9. **Journal Entry** Review the stage directions, and then decide what changes you would make if you were staging this play for each of the following audiences:

- High school students
- Sixth graders
- College students
- Residents of a retirement facility

10. **Critical Perspective** In a review of Barnett’s play *T for 2*, Celia Wren quotes Barnett as saying of her play, “One of my goals was to take some very ideological questions and make them very personal.”

Do you think this is Barnett’s goal in *Alone at Last!* as well? What “ideological questions” does *Alone at Last!* explore? How does the play “make them very personal”?

**Related Works:** “Sleep-over” (p. 136), “Love and Other Catastrophes: A Mix Tape” (p. 138), “What lips my lips have kissed” (p. 906), *Oedipus the King* (p. 1467)

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**Cultural Context** The basis for this play is the “infinite monkey theorem,” the idea that, given enough time and enough monkeys, at least one monkey placed in front of a typewriter will eventually produce William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Credit for this idea is generally given to French mathematician Émile Borel, whose 1913 essay explains the theorem. Since then, numerous writers (including Richard Russo and Douglas Adams) have alluded to this idea in literature, using it as a metaphor to explore the probability of random, spontaneous acts of artistic genius.

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**Words, Words, Words** (1994)

*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 flowery 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 (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"—I 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 Rosenbaun’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 game1 anyway, Swiftly.
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 antiquities. 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 blammamagam.
Bedsocks knockswurst tinkerelle."

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?
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!

1mug’s game: Pointless endeavor.
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 interposed . . .
Kafka: Paradise, wasn't it?
Swift: Lost!
Milton: Lost!
Swift: 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 chumps. 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 voyeurists 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, scribes, 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 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 despaired 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 snatch 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 distillation. We'll put the pellet with the poison in the vessel with the pestle.

2Kewpie doll: Style of doll based on magazine illustrations from the early twentieth century.
3hebona: Type of poisonous plant.
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... "Bedsheets 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 scrots go back to work. I'll do all the thinking around here. Swifty—revenge! (He paces, deep in thought.)

Milton: "Tinkerbelle... schuckelschwanz... hemorrhoid." Yeah, that's good.

That is good. (Types.) "Shuckelshwanz..."

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

Reading and Reacting

1. Look up the names of the three monkeys online. Why do you think Ives chose these names for his characters?

2. What personality traits define each of the monkeys? How are they alike? How are they different?

3. Why do you think Ives specifies that he does not want the monkeys dressed in monkey suits? Is this a good decision?

4. The monkeys sometimes use jargon typically used by writers for the movies or for television. Find several examples of this type of jargon. How does this use of language add to the humor of the play?

5. At various points in the play, the monkeys echo lines from Shakespeare's plays. Find several examples. What is the significance of this use of language?

6. The title of the play is an allusion to a line in Hamlet. In the play, Polonius asks Hamlet what he is reading. Hamlet answers, "words, words, words." Why do you think Ives chose this line as the title for his play?

7. What do the monkeys know about their situation? How do they attempt to manipulate Dr. Rosenbaum?

8. Like many of Shakespeare's characters, Swift decides to take revenge. Why does he decide to do so? What do the other monkeys think of Swift's plan?

9. Journal Entry: Read the stage directions at the beginning of the play. Then, decide what you would do differently if you were staging the play. Finally, write a set of stage directions reflecting the changes you would make.

10. Critical Perspective: In a review of Ives's plays, New York Times theater critic Ben Brantley makes the following point:

Mr. Ives's theories may owe much to the philosophical arcana of such dense thinkers as Einstein and Derrida, but he is no coolly detached academic. His obsessions with randomness and relativity are translated into revue-like sketches that percolate with comic brio and zesty bits of stagecraft.

Do you see evidence in Words, Words, Words that Ives is obsessed with "randomness and relativity"?

Related Works: "Two Questions" (p. 167), "Deportation at Breakfast" (p. 208), "The Fun Gallery" (p. 57), "The Value of Education" (p. 728), Hamlet (p. 1334)

Milcha Sanchez-Scott (1955– ) is a Los Angeles–based writer of plays that include Dog Lady and The Cuban Swimmer, both one-act plays (1984); Roosters, published in On New Ground: Contemporary Hispanic American Plays (1987) and adapted into the 1993 feature film of the same name; and Stone Wedding, produced at the Los Angeles Theater Center (1988). Also produced by the Los Angeles Theater Center was her play Carmen, adapted from Georges Bizet's opera of the same title.

Born in Bali, Sanchez-Scott is the daughter of an Indonesian mother and a Colombian-Mexican father. Her early childhood was spent in Mexico, South America, and Britain; her family moved to San Diego when she was fourteen.

Writing in Time magazine, William A. Henry observes that the visionary or hallucinatory elements in Sanchez-Scott's plays derive from the Latin American "magic realism" tradition of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. For example, Henry notes that in Roosters, what seems "a straightforward depiction of the life of farmhands gives way to mysterious visitations, symbolic cockfights enacted by dancers, virginal girls wearing wings, archetypal confrontations between father and son."

In 1984, the New York production of The Cuban Swimmer was noteworthy for an ingeniously designed set that realistically re-created on stage Pacific Ocean waves, a helicopter, and a boat. According to the New York Times, "The audience [could] almost feel the resistting tides and the California oil slick... represented by a watery-blue floor and curtain." Jeannette Mirabal, as the Cuban swimmer, made an "auspicious" debut in the play, according to the Times: "In a tour de force of ballistic movements, she [kapt] her arms fluttering in the imaginary waters throughout the play."

Cultural Context: In 1980, in the wake of numerous incidences of dissent and rebellion, Fidel Castro deported a large number of Cubans and encouraged many others to leave. In the resulting exodus, which became known as the Mariel boatlift, more than 120,000 Cuban refugees arrived in Florida, placing tremendous strain on U.S. resources. In 1984, an agreement was made between the two countries that limited the number of Cuban immigrants to 20,000 per year. Over time, the United States relaxed this quota, but the resulting abundance of refugees prompted the U.S. government to reinstate the quota in the mid-1980s. In 1996, the Cuban Adjustment Act was passed, stating that Cubans who reached dry land would be allowed to become permanent residents of the United States, but those who were intercepted while still at sea would be returned to Cuba. In 1999, the plight of Cuban refugees was reflected in the story of Elian Gonzalez, a six-year-old boy who was found clinging to an inner tube but was later returned