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Dramatic Publishing

FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

A One-Act Play
by
DAVID ROGERS

Based on the book
by
DANIEL KEYES



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • London, England • Melbourne, Australia

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FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

A One-act Play
For Four Men And One Woman*

CHARACTERS

DR. STRAUSS a young neurosurgeon

PROFESSOR NEMUR his older colleague

ALICE KINNIAN a young, dedicated teacher

BURT SELDON a young laboratory technician

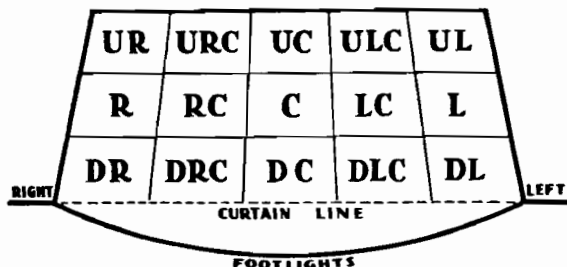
CHARLIE GORDON a retarded young man

TIME: Between March and September of one year.

PLACE: New York City

*The part of Burt may be played by a woman.

CHART OF STAGE POSITIONS



STAGE POSITIONS

Upstage means away from the footlights, downstage means toward the footlights, and right and left are used with reference to the actor as he faces the audience. R means right, L means left, U means up, D means down, C means center, and these abbreviations are used in combination, as: UR for up right, RC for right center, DLC for down left center, etc. A territory designated on the stage refers to a general area, rather than to a given point.

NOTE: Before starting rehearsals, chalk off your stage or rehearsal space as indicated above in the Chart of Stage Positions. Then teach your actors the meanings and positions of these fundamental terms of stage movement by having them walk from one position to another until they are familiar with them. The use of these abbreviated terms in directing the play saves time, speeds up rehearsals, and reduces the amount of explanation the director has to give to his actors.

FLOWERS FOR ALGERNON

SETTING: *The stage is divided into three areas. The area at R is Doctor Strauss' office. A desk, a few chairs. The L area is Charlie's room. A bed or small sofa, a chair, a table. The area C represents different places and is furnished basically with two chairs and two tables. Keep scenery and costumes simple so that the play moves rapidly.*

AT RISE OF CURTAIN: *DOCTOR STRAUSS, a young neurosurgeon, and his colleague, PROFESSOR NEMUR, a somewhat older, testier man, are in Strauss' office with ALICE KINNIAN, a teacher, young, attractive but very serious. They are interviewing her. The C area is now a lab. BURT, a young lab technician and CHARLIE GORDON are seated at a table parallel to the footlights. Upstage of them another table holds a mouse in a cage and a small maze. 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 slacks, a white shirt open at the neck, a shabby, heavy cardigan sweater and a baseball cap. In this unfamiliar atmosphere, he is tense and nervous. If possible, this area should not be lit. If that is not possible, have CHARLIE and BURT turned away from the audience until it is time for their scene to begin.*

ALICE. His name is Charlie Gordon. He's thirty-two...about five foot ten, rather nice-looking, brown hair and eyes—*(Change this physical description to fit actor.)*—and he's...mentally retarded.

STRAUSS. You've brought him with you, Miss Kinnian?

NEMUR. Burt's taken him up to the lab to run the tests.

STRAUSS. Oh. *(To ALICE.)* Do you happen to know his I.Q.?

ALICE. Sixty-eight.

STRAUSS. How did you meet him?

ALICE. He came to this class I teach for retarded adults, Doctor Strauss. The first night he 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, Miss Kinnian. We want him to keep a journal of his reactions.

ALICE. Oh, he can now, Professor Nemur. At about a third grade level. 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. They put him in an institution years ago. This woman who runs a bakery got him out, gave him a job. Exactly what kind of operation is this?

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—my lab technicians call him Algermon—whose intelligence has been increased threefold 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, revitalize 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.

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. 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 provisions have been made to secure the patient's future in that event.

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

STRAUSS. There is inevitably some danger in exploring new fields, Miss Kinnian. But 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 (*nodding*). I hope I'm doing the right thing. (*She goes off at R. If possible, 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, moving to table with mouse and maze on it, and pushes 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 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.

BURT (*indicating*). 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, BURT rings it out of sight.] Then BURT 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 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.

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. Please wait in there. (*CHARLIE exits UC. BURT walks into Strauss' office.*) He's strong as a horse and good-natured and very anxious. I think he's the most likely prospect we've seen.

NEMUR. All right. Charlie Gordon is our man. (*BURT starts toward where CHARLIE has exited.*)

BLACKOUT