage. Alex turns around in time to see a young woman drift by the window. She has a crown, and a sash with "Beauty Queen" printed upon it. She floats along as if she's sitting in a convertible, and she waves at an invisible crowd beyond the window. Alex waves to her, turns back around, and taps his feet to the music until it fades. As it fades, a frown sifts onto his face. He looks around the room.

A psych ward! A nuthouse! I'm stuck in a goddamn loony bin! A child could write a better play! An idiot could write a better play! Hey, that's a great idea! I'll write the play!

He takes a pen from his suit coat and writes.

Let's see...psych ward...isolation...search for meaning. I've got it! John is meaning! What a revelation! What symbolism!

The Nurse enters, stage right, pushing a dolly. On top of the dolly sits a toilet. On top of the toilet sits a nude manikin. The Nurse is a middle-aged man, wearing a dingy gray bikini and garter belt, and nylons full of runs and holes. He also wears an off-white nurse's cap, and carries a whip.

Nurse:

Well, Mr. Hacketts! I see you're hard at work already this morning. What are you writing?

He stands to Alex's right, arms akimbo, and lazily flicks his whip.

Alex:

Oh, no you don't!

He hides his notepad and pen in his coat.

You can't see it!

Nurse:

Whatever you say.

Alex:

You can't fool me! You want to show my notes to the
shrink, don't you! You want to pump me full of drugs! Zap
me full of volts!

Nurse:

Mr. Hacketts...

Alex:

Well, I won't let you do it! I won't! You can't make me
crack! I can take it! Come on! Just try to take my
notes! Come on!

He motions to him with his index finger.

Nurse:

Mr. Hacketts...

Alex:

Come on!

His voice becomes tiny.

Come on, come on, come on.

He pats his notepad.

Chicken!

Nurse:

Mr. Hacketts! This is not a mental hospital! This is a
rest home! We don't do things like that here.

Alex:

A rest home! Just what am I doing in a rest home? Huh?

What am I doing in a rest home?

Nurse:

Now, now. Why don't you join your friends in the cafeteria for breakfast? Powdered eggs, powdered milk and pablum.

Yum, yum!

Alex:

I don't have any friends. Just John. Where is he, by the way?

Nurse:

Who?

Alex:

You know, John. Wrinkled skin, gray hair, white beard, puffy gums, no teeth.

Nurse:

That could be anybody.

Alex:

You know, the one who always...

He pinches the Nurse's rear; he screams, then caresses Alex's face with his whip.

Nurse:

Oh, you mean him!

He flicks his whip away.

He's left us.

Alex:

You mean he's been discharged?

Nurse:

Of course not! Nobody leaves here that way. He's passed on.

Alex:

The old fart's passed a lot of things in his time, but he couldn't pass on!

Nurse:
He's gone. Permanently.

Alex:
You mean he's...dead?

Nurse:
Shh! Not so loud. You know the book doesn't allow that
kind of language!

Alex:
What book?

Nurse:
The rule book!

He recites like a schoolboy.

If a patient's bought the farm,
Don't let the others be alarmed.
Tell them that he's passed away.
Dead's the word you cannot say.

Alex:
Oh, because of them?

He points to the manikins.

They don't mind. They can't even hear.

Nurse:
Still...

Alex:
Death! Cancer! Stroke!

The Nurse cringes.

See? They don't care! Well, so John is dead. How did he
die?

Nurse:
It was an accident.

Alex:
An accident? What kind of accident?

Nurse:

He drowned. In the shower.

Alex:

But he was an invalid!

Nurse:

Now more than ever!

Alex:

All right! If he's dead, where's his body?

Nurse:

You can't see it.

Alex:

Why not?

Nurse:

Because the book says:

Once a codger's cold and stiff,
Read his rites, in a jiff.
Don't let the others near the coffin,
Or like flies they'll all be droppin'.

So you see, we already had the funeral.

Alex:

That was quick! Well, where's his grave?

Nurse:

You can't see it.

Alex:

Why not?

Nurse:

There isn't any. He's been cremated.

Alex:

You cooked him in an oven? You charbroiled him like a
burger? How could you? Where are his ashes? I want to
see his ashes!

Nurse:

You can't see his ashes.

Alex:

Why not?

Nurse:

We scattered them to the five corners of the earth.

Alex:

You're lying! He can't be dead! How could a ninety-year old paralytic get out of his wheelchair to take a shower in the first place?

Nurse:

We like all our patients to be clean.

He sniffs the air.

How about you? Do you need a shower?

He wraps his whip lovingly around Alex's throat.

Alex:

Oh, no! No! I'm clean!

Nurse:

See that you stay that way. A little dirt can be a dangerous thing.

The Nurse exits, stage right, pushing the dolly offstage.

Alex:

Alas! Poor John!

He takes out his notepad.

I knew him, notepad. A fellow of infinite gin, and most excellent Scotch. Many was the time he would pour me a Jim Beam...

Again, loud march music blares onto the stage. Alex turns around and spies the Beauty Queen riding past the window. He waves, beats out the

rhythm on his notepad, and turns back around. As the music fades, he becomes more serious.

I know!

He takes out his pen and writes.

John! John as a Christ figure! Jesus, what an idea!

Especially if he comes back to life.

The Doctor enters, stage right. She's middle-aged and wears a white, bloodstained surgeon's gown. A white mask hangs around her neck, and assorted knives, scissors and scalpels dangle from her waist. She carries a huge book, and pushes a dolly in front of her. A manikin sits in a basket atop the dolly.

Doctor:

Good morning, Mr. Hacketts! How are we today?

Alex:

None of your business!

He hides his pen and notepad.

Doctor:

Ah, writing! Good, good! Limbers up the fingers! Keeps the old arthritis from acting up! Or does it? Well, never mind.

Alex:

What do you want?

Doctor:

What do we want? We want us to be comfortable. We want us to be happy. And above all, we want us to be regular!

Tell us, Mr. Hacketts. Are we regular today?

Alex:

I've had a very moving experience. My best... my only friend is dead!

Doctor:

We're so very sorry!

Alex:

Tell me, Doc. Why am I here? Why am I in a rest home?

Doctor:

Now, now, Mr. Hacketts. Surely our relatives had some good reason for committing us!

Alex:

Relatives?

Doctor:

Certainly! We wouldn't be here if our relatives didn't worry about us, now, would we?

Alex:

But I don't remember any relatives!

Doctor:

Tut, tut! Acute senility!

Alex:

But I'm not old! I can't be! Can I?

Doctor:

It's not how old we seem to be, Mr. Hacketts. It's how old we really are that counts. And, my, my, my! We certainly are old today, aren't we? Let's just see what the repair manual has to say.

She opens the book and holds it in one arm while examining Alex with the other.

Hmmm. Scum on the gums. Ah! Debris on the knee! Oh, oh! Brine on the spine!

She bangs the book shut.

No, we certainly don't seem to be getting any younger, do we? Yes, we certainly do seem to be very old!

Alex:

But you said it's how old we really are that counts!

Doctor:

Did I say that? Well, that's the wonderful thing about modern medicine. New theories come along every second!

It's not what I said that's important; it's what I say!

But our motto never changes: "Health Makes Freedom!" And cleanliness makes health. Our body, Mr. Hacketts, is such a marvelous, such a beautiful form. We wouldn't want to let it get dirty, now, would we? When was the last time we took a shower?

Alex:

Well, I...

Doctor:

Don't tell us we can't remember that!

Alex:

To be honest, I...

Doctor:

Mr. Hacketts! Maybe we'd better take our shower someday soon! Don't we agree?

Alex:

No!

Doctor:

Well, try to, Mr. Hacketts! Try to!

She exits, stage right, pushing the dolly.

Alex:

Relatives! I have relatives! I don't even know them! How awful! How...

March music blasts away; the Beauty Queen glides past the window. Alex turns and waves, but when he turns back, he is serious again.

Unknown relatives! How...how Oedipal!

He takes out his notepad and pen, and writes.

Search for truth...dramatic irony...the Sphinx.

Mr. and Ms. Hacketts enter, stage right. He is middle-aged and wears a Hawaiian print shirt, sunglasses and knit pants. She is also middle-aged, and wears a knit blouse and tight knit pants, rhinestone sunglasses and a floppy hat. She carries a huge purse.

Mr. H:

Hello, son. Writing again? Say hello to Alex, Ms.

Hacketts.

Ms. H:

Hello, Alex.

Alex:

Who are you?

He hides his notepad and pen.

Ms. H:

Who are we? Did you hear that, Mr. Hacketts? He doesn't even know his own parents! Let's go home!

Mr. H:

Now, now, Ms. Hacketts. Let's give the boy a chance.

What's wrong with you, Alex? Don't you even know your own mother?

Alex:

It's just that I haven't seen you for so long, I guess.

Not since...since...

Ms. H:

Whaddya mean? We committed you just the other day.

Mr. H:

Actually, Ms. Hacketts, it was the day before the other day.

Ms. H:

Really? It seems like only yesterday.

Alex:

You mean you committed me? My own parents? Doesn't it usually work the other way around?

Ms. H:

No, it usually works around the other way.

Mr. H:

Nothing works the way it should anymore.

Ms. H:

Yes, these are modern times we live in.

Mr. H:

Thank God!

Ms. H:

Yes, thank God!

Alex:

But why? Why did you commit me? I'm not old! I'm only... only... How old am I, anyway?

Mr. H:

Did you hear that, Ms. Hacketts?

Ms. H:

I heard that, Mr. Hacketts. He doesn't even know his own age!

Mr. H:

Still as irresponsible as ever!

Alex:

Why did you do it?

Ms. H:

Why, why! He always wants to know why!

Mr. H:

I thought we told him. Didn't we tell him?

Ms. H:

We told him once. But he didn't listen.

Mr. H:
He never did.

Ms. H:
Where did we go wrong?

Mr. H:
I think it was in the back seat of my Rambler.

Ms. H:
Oh, Mr. Hacketts!

Mr. H:
Oh, Ms. Hacketts!

They kiss.

Alex:
Tell me why! Why! Why!

Ms. H:
The baby's crying, dear.

Mr. H:
I'll get the diapers.

Ms. H:
I'll get the bottle.

Neither moves.

Alex:
Why! Why! Why!

Mr. H:
There, there. It's all right.

Ms. H:
Just go back to sleep.

Mr. H:
Mr. and Ms. Hacketts are right here. Everything's fine.

Alex:
Can't you tell me? Can't you tell me why I'm here? Can't
you even give me a hint?

Ms. H:
Writing.

Mr. H:

Yes, writing.

Alex:

You mean, you committed me because I wrote?

Ms. H:

You call that writing? Ha!

Mr. H:

Now, now, Ms. Hacketts. Don't encourage the boy. You might give him a drama. Remember Mr. Spock.

Ms. H:

That's Dr. Spock.

Alex:

But what was wrong with my writing?

Ms. H:

You wanted to be an artist. You wanted to write plays. It was so tragic!

She cries.

Alex:

Why?

Mr. H:

Why? It's useless!

Ms. H:

Greek drama, mystery plays, Shakespeare...

Mr. H:

It's all been done before!

Ms. H:

Restoration drama, Ibsen, Strindberg...

Mr. H:

It's all been written!

Ms. H:

Surrealism, expressionism, absurdism.

Mr. H:

Art is finished! Ended! Kaput!

Alex:
So there's no room left for my plays?

Mr. H:
Plays? Ha! You call them plays?

Ms. H:
Now, now, Mr. Hacketts. Try to be logical. Remember Dr. Spock.

Mr. H:
That's Mr. Spock.

Ms. H:
The truth is, son, every time you tried to write a play, it came out as criticism.

Mr. H:
Long, boring, dull, trite, mediocre, turgid critical essays about plays that don't even exist!

Alex:
Well, what's wrong with that?

Mr. H:
It's useless, son! Useless!

Ms. H:
We tried to find something to do with them.

Mr. H:
I tried to make a coffee table out of them.

Ms. H:
I tried to clean the sink with them.

Mr. H:
I tried to use them as compost.

Ms. H:
They didn't work. They weren't good for anything.

Alex:
But why commit me to an old people's home? I'm not old!
Am I?

Mr. H:
You're very old, son. Very old.

Ms. H:
You have no purpose.

Mr. H:
No position.

Ms. H:
No money. I cry every time I think about it.

Mr. H:
You never cry.

Ms. H:
I never think about it.

Alex:
You mean I've been thrown out? Disposed? Garbaged?

Mr. H:
That's a pretty negative attitude. I like to think that
you've been deposited.

Ms. H:
Salted away for a rainy day.

Mr. H:
Stashed in a mattress.

Ms. H:
Swept under the rug.

Alex:
You mean...

Mr. H:
No, we don't mean!

Ms. H:
Mean, mean, mean! You always think everything has to mean
something!

Mr. H:
I thought we told him what it all meant. Didn't we tell
him?

Ms. H:
We told him once. But he didn't understand.

Mr. H:
Where did we go right?

Ms. H:
At the third stoplight, where we should have gone left.
You ran out of gas.

Mr. H:
Oh, Ms. Hacketts!

Ms. H:
Oh, Mr. Hacketts!

They embrace.

Alex:
Mom...Dad...

Mr. H:
That's Mr. Hacketts to you, son.

Ms. H:
Try to show some respect!

Alex cries.

And quit your sniffing!

Mr. H:
Well, this certainly has been a nice little chat.

Ms. H:
We're so glad you're getting along so well here.

Mr. H:
We must try to see you again sometime soon, mustn't we, Ms.
Hacketts?

Ms. H:
Yes, we certainly must, Mr. Hacketts.

They slowly walk toward the doorway, stage right.

Ms. H:
So long, son!

Mr. H:
Remember, wash behind your ears!

Ms. H:
Keep your nose clean!

Mr. H:
Wash under your nails!

Ms. H:
Wipe the slate clean!

Mr. H:
Wash out your mouth!

Ms. H:
Make a clean break with the past!

They exit.

Alex:
Mom...Dad...Mama...

March music, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home", surges across the stage. Alex quits crying and turns to see the Beauty Queen roll by the window again. He turns back around.

Make a clean break with the past. Make a clean break with the past! What a thematic statement!

He takes out his notepad and pen, and writes.

Modern man...cut off from his past... from himself.

"When Johnny Comes Marching Home" is heard again. The Parade enters, stage left. The semichorus of Clowns enters first, then the semichorus of the Band. They all march around Alex, then the Clowns move stage right, the Band, stage left. The Band stops playing, and the Parade stands still.

Who...who are you?

Band Leader:
We are the parade.

Alex:

A parade? In an old folk's home?

Band L:

"Old Folks at Home"! Hit it!

The Band plays a few bars of "Old Folks at Home".

Clown Leader:

No, no, no! Can't you do anything right?

The Band stops playing.

He means, "Why are we here?"

Band L:

Now there's a good question! You know perfectly well why we're here! You and your ridiculous clowning!

Clown L:

Of course we're ridiculous! That's the whole point! At least we're funny. Who'd want to listen to your dreary, boring march music?

Band L:

Dreary? Boring?

The clowns start chanting "oom-pah-oom-pah".

And who'd want to watch your disorderly, disgusting contortions?

The Band members all wriggle and jerk chaotically. The Clowns' chanting decays into disunified grunts; the Band members fall into the same jerky, grotesque motion.

Alex:

Won't somebody please tell me what a parade is doing here?

The Parade rests.

Clown L:

We were committed.

Band L:
They said we were too purposeless.

Clown L:
Too dangerous.

Band L:
Too old.

Clown L:
They told us to clean up our act.

Band L:
And no wonder! It's these cowardly, chaotic clowns!

The Band members again wriggle and jerk about.

Clown L:
What about your mindless, militaristic music?

The Clowns chant "boom-bah-boom-bah". The Band again becomes more orderly; the Clowns become more unorganized.

Alex:
Stop! Stop!

They stop.

Well, at least now I have some company.

Clown L:
Some company! Stuck in an old folk's home with these marching monstrosities!

The Clowns chant "dah-dah-doom, dah-dah-doom".

Band L:
Some company! Stuck in an old folks home with these grimacing grotesqueries!

The Band goes through its routine.

Alex:
Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!

The Band and Clowns stop. John enters, stage left. He is an old man with white hair and a

long white beard, but he walks and talks like a young man. He wears a white robe, and trucks on in like Mr. Natural.

John!

Alex stands.

John! You're alive!

John:

I should hope so. You people make enough noise to raise a soul from the dead.

Alex:

You're walking!

John:

Yeah, I'm tired of being pushed around. I'm on my own now.

Alex:

Here, have a seat.

John:

No thanks. It feels too good standing to sit down.

Alex sits.

Who are these jokers?

Band and Clown Leaders:

We're the...

Alex:

They're the parade. They've been committed, too.

To the Parade.

John's a real storyteller. Say, John, why don't you finish that story you were telling me earlier.

John:

What story?

Alex:

You know, the one about the three people.

John:
Oh, yeah! Once there were these three people...

Alex:
Wait!

He takes out his pen and notepad.

John:
What's with the notepad?

Alex:
I'm writing a play.

John:
And you're going to use my story?

Alex:
That's right.

John laughs.

What's so funny?

John:
Nothing, nothing. Well, once there were these three people

Alex writes.

And, boy, were they horny! So...

Alex:
No! That's not the story!

John:
Oh, I know! Once there were these three people, a German,
a Norwegian and a...

Alex:
That's not it either!

John:
Then I don't know which one you want.

Alex:
Tell me the one about the three people who were told when
they would die.

John:
I already told you that one.

Alex:
But you didn't finish it!

John:
Yes I did!

Alex:
Well, tell it to them, then.

Band L:
Yes, please do.

John:
No! It's my worst story!

Clown L:
But we want to hear it.

John:
No!

Band L:
We insist.

John:
Uh, uh!

Band and Clown Leaders:
Very well.

They direct the Band to go through its motions
and the Clowns to chant "oom-pah-oom-pah".

John:
All right! All right!

The Parade halts.

Anything to shut you up! Let's see... Once, three people
were told when they would die.

Alex writes.

The fool cried and said, 'I have but a short time left to
live!' The smart one grinned and said, 'At least now I

know I shall live until my time comes!' But the wise one
...this is the good part...the wise one...

He starts snickering.

The wise one...

John roars with laughter.

Alex:

Go on. What did the wise one do?

John rolls on the floor, laughing.

What did the wise one do?

John:

That's it!

He slowly stands up.

That's the whole story.

Alex:

It can't be!

John:

I knew you'd catch on.

Alex:

Finish the story!

John:

It is finished!

Alex:

But there's got to be an ending! What good's a story with-
out an ending?

John:

I knew you'd understand.

Alex:

I don't understand!

John:

I knew you'd understand.

Alex:

If only I could! You're so wise, so unknowable.

John:

What crap!

Alex:

If only I could be like you. If only I could create ideas, transmit knowledge.

John:

What bullshit!

Alex:

If only I could give humanity access to some higher reality, to the ideal world...

John:

Listen, kid. Don't kid yourself.

Alex:

What do you mean?

John:

Mean? Mean? You want to know what I mean? All right, all right. Let's assume that the mind resides in the brain.

Band:

In the brain.

John:

Let's assume that each nerve cell eats, digests, and excretes, in the brain.

Clowns:

In the brain.

John:

Let's assume that thought is merely a byproduct of these physical changes occurring in the brain.

Parade:

In the brain.

John:

Why, don't you see? Ideas are simply the shit of the brain!

Band:

Of course!

Clowns:

Of course not!

Alex:

So you're saying that thought is incidental, that it's only a side effect? But then the very ideas you've used to explain yourself are shit!

John:

I knew you'd understand!

Alex:

I don't understand.

John:

I knew you'd understand.

Alex:

I still don't see what you're getting at.

John:

All right. Let's assume that the brain resides in the mind.

Clowns:

In the mind.

John:

Let's assume, metaphorically speaking, that each thought eats, digests, and excretes, in the mind.

Band:

In the mind.

John:

Let's assume that our perceptions of the world are merely the byproducts of these processes in the mind.

Parade:

In the mind.

John:

Well, then. What seems to be the physical world is simply
the shit of the mind!

Clowns:

Of course!

Band:

Of course not!

Alex:

So now you're saying that the world is only a figment of
the imagination. But that means that the very sounds
you've spoken are simply shit, too!

John:

I knew you'd understand.

Alex:

I don't understand!

John:

I knew you'd understand!

Alex:

But you've just tried to prove to me...

John:

That no matter how you slice it, it still comes up shit!

Alex:

But...

John:

And god said, "Let there be shit!" And there was shit!

Alex:

But that's...

John:

In the beginning was shit, and the shit was with god, and
the shit was god!

Alex:

But that's pretty hard to swallow!

John:

Why? Millions eat it every day.

Alex:

But your explanations contradict themselves!

John:

Which leads you to conclude...

Alex:

That you're full of shit!

John:

I knew you'd figure it out! Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm getting out of here.

Alex:

You're dying?

John:

Heavens, no! I'm walking.

The Parade gasps.

Alex:

You'll never make it!

John:

Oh, yeah? Who's going to stop me?

Alex:

Well, how will you get out of the building?

John:

Out the window.

Alex:

But it's locked and grated.

John:

I'll manage.

Alex:

Suppose you make it out the window.

Band L:
Yeah, what then?

Clown L:
How'll you make it past the dogs?

Band L:
And the trenches?

Clowns:
The barbed wire?

Band:
Electric fences?

Clowns:
Telephones!

Band:
Natural gases!

Clowns:
Fluorocarbons!

Band:
Head-on crashes!

Clowns:
Plumbers!

Band:
Electricians!

Clowns:
Jesus freaks!

Band:
Politicians!

The entire Parade screams, and each semichorus huddles together.

John:
I'll make it.

Alex:
But why go? It's not so bad here.

John:
Sure, if you don't mind rotting like somebody's leftovers.

Alex:

But what are you going to do? Nobody out there wants you.

John:

All the better! I'm going to be a pain in the ass, a huge bird flipping at the world, a big bare-assed moon! I'm going to throw away my deodorant soap! Belch after every meal! Fart in the elevators! Pick my nose when I shake hands!

Alex:

You're disgusting!

John:

Thanks, kid. I knew you'd understand. Well, I'll be on my way.

John runs offstage, stage left. From offstage comes the sound of ripping metal and plaster.

Alex:

Why, he's ripping out the kitchen sink!

John runs back onstage and heaves the sink through the window.

John:

Anyone coming along? Too bad. So long, suckers!

John exits through the window.

Curtain.

The Literary Critic enters in front of the curtain, stage right. She's middle-aged, also.

Critic:

The title of this turkey is Parodos, the point in Old Greek Comedy where the chorus enters. And, as you have

seen, there is a chorus, one of many superficial similarities between this play and Aristophanic Comedy. The playwright has even tried to write in a parabasis, what I'm doing now. But actually he should be up here. Instead, the coward has sent me, a literary critic, to take his place. And after seeing the play so far, I can see why he's afraid to show himself. Why he's tried to model his play after Old Greek Comedy, I'll never know. Maybe because it's all Greek to him!

She chuckles, then catches herself.

For a modern to try to write an Aristophanic Comedy is like Shakespeare trying to write a screenplay for Woody Allen. Why, it's simply absurd! Which leads me to another point: Absurdism. Is this really an Absurdist play? I have my doubts. But it certainly is derivative. I mean, don't you get the impression you've seen it all before? It's ironic that Absurdism has become a convention. Any hack can sit down and crank out Absurdist drama from now until doomsday. Why, you even see it on TV, right next to the toothpaste and trashbag commercials! Not that being derivative is a flaw in any absolute sense. That's a modern idea; the classicists believed innovation was inartistic. But I'm sure the writer of this play would never claim to be a classicist. Absurdism as classicism--now there's a topic for a journal article! But I digress. What really bothers

me about this play is its mechanical lifelessness. There's no art here, no inspiration. It's a typically adolescent play, full of the playwright's own insecurities and of absolutely no interest to anyone else. It's a mishmash--a dash of this, a pinch of that. The writer even threw in the kitchen sink! It reminds me so much of--well, to make a long story short...

She exits, stage right. After a short pause, she reenters.

Oh, I nearly forgot! You will now see the artist's idea of an epirrhetic syzygy, although it certainly isn't epirrhetic. It's like a dialectic. An argument. A choral agon that will leave you in agony.

She laughs again, then catches herself.

The two halves of the chorus will have a singing contest.

She exits, stage right. The curtain comes up, revealing the same setting, except that John's wheelchair is gone. The Clowns enter from stage right, the Band, from stage left.

Band:

Baa, baa, black sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes, sir, yes, sir,
Three bags full!

Band L:

As you have heard, our band has perfect harmony. Each voice is right in step, not a note out of line. Discipline and rhythm and rhyme...everything in order. Perfect form locks meaning in a cage of song.

Clowns:

One sings at a time; the notes follow no melody,
but instead seem completely random.

Transcendent

dentifrice

Las Vegas

Nirvana

Meow

Meow

Meow

Clown L:

We clowns, as you can see, use the human voice to its fullest. No arbitrary melody traps us in pointless formalism; no rhyme nor reason chains us to all that is mundane. Perfect freedom allows meaning to explode in song.

Band:

Mary had a little lamb,
Its fleece was white as snow.
And everywhere that Mary went,
Her lamb was sure to go.

Band L:

Compare! Why, they sound like the clattering of dishes,
like the breaking of glass. Simple white noise to lull
your mind to sleep.

Clowns:

Zircon

smut

Electroplated

tulip

Schwartz

Schwartz

Schwinn

Clown L:

Yes, compare our music to theirs. They sound like the chugging of a tractor, like the tapping of a typewriter. Mechanical monotony to tranquilize your brain.

Alex enters, stage left, and sits in the chair.

Band L:

You must have heard us. Tell us who's better.

Clown L:

Yes! What do you think?

Alex:

Please, please! Your performances were... That is, it sounded like... I mean...

Band and Clown Leaders:

Yes? Yes?

Alex:

Both had the same incredible quality.

Band:

What a cop-out!

Clowns:

Fence-sitter!

Alex:

No, no! Who can judge, when faced with such extremely different types of...music. It's like trying to choose between red wine and white. Between poetry and painting. Between the firing squad and the gallows. Certainly there is room for both your kinds of...art.

Band L:

I never looked at it that way before.

Clown L:

He makes a lot of sense.

Band:

You must lead us.

Clowns:

You must show us the way.

Parade:

Hail Alex!

Alex:

But I couldn't...

Parade:

Long live Alex!

Alex:

But...

Parade:

Tippecanoe and Alex too!

Alex:

No! I'm not leading anything! I've got enough troubles of
my own.

Band L:

You don't understand.

Clown L:

We want you.

Alex:

I don't care. My mind's made up.

Parade:

You will lead us!

They all advance toward him.

Alex:

Oh, but I couldn't!

Parade:

Oh, but we insist!

They make threatening gestures.

Alex:

Oh, well, why didn't you say so?

The Parade returns to its original position.

Well, if I'm supposed to lead you, how do I do it? Maybe we'd better vote on it. How many want a representational democracy?

No one answers.

A benevolent despotcy? How about a figurehead monarchy?

A military junta? A corrupt but benign dictatorship?

Band:

You're getting warmer.

Clowns:

That's almost it.

Alex:

I can't think of anything else.

Parade:

How about tyranny?

Alex:

But what about the democratic ideal? One man, one vote?

Band:

Exactly! You're the one man...

Clowns:

With the one vote!

Alex:

You've got to be joking!

Parade:

Give us tyranny, or we'll give you death!

Alex:

But that's barbaric! It's unthinkable! It's unjust!

The Parade again intimidates Alex.

It's just right!

The Parade cheers. The Band plays "Hail to the Chief" while the Clowns pick Alex up and carry

him around the room, then set him back down in the chair.

Alex:

Well, now that I'm the leader, what am I leading?

Parade:

Us!

Alex:

No! I mean, what do you stand for?

Clown L:

We don't stand for much!

Band L:

Not from anyone!

Parade:

Damn right!

Alex:

No! No! I mean, what ideas do you stand for?

Band L:

Ideas? We don't stand for any of them, either!

Clown L:

Not from anyone!

Parade:

Right on!

Alex:

Look! I've got to know what you believe in!

Clown L:

Oh, that!

Band L:

Well, we...

Alex:

Wait. Ideas are only as good as the paper they're written upon.

He takes out his pen and notepad.

Besides, maybe I can work them into my play.

Band L:
We demand free trade.

Clown L:
And free shirts.

Band:
Free fall.

Clowns:
Free verse.

Band:
Law 'n order.

Clowns:
Equal rights.

Band:
Natural borders.

Clowns:
Sequel rights.

Band:
Deregulation.

Clowns:
Aggravation.

Band:
Liquidation.

Clowns:
Refrigeration.

The Parade cheers, almost like a howl.

Alex:
These are noble ideals; a person'd be proud to die for
them!

Band L:
We don't want to die for them!

Clown L:
But we'll gladly kill for them.

Parade:

A principle's only as good as the corpse it's carved upon!

Alex:

He turns to the manikins.

What about the rest of you? What do you say? Speak up!

Band:

The silent minority.

Clowns:

Silence means consent.

Alex:

I'm a leader! A leader!

He turns to the window, then slowly turns back around. He starts writing.

The superman...Napoleon...Napoleon brandy...brandy

Alexander.

The Nurse enters, stage right, pushing a shopping cart with a manikin in it.

Nurse:

Writing again, Mr. Hacketts?

Alex:

Who says so?

He hides his notepad and pen.

I thought you said John was dead.

Nurse:

Mr. Hacketts, please! He's passed on.

Alex:

He sure has! Right out the window!

Band:

Forget about John!

Clowns:

Forget the old escapist!

Nurse:

Say, what's everybody doing out here?

He twitches his whip.

You're supposed to be painting plastic Bambis in the arts
and crafts room.

Clowns:

Stand up to him, Alex!

Band:

Give him hell, Alex!

Nurse:

The book definitely says:

Old folks must be hard at work,
Or their minds will go berserk.
Since their brains are soft and senile,
Give them something dull and menial.

Band:

Tell him, Alex!

Clowns:

Show him who's boss, Alex!

Alex:

I, uh...

Nurse:

Yes?

He flicks his whip menacingly.

Alex:

What do you want me to do? I mean, he is the nurse.

Band:

Tell him off, or it's time for a coup!

Clowns:

Gesundheit!

Alex:

Uh, some of us have been thinking lately, and...

Nurse:

Thinking! That's out!

If the gray-heads start to think,
 Their poor old minds go on the blink.
 To put their withered thoughts to rest,
 Tell them that you know what's best.

Alex:

But we thought...

Nurse:

Mr. Hacketts!

He sniffs the air.

Have you taken a shower lately?

Alex:

Uh, well, I...

Nurse:

Well, it's time you did! Come along.

Alex:

I'm not going anywhere!

He stands.

Parade:

That's telling him!

Nurse:

What did you say?

Alex:

I said, I'm not going. You're the one who's headed for the
 showers! Grab him!

The Band grabs the Nurse.

Nurse:

You'll pay for this, Hacketts! No more cranberry sauce at
 Thanksgiving!

Alex:

Take him away!

The Band exits, stage right, carrying the protesting Nurse. Alex notices the manikin in the cart.

Alex:

Well, you're free now. Didn't you hear me? I said you're free!

Clowns:

The ultimate apathy: deafness.

Alex:

Arise! Take up your cart and walk! Well, all right. Off you go!

He pushes the cart offstage. The Band returns, stage right.

Band:

Long live Alex!

Clowns:

Viva Alex!

Parade:

Hail Alex! Hail Alex!

Alex:

What an experience! This reminds me of a story.

He sits, takes out his notepad and reads.

"Once, three people were told when they would die. The fool cried and said, 'I have but a short time left to live!'

The smart one grinned and said, 'At least now I know I shall live until my time comes!' But the wise one...the

wise one..." The wise one cancelled all his appointments!

He waits for a reaction from the Parade, but gets no response.

Yes, well, the ending does lack something.

He turns to the window, then turns around again.
I certainly was forceful, wasn't I?

He writes.

Profiles in Courage...Six Crises... Nobody knows Mein Kampf I've seen.

The Doctor enters, stage right, pushing a dolly.
Atop the dolly is a trash can with a manikin sitting in it.

Doctor:
Well, well, well! And what are we up to now? Writing again?

Alex:
What if I am?

He hides his notepad.

Doctor:
Oh, are we grumpy today? What's wrong, did we forget our smile pill this morning?

Alex:
Uh, no...er, yes. That is...I don't know.

Doctor:
Don't know? Can't we remember anything? Perhaps there's something the matter with our little old brain, eh? Maybe we'd just better take a look.

Band L:
Not the brain!

Clown L:
Don't let her, Alex!

The Doctor examines Alex's head.

Doctor:
Oh, my! Oh, my oh my oh my! Oh, yes! Oh, no! Well,

we'll have to consult the owner's manual!

She opens the book.

Let's see. Uranium on the cranium...lead in the head...
log in the noggin. Ah, here we are. Stain on the brain!

She closes the book.

You've got a dirty mind!

Clowns:

Not the mind!

Band:

Don't listen to her, Alex!

Doctor:

Yes, there's only one thing wrong with us. Our brain needs
a good washing.

Alex:

But...

Doctor:

A shower a day keeps the doctor away!

Alex:

But I...

Doctor:

For want of a shower, a horse was lost!

Alex:

But I don't...

Doctor:

A bath in time saves nine!

Alex:

Listen!

He stands.

I'm not taking a shower!

Parade:

Down with the Doc!

Doctor:

Oh! What's this? Do we detect a little dissent? A little rebellion?

Parade:

Off the Doc!

Doctor:

Well, maybe we'd all better take a shower!

Alex:

Wrong, Doc! We're taking you to the cleaners!

The Clowns grab the Doctor.

Alex:

Away with her!

The Clowns exit, stage right, carrying the complaining Doctor. Alex notices the manikin.

Alex:

Well, ma'am, you're free to go. I said you're free to go!

Band:

Some of the wheat falls on stony ground.

Alex:

Well, if you won't say anything, you can join the others.

He pushes the cart upstage. The Clowns return, stage right.

Clowns:

The Doc's all washed up!

Band:

Victory is yours!

Parade:

Hail Alex! Hail Alex!

Alex:

Thank you, thank you!

He sits.

You know, I'm reminded of a story I heard long ago.

He takes out his notepad and reads.

"Once, three people were told when they would die. The fool cried and said, 'I have but a short time left to live!' The smart one grinned and said, 'At least now I know I shall live until my time comes!' But the wise one...the wise one..." The wise one bought some extra insurance!

He waits for a reaction; the Parade gives none. Another weak ending.

He turns to the window, and turns slowly back. I've defeated them! I'm in charge now! What a sensation!

He writes.

The thrill of agony...the ecstasy of defeat...the vertigo of victory.

Mr. and Ms. Hacketts enter, stage right.

Ms. H:
Why, it's our little Alex!

Mr. H:
Oh, look! He's writing a play!

Alex:
What's it to you?

He hides his notepad.

Mr. H:
"What's it to you"! He said, "What's it to you"!

Ms. H:
How cute!

Mr. H:
How darling!

Band:
How awful!

Clowns:
How sick!

Mr. H:
I always said he could write.

Ms. H:
I always said he could read.

Mr. H:
My, he looks so young!

Ms. H:
So healthy!

Mr. H:
So frightening

Band:
So-so.

Clowns:
So what.

Alex:
Why are you here?

Ms. H:
He wants to know why we're here!

Mr. H:
Such wit!

Ms. H:
Such humor!

Band:
Such claptrap!

Clowns:
Such crap!

Mr. H:
Why, why, why! He always wants to know why!

Ms. H:
What did we ever do to deserve such a wonderful child?

Mr. H:
I pulled down my pants.

Ms. H:
I pulled up my skirt.

Mr. H:
I sold my sports car.

Ms. H:
I changed my name.

Alex:
You still haven't told me why you're here.

Ms. H:
As if his own mother needs a reason to visit her own son.

Mr. H:
As if his own father doesn't.

Alex:
You don't have a reason?

Ms. H:
We're completely unmotivated.

Mr. H:
Completely gratuitous.

Ms. H:
Completely arbitrary.

Band:
Completely covert.

Clowns:
Completely subversive.

Mr. H:
We just thought you might like to come back home with us.

Ms. H:
Yes, we'd take care of you.

Mr. H:
We'd feed you.

Ms. H:
Change you.

Mr. H:
Toilet train you.

Ms. H:
Wash your shirts.

Mr. H:
Wash your sheets.

Ms. H:
Bathe you.

Mr. H:
Shower you.

Alex:
Ah, ha!

He stands.

I thought so! Nab 'em!

The Band grabs Ms. H; the Clowns grab Mr. H.

Ms. H:
But Alex! We've brought you a gift!

Mr. H:
An offering!

Ms. H:
A sacrifice!

Mr. H:
A bride!

Band:
It's a trick!

Clowns:
It's a lie!

Ms. H:
But she's right outside!

Alex:
Double rinse and drip dry. No starch.

Mr. H:
But we're your parents!

Ms. H:
We have our rights!

Alex:
Read them their rites!

Band:
Trashes to trashes...

Clowns:
Rust to rust...

Mr. H:
What did we do to deserve such an end?

Ms. H:
I learned how to drive.

Mr. H:
I drank fluoridated water.

Ms. H:
I bled.

Mr. H:
I wet the bed.

Alex:
Take them away!

The Band, Clowns, and the Hacketts exit, stage right. Alex sits.

Alex:
At last. Peace.

He turns to the window, and turns slowly back.
He takes out his notepad and writes.

Serenity...entropy...steady states.

The Parade returns, pushing a wheelchair with the Old Woman sitting in it. She wears a sash that reads "Beauty Queen". She says nothing, and moves only her eyes. Her coarse silver hair is up, and she wears a plain gray dress, and gray shoes.

Band:
Here is your bride!

Clowns:
A tyrant must have a tyrantess!

Alex kneels down beside her and grips her hands.

Alex:

She is too beautiful. Too beautiful.

He stares into her eyes, then begins reciting.

"Once, three people were told when they would die."

Parade:

"Once, three people were told when they would die."

Alex:

"The fool cried and said, 'I have but a short time left to live!'"

Parade:

"The fool cried and said, 'I have but a short time left to live!'"

Alex:

The smart one grinned and said, 'At least now I know I shall live until my time comes!'"

Parade:

The smart one grinned and said, 'At least now I know I shall live until my time comes!'"

Alex:

"But the wise one...the wise one..." The wise one was already dead!

He turns to the Parade, awaiting their reaction.

Parade:

"But the wise one...the wise one..."

The Parade laughs mechanically, in unison, three times.

Ha, ha, ha!

The Parade laughs three times again, slightly louder.

Ha, ha, ha!

The Parade laughs once more, louder still, but only twice, as if they would laugh three times but are suddenly cut off.

Ha, ha!

Blackout.