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Dramatic Publishing



FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

a full-length play by

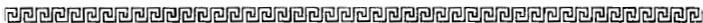
DAVID ROGERS

based upon the novel by

DANIEL KEYES



THE DRAMATIC PUBLISHING COMPANY



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DAVID ROGERS
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DANIEL KEYES

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(FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON)

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FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

A Full-Length Play

For Ten Men, Seventeen Women

(Can be reduced to Eight Men, Nine Women)*

CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

DR. STRAUSS	CHILD NORMA
PROFESSOR NEMUR	MRS. FELDMAN
ALICE KINNIAN	ELLEN
BURT SELDON	TEEN-AGE CHARLIE
CHARLIE GORDON	BERNICE
DORIS	CONNIE
NURSE	CHAIRLADY
FRANK	MRS. MOONEY
GINA	MRS. NEMUR
MRS. DONNER	MR. HARVEY
JOE	JACKIE WELBERG
MOTHER	ANNE WELBERG
LITTLE CHARLIE	NORMA
FATHER	Party guests, concert-goers

The play takes place between March and September in New York City and Chicago.

There is one intermission.

*Doubling: Doris - Norma; Ellen - Nurse - Mrs. Mooney; Bernice - Mrs. Nemur; Mrs. Feldman - Connie - Jackie Welberg; Gina - Chairlady - Anne Welberg; Joe - Mr. Harvey; Frank - Teen Age Charlie. (These are just suggestions; parts can be divided many ways, possibly making the cast smaller. Some very small parts can be eliminated.)

SETTING

"Flowers for Algernon" is played in drapes, with certain small set pieces and furniture brought in for the various scenes.

Basically, the stage is divided into four areas. The only area remaining the same throughout the play is a small one at R. (If you are using a very small stage, this set can be placed before the curtain.) It is Dr. Strauss' office at Beekman hospital and consists of an analyst's couch DR, and a small desk behind it parallel to the footlights with a chair behind the desk and one at its left, both facing front. We assume the entrance to the office is UR behind the desk.

The stage L area remains the same all through Act One. It is Charlie's room, consisting of a small bed L, a small table downstage of the bed, and a standing lamp behind the bed.

At the beginning of the play, the area right of C holds a small table with two facing chairs, a tape recorder on the table. Behind the table and a little left of it, another table holds a mouse's maze. In the area left of C, a white hospital screen hides a hospital bed.

ACT ONE

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: DR. STRAUSS -- a neurosurgeon, warm, sympathetic -- is seated behind his desk looking through some papers, as PROFESSOR NEMUR, a somewhat older, slightly testier man, enters UR.)

STRAUSS. Oh, there you are, Professor Nemur.

NEMUR. She's here, Dr. Strauss.

STRAUSS. Good. Ask her to come in, please.
(He rises.)

NEMUR (speaking off). Will you come in, Miss Kinnian?

(ALICE KINNIAN enters. She is pretty, youngish, serious, rather tense at the moment. She moves to STRAUSS.)

ALICE. How do you do, Dr. Strauss?

STRAUSS (shaking hands with her). Miss Kinnian.
(He gestures, inviting her to sit beside the desk.)
Have you brought him with you?

ALICE (sitting). Yes.

NEMUR (sitting on the couch). Burt's taken him up to the laboratory to run the tests.

STRAUSS (a bit annoyed). Without my meeting him?

NEMUR. I thought it would save time. Miss Kinnian can fill us in on his background.

STRAUSS. I see. (Picking up a pencil.) Well, Miss Kinnian? (As she speaks, STRAUSS makes notes.)

ALICE. His name is Charlie Gordon. He's thirty-two . . . about five foot ten, rather nice-looking, brown hair and eyes * and he's . . . mentally retarded.

STRAUSS. Do you happen to know his I. Q. ?

ALICE. Sixty-eight.

STRAUSS. How did you meet him?

ALICE. I teach a night class for retarded adults. Someone at the bakery where he works heard about it and told him. The first night Charlie came . . . of course, he couldn't read or write . . . but he bought a newspaper on the way to school, thinking he could read it on his way home.

NEMUR. Our subject must read and write. We want him to keep a journal of his reactions.

ALICE. Oh, he can now . . . at about a third grade level. He's slow . . . and sometimes he forgets what he's learned already. It's rather like those Moslem pilgrims, two steps forward, one step back. But he works very hard. He's so anxious, so very eager to learn. That's why I wrote to you when I heard about this project.

STRAUSS. Has he any family?

ALICE. If he has, he's lost track of them. There was a younger sister. The family lived in Brooklyn. She may still be there.

STRAUSS (to NEMUR). If there is a family, we need permission. If something should go wrong during the operation . . .

NEMUR. So we look for them. (Minimizing the problem.) How big is Brooklyn?

ALICE. Exactly, what kind of operation is it?

* Physical description may be changed to fit the actor.

STRAUSS. It's very new.

NEMUR. So far, we've only done it with mice.

ALICE (shocked). Mice!

NEMUR. But it's been very successful. There's a mouse in the laboratory now whose intelligence has been increased three fold and is still growing.

ALICE. Can you explain it . . . the operation . . . to me?

NEMUR. It's too complicated for a layman to understand.

STRAUSS. Put very simply, we remove the damaged portion of a retardate's brain by surgery, then, by chemical injection, re-vitalize the remaining brain tissue permitting it to produce brain proteins at a super-normal rate.

ALICE (smiling). You're right. It is too complicated for a layman.

NEMUR. If it's successful, the operation would increase the patient's mental capacity -- perhaps, to the level of genius. And we think it would happen very rapidly.

ALICE. Genius? And he'll stay that way permanently?

STRAUSS. We have every reason to believe so.

NEMUR. It's worked so far on Algernon.

ALICE. Who's Algernon?

NEMUR. That's what my lab technicians call the mouse.

ALICE. But what happens if the operation isn't a success?

STRAUSS. There may be no effect at all . . . or his intelligence might improve temporarily . . . or it might make him worse.

ALICE. What would happen to him then?

NEMUR. He'll be taken care of.

ALICE. How?

NEMUR. Miss Kinnian, we would not proceed with this operation if we were not reasonably sure of success. However, we are aware of the possibility of failure and the Welberg Foundation, which is sponsoring us, has taken steps to secure the patient's future in that event.

ALICE (rising, upset). Perhaps I shouldn't have brought Charlie here.

(As ALICE speaks, lights come up slowly on testing room at RC. Through following dialogue, we see BURT, a young lab technician, escort CHARLIE to the table. CHARLIE is a good-looking man of thirty-two, but retarded. He should be played at this point like an amiable eight-year-old with a desire to please and a rather foolish grin. He speaks slowly, hesitating before larger words, and moves awkwardly. He wears baggy slacks, a clean but cheap sports shirt, a shabby, heavy cardigan sweater and a baseball cap. In this unfamiliar atmosphere he is tense and nervous. As the dialogue continues in the office, BURT will seat CHARLIE, take some cards from the table drawer, seat himself opposite CHARLIE, and turn on the tape recorder. Their lights, if possible, will continue to dim up as the lights on Strauss' office dim down.)

STRAUSS. There is inevitably some danger in exploring new fields, Miss Kinnian, but in every scientific advance, there must be someone who is first.

ALICE. I know. It's just a little upsetting when the first person isn't somebody faceless in a

newspaper but someone you know . . . someone you care about.

STRAUSS. If Charlie is chosen and we succeed, he will have more than a new life. He will have a life. And even if we fail, he will have made a greater contribution to mankind than most normal people can ever hope to do.

ALICE. I know that. It's just . . . Charlie's like a lovable little boy. All he wants . . . all he ever talks about . . . is to be smart. He's quite incapable of making a decision like this on his own . . . and I've taken it on myself I hope I'm doing the right thing. (She turns and goes off UR. Lights on this set go out, though STRAUSS and NEMUR remain seated.)

BURT. Just make yourself comfortable, Charlie.

CHARLIE (very tense). You want I should open my mouth and say "ah"?

BURT. Why would I want that?

CHARLIE. That's doctors. "Open your mouth and say "ah".

BURT (laughing). I'm not a doctor, Charlie.

CHARLIE. You got a white coat.

BURT. Well, that's because I work in a laboratory. Now just relax.

CHARLIE. It . . . it . . . it hurts when they say relax.

BURT. It won't hurt, Charlie. There's nothing to be scared of.

CHARLIE. I know. I know. (Smiling and pulling it out.) I got my rabbit's foot.

BURT. Good. We're just going to run some tests.

CHARLIE. When I was a kid, I allus failed tests . . . you know . . . in school?

BURT. Well, this is different. It's called a Rorschach test.

CHARLIE. Raw Shock?

BURT. Yes. You just look at these cards and tell me what you see.

CHARLIE (suspicious). That's the test?

BURT. Yes. (BURT hands him a card.) Look at this, Charlie. What might this be? (CHARLIE, as BURT talks, holds card far off, then squints at it, up close.) What do you see on this card? People see all kinds of things in these ink blots. Tell me what it makes you think of?

CHARLIE (really trying). Somebody spilled red ink on a white card.

BURT. Charlie, people see pictures in these ink blots.

CHARLIE. Where?

BURT. No. You have to find them. (Handing him another.) Think, Charlie. Imagine there's something there.

CHARLIE (after a long think). I imagine . . . (BURT picks up his pencil, ready to make a note.) I imagine . . . a ink blot.

BURT (handing him another card). Look at this, Charlie. . . . Does it remind you of anything? Pretend it's something.

CHARLIE (looking, making a show of understanding, anxious to please). Oh. I p'tend . . . I p'tend . . .

BURT. Yes?

CHARLIE (smiling, happy with his smartness). I p'tend a bottle o' ink spilled all over a white card. (BURT breaks his pencil point.)

BURT. All right, let's try the other one. (He rises, calls off.) Doris, will you bring in Algernon?

DORIS (off). Right away, Burt.

BURT (moving to table behind test table and pushing it forward). We're going to play a game, Charlie. This is called a maze.

CHARLIE. I don't see no pictures.

BURT (laughing). No. This isn't a test. It's a sort of race. See, there are all these little

alleys here and a mouse starts here, and he has to find all the openings in all the walls and get through to here. That makes this bell ring -- (He rings it, a small tinkling sound.) -- and then he gets a prize. Some cheese.

CHARLIE (laughing). No mouse'd find all them holes.

(DORIS, a young lab technician, enters carrying a small cage with a mouse, stuffed or rubber, in it.)

BURT (taking it). Thanks. (She moves behind maze table.) Charlie, this is Algernon.

CHARLIE (smiling broadly). Hiyah. . . he's cute.

BURT (taking mouse from cage, masking it with his hand and putting it into the maze). Now, watch. O.K., Algernon, go! (They watch a moment, CHARLIE at first laughing, then a little surprised, then very interested. We hear the bell ring. [Actually, Doris rings it out of sight.] Then, she feeds Algernon a small piece of cheese.)

CHARLIE. Boy, that's a smart mouse!

BURT. Would you like to race him?

CHARLIE (too smart for that). Aww, I couldn't fit in there.

BURT. No. I'll show you how we do it. (He takes Algernon from maze. To DORIS.) Arrangement 2. (She pulls boards from maze and rearranges them as he speaks. He takes paper and pencil from table, showing them to CHARLIE.) See, Charlie, this arrangement is the same as Algernon's maze. You take this pencil and draw a line from here till you reach the end here, but you mustn't go over any of the printed lines.

CHARLIE. And who gets to the end first, wins?

BURT. Right.

CHARLIE. But I don't like cheese.

BURT. That's all right. We'll just see who wins.

CHARLIE. O. K. (Very determined, he sits, putting pencil at starting place.)

BURT (pulling out stop watch, putting Algernon in maze). Ready, set, go!

CHARLIE (starting, running into trouble immediately). But . . . I can't . . .

BURT. Go back. Find the way.

CHARLIE (nervous). Uh . . . oh . . . here . . . (Algernon's bell rings.) I didn't know mice was so smart.

BURT. Well, this one's had a lot of advantages. (He takes mouse from maze, returns it to cage.)

CHARLIE. Does that mean I won't get the operation? 'Cause I lost?

BURT. No, Charlie, this is just to test your perception . . . to test you. (He puts the cage on top of the maze, nods to DORIS, who pushes the table off.)

CHARLIE. I can do it better . . . 'cause . . . I want that . . . that operation. I want to be smart. I could watch Algernon every day, I could watch and learn how to finish the amazed, even if it takes me a long time, I could do it.

BURT. We'll have to see what Professor Nemur says, Charlie.

(He piles the chairs on the teaching table.

Lights begin to dim down on this area and come up on Strauss' office. BURT pushes the table and chairs off as CHARLIE speaks.)

CHARLIE. 'Cause I ain't afraid of the operation.

I ain't afraid o' nuthin' 'cause I'm very strong and I allus do good and 'sides, I got my rabbit's foot.

(Lights out on him. He goes behind hospital screen. Lights are full up on Strauss' office by now. BURT has returned to the office. We must feel the people in the office have been talking for a while.)

NEMUR. I don't know. I simply don't know.

BURT. He didn't do too well on the tests.

STRAUSS. From a man with a 68 I. Q. you don't expect the responses you'd get from Dr. Salk.

BURT. He passed the physical. The Doctor said he was strong as a horse.

NEMUR. This is not a tryout for the Olympic team. It's a serious scientific experiment.

STRAUSS. I know Charlie is not what you had in mind, Professor, for the first of your new breed of intellectual supermen, but most people of his low mentality are hostile and uncooperative. They're usually dull, apathetic and hard to reach.

BURT. Charlie's good-natured and interested. . . and he's eager to please.

NEMUR. It's not a popularity contest, either. He'll be the first human being ever to have his intelligence increased by surgery.

STRAUSS. Exactly. Where will we find another retarded adult with his tremendous motivation to learn?

BURT. He reads and writes very well for his mental age.

NEMUR. So he reads and he writes. Does he understand? Does he understand what we're going to do to him? What could happen?

STRAUSS. I think he does. We explained very carefully when we interviewed him.

BURT. Please, let's use him, Professor.

NEMUR. Why does it mean so much to you?

BURT. Because he wants it so much. He wants to be smart so badly, you can feel it. If this project has any chance to succeed, it will succeed with Charlie Gordon. (NEMUR scratches his head, pulls his nose, thinking, then decides.)

NEMUR. Maybe you're right. We will use him. (There is a blackout, immediately followed by the sound of a telephone bell ringing. The three men go behind the hospital screen.)

(A spot picks up ALICE at far DL, a telephone in her hand. She is dressed in a housecoat.)

ALICE. Yes? Hello? . . . Oh, Burt. . . . No, I'm just making breakfast. Is it over? . . . How is he? . . . Oh, thank God . . . but can they tell what effect it had on his mind? . . . When do they think they'll know? . . . I see . . . Can I come and see him tonight? . . . Well, will you let me know just as soon as he can have visitors? . . . Thank you, Burt . . . and thank you so much for calling. (She hangs up. Spot goes out.)

(Lights come up on area left of C that has been masked by hospital screen. A NURSE is just removing the screen, revealing CHARLIE in bed, asleep, wearing hospital gown and large head bandage. DR. STRAUSS, wearing a stethoscope, is left of the bed, NEMUR and BURT to the right. The NURSE takes the screen off L. STRAUSS shakes CHARLIE, gently.)

STRAUSS. Charlie . . . Charlie . . .

NEMUR. Is anything the matter?

STRAUSS. The anaesthetic hasn't quite worn off
. . . Charlie . . . (He slaps CHARLIE's face
lightly. CHARLIE groans.) Wake up, Charlie.

CHARLIE (shifting in the bed). Oh . . . oh . . .
when is the . . . operation? (The three men
laugh.)

STRAUSS. It's all over, Charlie. (He takes his
pulse.)

CHARLIE. Over?

STRAUSS. Yes. You've been asleep eighteen
hours. (To others.) Pulse normal.

CHARLIE. You done it while I was sleeping?

STRAUSS. Yes. (Puts stethoscope to ears,
checks CHARLIE's heart.)

CHARLIE. That's a funny thing to do.

STRAUSS. We put you to sleep.

CHARLIE. Oh . . . yeah. That thing on my
nose. Smelled funny. You was all dressed
up like the doctors on the TV.

STRAUSS (to NEMUR). Respiration normal. (He
moves to the foot of the bed, makes notes on
the chart.)

BURT. How do you feel, Charlie?

CHARLIE. I feel fine . . . but -- (Sitting up.) --
Am I smart?

BURT. That's not the way it works. It comes
slowly and you have to work very hard to get
smart.

CHARLIE. Then whut did I need the operation
for?

STRAUSS. So that when you learn something, it
sticks with you. Not the way it was before.

CHARLIE (disappointed). Oh. I thought I'd be
smart right away so I could go back an' show
my frien's at the bakery . . . an' talk smart

things with 'em . . . like how the president makes dumb mistakes an' all. . . . If you're smart, you have lotsa frien's to talk to an' you never get lonely by yourself all the time.

NEMUR. You will, Charlie. In time. Now. See, I've brought you a present. (He takes a small notebook from his pocket and gives it to CHARLIE.)

CHARLIE. Gee, thanks! Whut is it?

NEMUR. It's a notebook. And every day I want you to write in it.

CHARLIE. Write whut?

NEMUR. Well, we'll call it a progress report.

CHARLIE. Pogriss report?

NEMUR (correcting him). Progress report. I want you to put the date on the top and write all the things you feel and think about and remember from the past every day.

CHARLIE. I don't remember so good.

NEMUR. Do the best you can. It's very important. By reading this, we'll know what's going on in your mind.

CHARLIE. I don't know what's goin' on in my mind, so how can you?

NEMUR. Take my word for it. Just do it.

STRAUSS. I'd like to check his motor responses. Do you feel able to walk, Charlie?

CHARLIE. Sure. (He swings his legs over the side of the bed and reaches for a robe at the foot of the bed.) I kin walk good since my operation. (Starts to put robe on, thinks it over.) I could allus walk good. (He puts on the robe, slips into some slippers and stands.)

STRAUSS. Would you take him for a walk down the corridor, Burt?

BURT. Sure, Doctor. Come on, Charlie. (He moves to CHARLIE, gives him his arm. They

start L slowly. CHARLIE turns.)

CHARLIE. Kin I go back to work soon, Doctor?

STRAUSS. You want to?

CHARLIE. Yeah. We have lotsa fun at the bakery. 'N' maybe I could go find my Mom and Dad, too. My Mom allus wanted me to be smart. 'N' maybe they wouldn't send me away no more if they saw how smart I got.

STRAUSS. We'll see. Try to walk now, Charlie.

CHARLIE. Sure. (He starts out leaning a little on BURT.) Burt, after Algernon was operationed, did you have to walk him like this? (They go out L.)

NEMUR. Should we send him back to work?

STRAUSS. I think. In a few days. He seems perfectly fine.

NEMUR. What about the tests? The therapy? The progress reports?

STRAUSS. He'll have to come to the laboratory after work. I can see him for therapy and Burt can continue the tests. Two hours a night should do it . . . and the progress reports he'll do on his own time.

NEMUR. Do you think it's too much activity for him? After all, he's had a serious operation.

STRAUSS. He may be tired for a while but I think, on the whole, it's better for him to remain in his own environment. We mustn't change his life completely . . . all at once. He feels at home at the bakery. His friends are there.

(NURSE enters L, coming to STRAUSS.)

NURSE. Doctor, may I change the bed? (STRAUSS nods "yes," takes the chart from the foot of the bed. The NURSE rolls the bed out L. STRAUSS and NEMUR begin to stroll R.)

NEMUR. Suppose Charlie doesn't want therapy?
Suppose he doesn't want to come for the tests?

STRAUSS. Charlie? Charlie will want to. Besides, we'll pay him. There's money in the budget for that.

NEMUR. I suppose you're right. One thing, though. I think we must warn Charlie not to tell anyone the exact nature of the operation. People might not understand. It might make life even more difficult for him. We don't want his friends acting as though he were some kind of freak.

STRAUSS. Which, of course, is what we may have made him.

NEMUR. That's not a scientific attitude, Doctor.

STRAUSS. Forgive me. I sometimes slip back and think like a human being.

(Lights begin to come up on Charlie's room L, as he enters, wearing pullover shirt or sweater, slacks, shoes and socks. There is a medium-size bandage on his forehead. He carries the notebook Nemur gave him and a pencil. He lies on the bed as the dialogue continues, and tries to think what to write. The lights begin to come down on STRAUSS and NEMUR.)

NEMUR. That's sentimentalizing. What we have done, if it works, will push forward the boundaries of human knowledge . . . will help untold numbers of people.

STRAUSS. Yes, yes, of course. It just seems that a man's life is a more delicate thing to deal with than a mouse's. (Their light goes out. They exit R.)