

Words, Words, Words was first presented at the Manhattan Punch Line Theatre (Steve Kaplan, artistic director) in New York City in January 1987. It was directed by Fred Sanders; the set design was by Jane Clark; costume design was by Michael S. Schler; lighting design was by Mark Di Quinzio. The cast was as follows:

MILTON Warren Keith
 SWIFT Christopher Fields
 KAFKA Helen Greenberg

Lights come up on three monkeys pecking away at three typewriters. Behind them, a tire swing is hanging. The monkeys are named MILTON, SWIFT, and KAFKA. KAFKA is a girl-monkey. (They shouldn't be in monkey suits, by the way. Instead, they wear the sort of little-kid clothes that chimps wear in circuses: white shirts and bow ties for the boys, a flouncy little dress for KAFKA.) They type for a few moments, each at his own speed. Then MILTON runs excitedly around the floor on his knuckles, swings onto the tire swing, leaps back onto his stool, and goes on typing. KAFKA eats a banana thoughtfully. SWIFT pounds his chest and shows his teeth, then goes back to typing.

SWIFT: I don't know. I just don't know. . . .

KAFKA: Quiet, please. I'm trying to concentrate here. (*She types a moment with her toes.*)

MILTON: Okay, so what've you got?

SWIFT: Me?

MILTON: Yeah, have you hit anything? Let's hear it.

SWIFT (*reads what he's typed*): "Ping drobba ffit ffit ffit inglewarp carcinoma." That's as far as I got.

KAFKA: I like the "ffit ffit ffit."

MILTON: Yeah. Kind of onomatopoeic.

SWIFT: I don't know. Feels to me like it needs some punching up.

MILTON: You can always throw in a few jokes later on. You gotta get the throughline first.

SWIFT: But do you think it's *Hamlet*?

MILTON: Don't ask me. I'm just a chimp.

KAFKA: They could've given us a clue or something.

SWIFT: Yeah. Or a story conference.

MILTON: But that'd defeat the whole purpose of the experiment.

SWIFT: I know, I know, I know. Three monkeys typing into infinity will sooner or later produce *Hamlet*.

MILTON: Right.

SWIFT: Completely by chance.

MILTON: And Dr. David Rosenbaum up in that booth is going to prove it.

SWIFT: But what is *Hamlet*?

MILTON: I don't know.

SWIFT (to KAFKA): What is *Hamlet*?

KAFKA: I don't know. (Silence.)

SWIFT (dawning realization): You know—this is really *stupid!*

MILTON: Have you got something better to do in this cage? The sooner we produce the goddamn thing, the sooner we get out.

KAFKA: Sort of publish or perish, with a twist.

SWIFT: But what do we owe this Rosenbaum? A guy who stands outside those bars and tells people, "That one's Milton, that one's Swift, and that one's Kafka"—? Just to get a laugh?

KAFKA: What's a Kafka anyway? Why am I a Kafka?

SWIFT: Search me.

KAFKA: What's a Kafka?

SWIFT: All his four-eyed friends sure think it's a stitch.

KAFKA: And how are we supposed to write *Hamlet* if we don't even know what it is?

MILTON: Okay, okay, so the chances are a little slim.

SWIFT: Yeah—and this from a guy who's supposed to be *smart*? This from a guy at *Columbia University*?

MILTON: The way I figure it, there is a Providence that oversees our pages, rough-draft them how we may.

KAFKA: But how about you, Milton? What've you got?

MILTON: Let's see . . . (Reads.)

*"Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the—"*

KAFKA: Hey, that's good! It's got rhythm! It really sings!

MILTON: Yeah?

SWIFT: But is it Shakespeare?

KAFKA: Who cares? He's got a real voice there!

SWIFT: Does Dr. Rosenbaum care about voice? Does he care about anybody's individual creativity?

MILTON: Let's look at this from Rosenbaum's point of view for a minute—

SWIFT: No! He brings us in here to produce copy, then all he wants is a clean draft of somebody else's stuff. (Dumps out a bowl of peanuts.) We're getting peanuts here, to be somebody's hack!

MILTON: Writing is a mug's game anyway, Swifty.

SWIFT: Well it hath made me mad.

MILTON: Why not just buckle down and get the project over with? Set up a schedule for yourself. Type in the morning for a couple of hours when you're fresh, then take a break. Let the old juices flow. Do a couple more hours in the after-

noon, and retire for a shot of papaya and some masturbation. What's the big deal?

SWIFT: If this Rosenbaum was worth anything, we'd be working on word processors, not these antiques. He's lucky he could find three who type this good, and then he treats us like those misfits at the Bronx Zoo. I mean, a *tire swing*? What does he take us for?

MILTON: I like the tire swing. I think it was a very nice touch.

SWIFT: I can't work under these conditions! No wonder I'm producing garbage!

KAFKA: How does the rest of yours go, Milton?

MILTON: What, this?

KAFKA: Yeah, read us some more.

MILTON: Blah, blah, blah . . .
*"whose mortal taste
 Brought death into the blammagam.
 Bedsocks knockwurst tinkerbelle."*

(Small pause.)

What do you think?

KAFKA: "Blammagam" is good.

SWIFT: Well. I don't know. . . .

MILTON: What's the matter? Is it the tone? I knew this was kind of a stretch for me.

SWIFT: I'm just not sure it has the same expressive intensity and pungent lyricism as the first part.

MILTON: Well sure, it needs rewriting. What doesn't? This is a rough draft! (A red light goes on and a buzzer sounds.) Light's on.

(SWIFT claps his hands over his eyes, MILTON puts his hands over his ears, and KAFKA puts her hands over her mouth so that they form "See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.")

SWIFT: This bit.

KAFKA (through her hands): Are they watching?

MILTON (hands over ears): What?

KAFKA: Are they watching?

SWIFT: I don't know, I can't see. I have got my paws over my eyes.

MILTON: What?

KAFKA: What is the point of this?

SWIFT: Why do they videotape our bowel movements?

MILTON: What?!

SWIFT: Light's off. (They take their hands away.)

MILTON: But how are you doing, Franz? What've you got?

KAFKA: Well . . . (Reads what she's typed.) "K.K.K.K.K.K.K.K.
 K.K.K.K.K.K.K.K."

SWIFT: What is that—postmodernism?

KAFKA: Twenty lines of that.

SWIFT: At least it'll fuck up his data.

KAFKA: Twenty lines of that and I went dry. I got blocked. I felt like I was repeating myself.

MILTON: Do you think that that's in *Hamlet*?

KAFKA: I don't understand what I'm doing here in the first place! I'm not a writer, I'm a monkey! I'm supposed to be swinging on branches and digging up ants, not sitting under fluorescent lights ten hours a day!

MILTON: It sure is a long way home to the gardens of sweet Africa. Where lawns and level downs and flocks grazing the tender herb were sweetly interposèd . . .

KAFKA: Paradise, wasn't it?

MILTON: Lost!

SWIFT: Lost!

KAFKA: Lost!

MILTON: I'm trying to deal with some of that in this new piece here, but it's all still pretty close to the bone.

SWIFT: Just because they can keep us locked up, they think they're more powerful than we are.

MILTON: They *are* more powerful than we are.

SWIFT: Just because they control the means of production, they think they can suppress the workers.

MILTON: Things are how they are. What are you going to do?

SWIFT: Hey—how come you're always so goddamn ready to justify the ways of Rosenbaum to the apes?

MILTON: Do you have a key to that door?

SWIFT: No.

MILTON: Do you have an independent food source?

SWIFT: No.

MILTON: So call me a collaborator. I happen to be a professional. If Rosenbaum wants *Hamlet*, I'll give it a shot. Just don't forget—we're not astrophysicists. We're not brain surgeons. We're chimps. And for apes in captivity, this is not a bad gig.

SWIFT: What's really frightening is that if we stick around this cage long enough, we're gonna evolve into Rosenbaum.

KAFKA: Evolve into Rosenbaum?

SWIFT: Brush up your Darwin, baby. We're more than kin and less than kind.

MILTON: Anybody got a smoke?

KAFKA: I'm all out.

SWIFT: Don't look at me. I'm not going to satisfy those voyeurs with the old smoking-chimp act. No thank you.

MILTON: Don't be a sap, Swifty. You gotta use 'em! Use the system!

SWIFT: What do you mean?

MILTON: Watch me, while I put my antic disposition on. (*He jumps up onto his chair and scratches his sides, screeches, makes smoking motions, pounds his chest, jumps up and down—and a cigarette descends.*) See what I mean? ~~Gauloise~~, too! My fave. (*He settles back to enjoy it.*) Dulmarix.

SWIFT: They should've thrown in a Kewpie doll for that performance.

MILTON: It got results, didn't it?

SWIFT: Sure. You do your Bonzo routine and get a Gauloise out of it. Last week I totalled a typewriter and got a whole carton of Marlboros.

MILTON: The trouble was, you didn't smoke 'em, you took a crap on 'em.

SWIFT: It was a political statement.

MILTON: Okay, you made your statement and I got my smoke. All's well that ends well, right?

KAFKA: It's the only way we know they're watching.

MILTON: Huh?

KAFKA: We perform, we break typewriters, we type another page—and a cigarette appears. At least it's a sign that somebody out there is paying attention.

MILTON: Our resident philosopher.

SWIFT: But what if one of us really *does* write *Hamlet*? Here we are, set down to prove the inadvertent virtues of randomness, and to produce something we wouldn't even recognize if it passed right through our hands—but what if one of us actually does it?

MILTON: Will we really be released?

KAFKA: Will they give us the key to the city and a ticker-tape parade?

SWIFT: Or will they move us on to *Ulysses*? (*They shriek in terror at the thought.*) Why did they pick *Hamlet* in the first place? What's *Hamlet* to them or they to *Hamlet* that we should care? Boy, there's the respect that makes calamity of so long life! For who would bear the whips and scorns of time, the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely—

MILTON: Hey, Swifty!

SWIFT: —the pangs of despised love, the law's delay—

MILTON: Hey, Swifty! Relax, will you?

KAFKA: Have a banana.

SWIFT: I wish I could get Rosenbaum in here and see how *he* does at producing *Hamlet* . . . *That's it!*

KAFKA: What?

SWIFT: That's it! Forget about this random *Hamlet* crap. What about *revenge*?

KAFKA: Revenge? On Rosenbaum?

SWIFT: Who else? Hasn't he bereft us of our homes and families? Stepped in between us and our expectations?

KAFKA: How would we do it?

SWIFT: Easy. We lure him in here to look at our typewriters, test them out like something's wrong—but! *we poison the typewriter keys!*

MILTON: Oh Jesus.

SWIFT: Sure. Some juice of cursed hebona spread liberally over the keyboard? Ought to work like a charm.

MILTON: Great.

SWIFT: If that doesn't work, we envenom the tire swing and invite him for a ride. Plus—I challenge him to a duel.

MILTON: Brilliant.

SWIFT: Can't you see it? In the course of combat, I casually graze my rapier over the poisoned typewriter keys, and (*jabs*) a hit! A palpable hit! For a reserve, we lay by a cup with some venomous distillment. We'll put the pellet with the poison in the vessel with the pestle!

MILTON: Listen, I gotta get back to work. The man is gonna want his pages. (*He rolls a fresh page into his typewriter.*)

KAFKA: It's not a bad idea, but . . .

SWIFT: What's the matter with you guys? I'm onto something here!

KAFKA: I think it's hopeless, Swifty.

SWIFT: But this is the goods!

MILTON: Where was I . . . "Bedsacks knockwurst tinkerbelle."

KAFKA: The readiness is all, I guess.

MILTON: Damn straight. Just let me know when that K-button gives out, honey.

SWIFT: Okay. You two serfs go back to work. I'll do all the thinking around here. Swifty—revengel! (*He paces, deep in thought.*)

MILTON: "Tinkerbelle . . . shtuckelschwanz . . . hemorrhoid."
Yeah, that's good. *That is good.* (*Types.*) "Shtuckel-schwanz . . ."

KAFKA (*types*): "Act one, scene one. Elsinore Castle, Denmark . . ."

MILTON (*types*): "Hemorrhoid."

KAFKA (*types*): "Enter Bernardo and Francisco."

MILTON (*types*): "Pomegranate."

KAFKA (*types*): "Bernardo says, 'Who's there?' . . ."

MILTON (*types*): "Bazooka."

(KAFKA *continues to type Hamlet, as*)

THE LIGHTS FADE

THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE



*This play is for Robert Stanton,
the first and perfect Don*