

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

This play is for Fred Sanders

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS was presented as part of ALL IN THE TIMING at Primary Stages (Casey Childs, Artistic Director), in New York City, in December, 1993. It was directed by Jason McConnell Buzas; the set design was by Bruce Goodrich; the costume design was by Sharon Lynch; the lighting design was by Deborah Constantine and the production stage manager was Christine Catti. The cast was as follows:

SWIFT Robert Stanton
KAFKA Nancy Opel
MILTON Daniel Hagen

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS premiered at the Manhattan Punch Line Theatre, in New York City, in January 1987. It was directed by Fred Sanders; the set design was by Jane Clark; the costume design was by Michael S. Schler; the lighting design was by Mark Di Quinzio; the sound design was by James Reichert and the stage manager was Beverly Jenkins. The cast was as follows:

MILTON Warren Keith
SWIFT Christopher Fields
KAFKA Helen Greenberg

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

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 fft fft fft inglewarp carcinoma." That's as far as I got.

KAFKA. I like the "fft fft fft."

MILTON. Yeah. Kind of onomatopoeic.

SWIFT. I don't know. Feels to me like it needs some punch-ing 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 afternoon, 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! (*Suddenly noticing.*) 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've 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 — post-modernism?

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

veet Africa. Where lawns and level downs and flocks grazing
ie tender herb were sweetly interposèd ...

AFKA. Paradiſe, wasn't it?

IILTON. Lost!

WIFT. Lost!

AFKA. Lost!

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

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

IILTON. They *are* more powerful than we are.

WIFT. Just because they control the means of production,
ey think they can suppress the workers.

IILTON. Things are how they are. What are you going to
o?

WIFT. Hey — how come you're always so goddamn ready
o justify the ways of Rosenbaum to the apes?

IILTON. Do you have a key to that door?

WIFT. No.

IILTON. Do you have an independent food source?

WIFT. No.

IILTON. So call me a collaborator. I happen to be a pro-
ssional. If Rosenbaum wants *Hamlet*, I'll give it a shot. Just
on't forget — we're not astrophysicists. We're not brain sur-
eons. We're chimps. And for apes in captivity, this is not a
ad gig.

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

AFKA. Evolve into Rosenbaum?

WIFT. Brush up your Darwin, baby. We're more' than kin
ad less than kind.

IILTON. Anybody got a smoke?

AFKA. I'm all out.

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

IILTON. Don't be a sap, Swifty. You gotta 'use 'em! Use
ie system!

WIFT. 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.*)

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'll happen if one of us *does* write *Hamlet*? Here we are, set down to prove the inadvertent virtues of randomness, and to produce something that 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 tickertape parade?

SWIFT. Or will they move us on to *Ulysses*? (*The others 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?

ŁAFKA. Have a banana.

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

ŁAFKA. What?

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

ŁAFKA. Revenge? On Rosenbaum?

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

ŁAFKA. 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 cursèd 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.)*

ŁAFKA. It's not a bad idea, but ...

SWIFT. What's the matter with you guys? I'm on to something here!

ŁAFKA. I think it's hopeless, Swifty.

SWIFT. But this is the goods!

MILTON. Where was I ... "Bedsocks knockwurst tinkerbelle."

ŁAFKA. 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 — revenge! (*He paces, deep in thought.*)

MILTON. "Tinkerbelle ... shtuckelschwanz ... hemorrhoid. Yeah, that's good. *That is good.* (*Types.*) "Shtuckelschwanz ..."

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.*)

PROPERTY LIST

6 typing tables
6 stools
6 old typewriters
Typing paper
6 wastebaskets overflowing with crushed paper
Fire-swing
Banana (KAFKA)
Bowl of peanuts (SWIFT)
6 ashtrays, full of butts
Empty cigarette pack (KAFKA)
Cigarette on a wire, for Milton
Cigarette lighter, for Milton

English Made Simple

By: David Ives

English Made Simple examines the first encounter of a single couple at a café.

Their meeting examines the possibilities of long life together through varying sequences of circumstance. Through a journey of logistics of the structure of English conversation, this one-act deals with dating and relationship issues that many of us might have experienced. The waiter in the scene acts as a mediator who dictates between sequences and give the couple advice about how to communicate in their interaction. Each sequence marks a different fate of their union: should they actually go out for a cup of coffee and if they do will the meeting lead to disaster or eternal bliss?

The WAITER serves coffee to café patrons as JILL enters, followed by JACK and they do not notice each other at first. The WAITER rings a call bell to signal the start of the scene in which JACK and JILL face each other.

WAITER: English Made Simple. Chapter Three. The Café. Section One: Saying Hello.

JACK AND JILL: Hello! *(They shake)*

WAITER: But remember before you begin-The first three minutes of conversation between two people can determine their relationship for the rest of eternity. So watch your language!

JACK: Hello.

JILL: Hi.

JACK: How are you?

JILL: Good.

JACK: I don't think I know you.

JILL: My name is Jill.

JACK: I'm Jack.

JACK AND JILL: How do you do.

JACK: Come here often?

JILL: Not so much really.

JACK: Oh. So...

JILL: Well...

JACK: Great café! (*They freeze*)

WAITER: Excellent. But let's look at the underlying rhythm of this interchange.

JACK: Ba-bump.

JILL: Beep.

JACK: Buh-buh-beep?

JILL: Boop.

JACK: Bee da dee dadump bop.

JILL: Da da da Bop.

JACK: Bop Bop.

JILL: Ba dadoo wop.

JACK: Bee dada beep?

JILL: Bee dada beep-beep.

JACK: Oh. Baaa...

JILL: Booo...

JACK AND JILL: Da wop bop!

JILL: Hello hello hello, it's always hello.

JACK: You are the most wonderful woman at this café.

JILL: And then good-bye good-bye.

JACK: You have a light that surrounds you.

JILL: Every time I hear the word "hello" it's like a magic incantation. An open sesame.

JACK: Hello, I say to her.

JILL: Abracadabra.

JACK: My name is Jack.

JILL: And I expect a whole new universe to open up in front of me, full of joy.

JACK: Hello hello.

JILL: And then good-bye good-bye. (*They freeze*)

WAITER: Section Two. The structure of English Conversation.

JILL: Fred!

WAITER: First name.

JACK: Mary!

WAITER: First name.

JACK AND JILL: Hello!

WAITER: Salutation. (They kiss) Social display of affection, followed by-

JILL: I didn't know you were here.

WAITER: Friendly observation, answered by-

JACK: I'm here.

WAITER: Statement of the obvious.

JILL: How are you?

WAITER: Superficial question about health.

JACK: Good.

WAITER: Superficial answer. Occupational question.

JACK: How's the job?

WAITER: And-

JILL: Terrific.

WAITER: Acceptable falsehood.

JACK: So...

WAITER: Meaningless monosyllable while searching for topic.

JILL: Quite a smorgasbord.

WAITER: Attempt at new topic.

JACK: Mmmmmm.

WAITER: Noncommittal noise, to reject the topic. And-

JACK AND JILL: Well!

WAITER: Exclamation, to signal the approaching end of the interchange. Well done.

JACK: I was in love with you, once upon a time.

JILL: You asked me about my job, and I lied to you.

JACK: You who looked so self-possessed and mature.

JILL: I would have answered you honestly, once upon a time.

JACK: Once upon a time you cried on my shoulder like a little child.

JILL: We would have talked like two people who love each other. Then we would have gone home and lain in bed.

JACK: We used to go to places like this all the time.

JILL: Together.

JACK: So happy...

JACK AND JILL: Well!

JILL: Nice seeing you, Fred. (*Kisses his cheek*)

WAITER: Expression of pleasure. First name.

JACK: Take care of yourself, Mary.

WAITER: Parting wish. First name.

JACK AND JILL: 'Bye!

WAITER: Valediction. (*They freeze*)

WAITER: Section Three. Simultaneous Translation, or: The secret meaning of common English words.

JILL: Well, well, well.

WAITER: In this context: "oh, shit."

JACK: I didn't know you were here.

WAITER: "What the fuck are you doing here?"

JILL: How are you, Hank?

WAITER: "Wasn't five years enough?"

JACK: I'm good.

WAITER: "Fuck you, Agnes."

JILL: Nice place.

WAITER: "Asshole."

JACK: Very nice.

WAITER: "Fuck you, Agnes."

JILL: So what are you doing with yourself?

WAITER: "Are you still sleeping with that slut from the community college?"

JACK: Same old thing.

WAITER: "It's none of your fucking business."

JILL: Have you tried the chicken?

WAITER: "Have some salmonella?"

JACK: I'm sticking with liquids.

WAITER: "I know you have problems with your mother, but you don't have to poison me."

JILL: See you, Hank.

WAITER: "Up yours."

JACK: Take care.

WAITER: "Fuck you, Agnes."

JACK AND JILL: 'Bye! *(They freeze)*

WAITER: Section Seven. Fill In The Blank, or: The arbitrariness of information.

JACK: Excuse me, but don't I know you? My name is Jack.

JILL: Hello.

JACK: My name is Bill.

JILL: How are you.

JACK: My name is Ted.

JILL: How do you do.

JACK: Melvin. And you are...?

JILL: Jill.

JACK: Hello, Jill.

JILL: Monica.

JACK: How are you, Monica.

JILL: Denise.

JACK: Could we have gone to college together?

JILL: I went to Stanford.

JACK: Ah.

JILL: Bennington.

JACK: Oh.

JILL: Chicago.

JACK: And-I'm sorry-your name is...?

JILL: Louise. And you are?

JACK: Barney.

JILL: Where did you grow up, Bob?

JACK: Well...

JILL: Jim?

JACK: Well...

JILL: Stanley?

JACK: Well I grew up in Washington.

JILL: Oh.

JACK: St. Louis.

JILL: Great place.

JACK: Santa Fe.

JILL: Nice.

JACK: What about you, Jane?

JILL: My name is Jill.

JACK: I'm sorry. Jill.

JILL: And yet really my name could be anything...

JACK: Anyway, I went to med school.

JILL: I wasn't born with a name.

JACK: Went to law school.

JILL: I was given a name.

JACK: Went to plumbing school.

JILL: My name could just as easily be Beth, or Phyllis, or Jane.

JACK: Quite a smorgasbord, isn't it?

JILL: Or Gertrude, or Natasha.

JACK: Do you know what the trouble with a smorgasbord is? There are just too many choices.

JILL: A hummingbird doesn't have a name.

JACK: Do I want the chicken, or the roast beef?

JILL: A fish doesn't have a name.

JACK: Pâté, or cheese?

JILL: A hedgehog doesn't have a name.

JACK: It's just like life that way.

JILL: It's just this nameless thing, a handful of skin and fur and a heart beating inside it.

JACK: Should I work, should I read, should I listen to music?

JILL: Completely anonymous.

JACK: Should I go to this café, or should I go to the movies?

JILL: A hedgehog doesn't even know it has a name.

JACK: Sometimes there are just so many choices, I don't do anything!

JILL: With a name you're just an example of something.

JACK: I thought to myself, this café could be a total waste.

JILL: But I'm not an example of something.

JACK: But I came to this café because I thought I might meet the love of my life.

JILL: I'm some body.

JACK: Do you think she's here?

JILL: I'm Jill.

JACK: I'm Jack.

JACK AND JILL: Hello. *(They freeze)*

WAITER: Section Twenty-six. The Conditional Tense, or: Should, Would, Could.

JACK: Okay, so we meet at this café.

JILL: And we like each other.

JACK: We like each other instantly. (*Extend hand*) I'm Zeno.

JILL: Miranda. (*They shake*) Did you know that the first three minutes of a conversation can determine your relationship to the other person for all eternity?

JACK: But we pass the three minute mark! We meet, and we mesh!

JILL: Oy, what a mesh.

JACK: And it all begins right here on this spot. In a single moment, all things seem possible.

JILL: All things are possible.

JACK: The infinite smorgasbord lies before us. But what do we do?

JILL: The café is closing.

JACK: The crowd is thinning.

JILL: But the question of the moment is...

JACK: Do I ask you out?

JILL: Do I ask *you* out?

JACK: And if you do-

JACK AND JILL: Should I accept?

JACK: This could be one of those glorious and intoxicating meetings best left to memory.

JILL: Or it might be the start of eternal love.

JACK: So I say: Would you like to get a cup of coffee sometime? And you say-

JILL: Sorry. But thanks anyway.

JACK AND JILL: 'Bye!

JACK: And that's the road of no-thank-you.

JILL: A dead end.

JACK: But possibly a happy dead end. While down this road here, is...

JILL: Would you like to get a cup of coffee sometime?

JACK: Sure!

JILL: So we go out for coffee.

JACK: And we have a horrible time.

JILL: Dead end.

JACK: Or a wonderful time. In which case-

JILL: We get a second cup.

JACK: And stop right there.

JILL: Dead end.

JACK: Or we go out for a third cup and a fourth cup and a fifth cup.

JILL: Would we have made love by now?

JACK: Maybe we would have.

JILL: I say we should have.

JACK: We certainly could have.

JILL: Let's say we did.

JACK: And it was horrible.

JACK AND JILL: Dead end.

JILL: Or it was wonderful. Which means-

JACK: More coffee. And-

JILL: We move in with each other.

JACK: Mistake.

JILL: Dead end.

JACK: Or it could be wonderful.

JILL: And so we get engaged!

JACK: Marriage.

JILL: Children.

JACK: Bliss! (*Both sigh slightly*)

JILL: And on to divorce.

JACK: Or-the other road-maybe we're down the road of no-thank-you we took years and years ago, and years and years pass.

JILL: And we meet each other at a café. And you say-

JACK: Hello, I'm Zeno.

JILL: Miranda.

JACK: Don't I know you from somewhere?

JILL: And a whole universe opens up in front of us-

JACK: Full of joy.

JILL: All things are possible.

JACK: And they start right on this spot.

JILL: Dead end.

JACK: Or bliss.

JILL: Should, would, could. (*Small pause*)

JACK: Well it was nice meeting you, Miranda.

JILL: Yes. Nice meeting you, Zeno.

WAITER: Section Seventy-eight. Saying Good-bye.

JACK: Listen, I only have a few minutes.

WAITER: Let's practice a typical interchange.

JACK: The café is closing and the crowd is thinning. Coats are disappearing from the rack...

WAITER: A typical interchange, please!

JACK: I just wanted to say, while I have this chance, that you are the most wonderful woman at this café.

WAITER: Typical, please!

JACK: On this street. In this city. In the country. On this planet.

JILL: You're the most wonderful man I've met in years.

JACK: You have a light that surrounds you.

JILL: You're intoxicating.

JACK: You're radiant. I came to this café one thing and I leave it transformed.

JILL: I came to this café to meet the love of my life.

JACK: And you're her.

WAITER: You are she.

JACK: You're *her!* You're the love of my life!

JILL: My name could be anything

JACK: But it's Jill.

JILL: I could have gone anywhere tonight.

JACK: But you came to this café.

JILL: Hello, hello.

JACK: Abracadabra. My name is Jack.

JILL: Would you like to get a cup of coffee sometime, Jack?

JACK: Yes, Jill, I would like that very much.

JILL: And it all happens right here. (*They exit arm-in-arm*)

WAITER: A-plus.

VARIATIONS
ON THE
DEATH OF
TROTSKY



*This play is for Fred Sanders,
first appreciator of the comic possibilities
of mountain-climbers' axes*

Variations on the Death of Trotsky was first presented at the Manhattan Punch Line Theatre (Steve Kaplan, artistic director) in New York City in January 1991. It was directed by Jason McConnell Buzas; the set design was by Vaughn Patterson; costume design was by Sharon Lynch; lighting design was by Pat Dignan. The cast was as follows:

TROTSKY Daniel Hagen
MRS. TROTSKY Nora Mae Lyng
RAMON Steven Rodriguez

TROTSKY's study in Coyoacan, Mexico. A desk, covered with books and papers. A mirror hanging on the wall. A doorway, left. Louvered windows upstage, through which we can glimpse lush tropical fronds and greenery. A large wall calendar announces that today is August 21, 1940. Lights up on TROTSKY sitting at his desk, writing furiously. He has bushy hair and a goatee, small glasses, a dark suit. The handle of a mountain-climber's axe is sticking out of the back of his head.

VARIATION ONE

TROTSKY (*as he writes*): "The proletariat is right. The proletariat must *always* be right. And the revolution of the proletariat against oppression must go on . . . forever!"

(MRS. TROTSKY *enters, grandmotherly and sweet, in an ankle-length dress and high-button shoes. She is holding a large book.*)

MRS. TROTSKY: Leon.

TROTSKY: "And forever and forever . . . !"

MRS. TROTSKY: Leon, I was just reading the encyclopedia.

TROTSKY: The heading?

MRS. TROTSKY: "Trotsky, Leon."

TROTSKY: Good. It's about me.

MRS. TROTSKY: Listen to this. (*Reads.*) "On August 20th, 1940, a Spanish Communist named Ramon Mercader smashed a mountain-climber's axe into Trotsky's skull in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City. Trotsky died the next day."

TROTSKY: What is the year of that encyclopedia?

MRS. TROTSKY (*checks the spine*): 1994. (*or whatever year it happens to be right now.*)

TROTSKY: Strange.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes.

TROTSKY: But interesting. I *am* Trotsky.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes, dear.

TROTSKY: And this is our house in Coyoacan.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes.

TROTSKY: And we have a Spanish gardener named Ramon—?

MRS. TROTSKY: Mercader. Yes.

TROTSKY: Hmm . . . There aren't any *other* Trotskys living in Coyoacan, are there?

MRS. TROTSKY: I don't think so. Not under that name.

TROTSKY: What is the date today?

MRS. TROTSKY (*looks at the calendar*): August 21st, 1940.

TROTSKY: Then I'm safe! That article says it happened on the twentieth, which means it would've happened yesterday.

MRS. TROTSKY: But Leon . . .

TROTSKY: And I'd be dead today, with a mountain-climber's axe in my skull!

MRS. TROTSKY: Um—Leon . . .

TROTSKY: Will the capitalist press never get things right? (*He resumes writing.*)

MRS. TROTSKY: But Leon, isn't that the handle of a mountain-climber's axe, sticking out of your skull?

TROTSKY (*looks into the mirror*): It certainly does look like one. . . . And you know, Ramon was in here yesterday,

telling me about his mountain-climbing trip. And now that I think of it, he was carrying a mountain-climber's axe. I can't remember if he had it when he left the room. . . . (*TROTSKY considers all this.*) Did Ramon report to work today? (*TROTSKY dies, falling face forward onto his desk.*)

(*A bell rings.*)

VARIATION TWO

(*TROTSKY resumes writing.*)

TROTSKY: "No one is safe. Force must be used. And the revolution of the proletariat against oppression must go on forever and forever . . ."

MRS. TROTSKY: Leon . . .

TROTSKY: "And forever!"

MRS. TROTSKY: Leon, I was just reading the encyclopedia.

TROTSKY: Is it the *Britannica*?

MRS. TROTSKY: Listen to this.

TROTSKY (*to audience*): The universe as viewed by the victors.

MRS. TROTSKY: "On August 20th, 1940, a Spanish Communist named Ramon Mercader smashed a mountain-climber's axe into Trotsky's skull in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City. Trotsky died the next day."

TROTSKY (*impatient*): Yes? And?

MRS. TROTSKY: I *think* that there's a mountain-climber's axe in your own skull right now.

TROTSKY: I knew *that*! When I was shaving this morning, I noticed a handle sticking out of the back of my head. For a moment I thought it was an ice pick, so at first I was worried.

MRS. TROTSKY: No, it's not an ice pick.

TROTSKY: Don't even say the word! You know my recurring nightmare.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes, dear.

TROTSKY: About the ice pick that buries itself in my skull.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes, dear.

TROTSKY: That is why I have forbidden any of the servants to allow ice picks into the house.

MRS. TROTSKY: But Leon—

TROTSKY: No one may be seen with an ice pick in this house. *Especially* not Spanish Communists.

MRS. TROTSKY: But Leon—

TROTSKY: We'll do without ice. We'll drink our liquor neat and our Coca-Cola warm. Who cares if this *is* Coyoacan in August? Hmm. Not a bad song-title, that. "Coyoacan in August." (*Writes it down.*) Or we'll get ice, but we just won't pick at it. Ice will be allowed into the house in blocks, but may not be picked or chipped under any circumstances—at least, not with ice picks. Ice-cube trays will also be allowed, if they've been invented yet. I'll bet this article doesn't say anything about an *ice-cube tray* in my skull, does it?

MRS. TROTSKY: No . . .

TROTSKY: Does it?

MRS. TROTSKY: No.

TROTSKY: HA! I've outsmarted destiny! (*To audience.*) Which is only a capitalist explanation for the status quo!

MRS. TROTSKY: Leon . . .

TROTSKY: Also—look at this. (*Opens a desk drawer and takes out a skull.*) Do you know what this is?

MRS. TROTSKY: No.

TROTSKY: It's a skull.

MRS. TROTSKY: Well I knew *that*, but—

TROTSKY: I bought this skull. I *own* this skull. So what does that make this?

(*Pause.*)

MRS. TROTSKY AND TROTSKY (*together*): Trotsky's skull.

TROTSKY: If some Spanish-Communist-posing-as-a-gardener wants to bury anything in my skull, be it a (*he is about to say "ice pick"*) you-know-what or anything else—this will be here as a decoy. He'll see this skull, recognize it as my skull, bury something in it, and he'll go his way and I'll go mine. Is that ingenious?

MRS. TROTSKY: Up to a point.

TROTSKY: Fifty more years of Trotsky!

MRS. TROTSKY: I have some very bad news for you, Leon. (*Shows him the entry in the encyclopedia.*)

TROTSKY: A mountain-climber's axe . . . ? Ingenious! (TROTSKY *dies.*)

(*Bell.*)

VARIATION THREE

TROTSKY: Funny. I always thought it was an ice pick.

MRS. TROTSKY: A mountain-climber's axe! *A mountain-climber's axe!* CAN'T I GET THAT THROUGH YOUR SKULL?

(TROTSKY *dies.*)

(*Bell.*)

VARIATION FOUR

(TROTSKY *begins to pace.*)

TROTSKY: This is very bad news. This is serious.

MRS. TROTSKY: What is serious, Leon?

TROTSKY: *I have a mountain-climber's axe buried in my skull!*

MRS. TROTSKY: Smashed, actually. It says Mercader "smashed" the axe into your skull, not "buried"—

TROTSKY: All right, all right. What am I going to do?

MRS. TROTSKY: Maybe a hat would cover the handle. You know. One of those cute little Alpine hats, with a point and a feather . . . ? (*Sees the look on his face, and stops.*)

TROTSKY: The encyclopedia says that I die today?

MRS. TROTSKY: The twenty-first. That's today.

TROTSKY: Does it say what time?

MRS. TROTSKY: No.

TROTSKY: So much for the usefulness of *that* encyclopedia. All right, then, I have until midnight at the latest.

MRS. TROTSKY: What should I tell Cook about supper?

TROTSKY: Well she can forget the soup course. (TROTSKY *falls to the floor and dies.*)

MRS. TROTSKY: Nyet, nyet, *nyet!*

(*Bell.*)

VARIATION FIVE

TROTSKY: But this man is a gardener.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes.

TROTSKY: At least he's been *posing* as a gardener.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes.

TROTSKY: Doesn't that make him a member of the proletariat?

MRS. TROTSKY: I'd say so.

TROTSKY: Then what's he doing smashing a mountain-climber's axe into my skull?

MRS. TROTSKY: I don't know. Have you been oppressing him?

TROTSKY: Why would Ramon have done this to me? (*He holds up the skull, Hamlet-like.*)

MRS. TROTSKY: Maybe he's a literalist.

TROTSKY: A what?

MRS. TROTSKY: A literalist. Maybe Ramon ran into Manuel yesterday. You know—Manuel? The head gardener?

TROTSKY: I know who Manuel is.

MRS. TROTSKY: I know you know who Manuel is.

TROTSKY (*Ralph Kramden*): One of these days, Mrs. Trotsky . . . *Bang! Zoom!*

MRS. TROTSKY: Maybe Ramon asked him, "Will Mr. Trotsky have time to look at the nasturtiums today?" And maybe Manuel said, "I don't know—*axe* Mr. Trotsky." HA HA HA HA HA!

TROTSKY: Very funny.

MRS. TROTSKY: Or maybe he was just hot-to-trotsky.

TROTSKY: Oh very, very funny.

MRS. TROTSKY: Or maybe he just wanted to *pick your brain!* HOO HOO HEE HEE HAA HAA!

TROTSKY: Stop it! *Stop it!* (*He dies.*)

MRS. TROTSKY: HA HA HA HA HA HA!

(Bell.)

VARIATION SIX

TROTSKY: Call Ramon in here.

MRS. TROTSKY: Ramon!

TROTSKY: You'd better get him quickly. I have a mountain-climber's axe in my skull.

MRS. TROTSKY: *Ramon! Come quickly!*

(RAMON enters: *sombrero, serape, huaraches, and guitar.*)

TROTSKY: Good morning, Ramon.

RAMON: Good morning, señor. (*They shake hands.*)

TROTSKY: Have a seat, please. (*To MRS. TROTSKY.*) You see? We have very good employer-employee relations here. (*To RAMON.*) Ramon, did you bury this mountain-climber's axe in my skull?

RAMON: I did not bury it, señor. I *smashed* it into your skull.

TROTSKY: Excuse me?

RAMON: You see? You can still see the handle.

MRS. TROTSKY: It's true, Leon. The axe is not entirely out of sight.

RAMON: So we cannot say "buried," we can only say "smashed," or perhaps "jammed"—

TROTSKY: All right, all right. But *why* did you do this?

RAMON: I think I read about it in an encyclopedia.

TROTSKY (*to audience*): The power of the printed word!

RAMON: I wanted to use an ice pick, but there weren't any around the house.

TROTSKY: But why? Do you realize who I am? Do you realize that you smashed this axe into the skull of a major historical figure? I helped run the Russian Revolution! I fought Stalin! I was a major political theorist! Why did you do this? Was it political disaffection? Anti-counterrevolutionary backlash?

RAMON: Actually—it was love, señor.

MRS. TROTSKY: It's true, Leon. (*She and Ramon join hands.*) I'm only sorry you had to find out about it this way.

TROTSKY: No.

MRS. TROTSKY: Yes.

TROTSKY: No.

RAMON: Sí!

TROTSKY: Oh God! What a fool I've been! (*He dies.*)
(Bell.)

VARIATION SEVEN

TROTSKY: Why did you really do this, Ramon?

RAMON: *You* will never know, Señor Trotsky.

TROTSKY: This is a nightmare!

RAMON: But luckily for you—your night will soon be over.
(TROTSKY *dies.*)

(Bell.)

VARIATION EIGHT

TROTSKY: All right, Ramon. Thank you. You may go.

(RAMON starts out. Stops.)

RAMON: Señor Trotsky—?

TROTSKY: Yes?

RAMON: Do you think you will have time to look at the nasturtiums today? They are really very beautiful.

TROTSKY: I don't think so, Ramon. But I'll try.

RAMON: Thank you, señor. *Hasta la vista*. Or should I say, *buenas noches*. (Exits.)

TROTSKY: Well. All right then. The twenty-first of August 1940. The day I'm going to die. Interesting. And to think that I've gone over so many twenty-firsts of August in my life, like a man walking over his own grave. . . .

MRS. TROTSKY: It's been wonderful being married to you, Leon.

TROTSKY: Thank you, Mrs. Trotsky.

MRS. TROTSKY: Though it was a burden at times, being married to a major historical figure.

TROTSKY: I'm sorry I was away from home so often, tending the revolution.

MRS. TROTSKY: I understand.

TROTSKY: And I'm sorry I couldn't have been more in touch with my feelings.

MRS. TROTSKY (*gentle protest*): No . . . please . . .

TROTSKY: And that I often had such trouble expressing my emotions.

MRS. TROTSKY: Oh, I haven't been everything I should have been.

TROTSKY: Well it's a little late for regrets, with a mountain-climber's axe buried in one's skull.

MRS. TROTSKY: Smashed, actually.

TROTSKY: So it wasn't old age, or cancer, or even the ice pick that I feared for years. It was an axe wielded by a Spanish Communist posing as a gardener.

MRS. TROTSKY: You really couldn't have guessed that, Leon.

TROTSKY: So even an assassin can make the flowers grow. The gardener was false, and yet the garden that he tended was real. How was I to know he was my killer when I passed him every day? How was I to know that the man tending the nasturtiums would keep me from seeing what the weather will be like tomorrow? How was I to know I'd never get to see *Casablanca*, which wouldn't be made until 1942 and which I would have despised anyway? How was I to know I'd never get to know about the bomb, or the eighty thousand dead at Hiroshima? Or rock and roll, or Gorbachev, or the state of Israel? How was I supposed to know I'd be erased from the history books of my own land . . . ?

MRS. TROTSKY: But reinstated, at least partially, someday.

TROTSKY: Sometime, for everyone, there's a room that you go into, and it's the room that you never leave. Or else you go out of a room and it's the last room that you'll ever leave. (*He looks around.*) This is my last room.

MRS. TROTSKY: But you aren't even here, Leon.

TROTSKY: This desk, these books, that calendar . . .

MRS. TROTSKY: You're not even here, my love.

TROTSKY: The sunshine coming through the blinds . . .

MRS. TROTSKY: That was yesterday. You're in a hospital, unconscious.

TROTSKY: The flowers in the garden. You, standing there . . .

MRS. TROTSKY: This is yesterday you're seeing.

TROTSKY: What does that entry say? Would you read it again?

MRS. TROTSKY: "On August 20th, 1940, a Spanish Communist named Ramon Mercader smashed a mountain-climber's axe into Trotsky's skull in Coyoacan, a suburb of Mexico City. Trotsky died the next day."

TROTSKY: It gives you a little hope about the world, doesn't it? That a man could have a mountain-climber's axe smashed into his skull, and yet live on for one whole day . . . ? Maybe I'll go look at the nasturtiums.

(TROTSKY dies. The garden outside the louvered window begins to glow.)

THE LIGHTS FADE