

***Flowers for Algernon* Initial Design Concepts**

09.20.10

A Rough Synopsis:

There's SO much to appreciate and dig through in this piece of theatre. The novel is very rich, and Roger's adaptation for the stage does a pretty solid job maintaining the beauty and depth of thought behind this story. For those who haven't read the script, here's a brief overview. Charlie Gordon is a mentally-challenged but reasonably high-functioning man. He becomes the first human trial subject in an experimental surgical procedure that will dramatically increase his intelligence, perhaps to a genius level. One of earliest test subjects in animal trials is Algernon, a mouse that has already undergone the procedure and has displayed phenomenal results. Anyway, he undergoes the surgery and rapidly experiences vast gains in his mental capabilities. He has flashbacks of his childhood from time to time. At first, the memories are dull and unclear, partially a function of his repression of them, partially because of his limited cognition at the time. He was not treated very well by his mother, and eventually he is sent to live with his uncle to protect his sister's well-being. As time goes on, Charlie begins to experience the world and those within it differently. He begins to perceive how horribly his coworkers in a bakery have treated him over the years, ridiculing him mercilessly for their own sport. As he develops mentally, he also grows emotionally. He soon falls in love with his former night-school teacher, Alice Kinnear. He is unable to act on his feelings until she makes the first move, a sign of his emotional immaturity and inexperience. As his mental prowess increases, he begins to grow cold and sheds much of his innocence and originally kind-spirit. Soon things look down for Charlie. Algernon begins to regress and lose much of his capabilities, a dark messenger of Charlie's own eventual decline. His workload and research for a cure or improvement to the procedure quickens and launches into a maddening pace, a desperate attempt to stave off the inevitable. By the end of the show, we learn that Charlie has regressed once more to his original condition.

Overall Design Concepts:

AHHH! We could pull so many, many morsels out of this show and explore each separately with amazing visual and audio design choices. There's a ton to consider, but we'll keep things limited to the core themes at play. So, here we go. One central concept becomes; how does one's experience of the world feel to people of highly varied levels of cognitive ability?

Our main themes:

- The Mistreatment of the Mentally Disabled
- The Implications Past Experience on the Present State of Being
- The Battle Between Intelligence and Emotion
- Alienation and One's Sense of Isolation

Our Motifs:

- Changes in Grammar and Spelling in Charlie's Journals
- Flashbacks

Our Symbols:

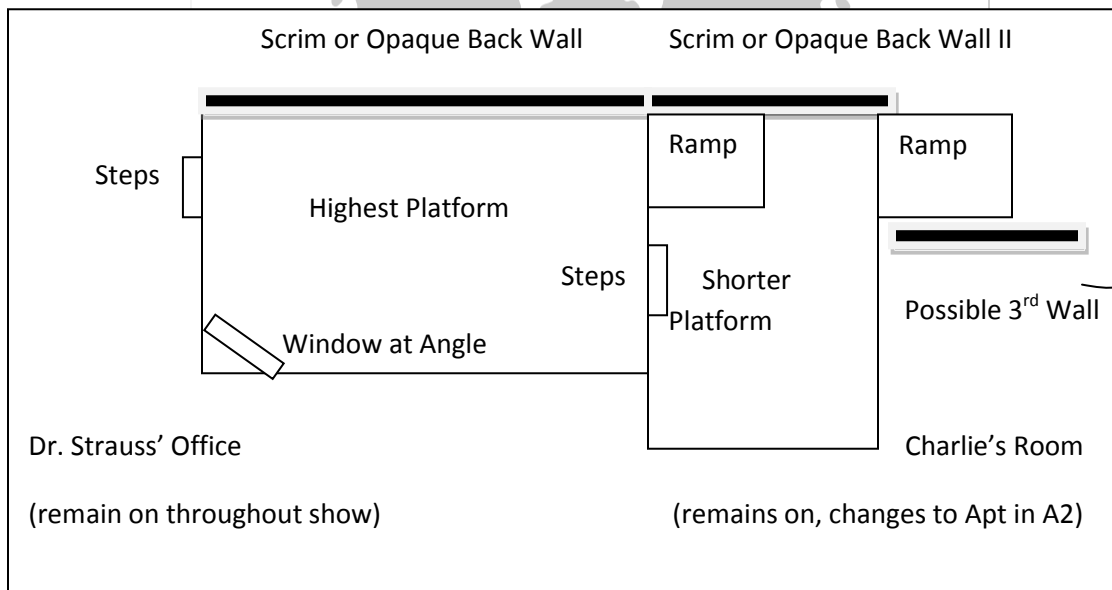
- Algernon
- The Window

So, okay, we've got this list 'o crap. What should we do with it? Well, I want to weave as much of the relevant literary enticements from the novel into our staging of the play. The good news is that our playwright has already done a ton of work for us. He makes use of flashbacks to events from Charlie's childhood, which is great. Algernon is written in as an obsession for Charlie, who increasingly identifies with him as the play rolls on. No brainer. Pretty much all of the themes are written into the show as well, but our staging with accentuate the hell out of them. Some of the items that aren't integrated into the play very well is the symbol of the window and the changes that occur in Charlie's spelling. Grammar we are given via his monologues.

Scenic Design Concepts:

There is one major issue that we have to contend with where the show's scenic and lighting designs are concerned, *everything changes quickly*. The scenes in the show are very, very short. The play's pace is rapid, the staging locales are vast, and the opportunities for long set changes are pretty limited. We'll do what we can. The three things I would like to utilize include:

- Two prominent platforms of differing levels, the center being the tallest.
- Use of US walls on the platforms that
 - o Are made of a scrim and/or
 - o Make use of silhouettes and/or
 - o Allow for back-projection (projection, huh? Here we go. Yeah, yeah, SHUT UP! It's different this time!)
- Use of 1-3 windows on the DS corners of the platforms



Okay, scenic designers, if you feel as though I've mandated a completed set and given you nothing left to do, you're wrong. Within this space, we have room for vast contributions when it comes to how the spaces are filled. For instance, the bakery requires a few additions such as countertops, displays, etc. The same can be said for the laboratory, the hospital, Frank's party, the Gordon's home, the barbershop, Nemur's party, etc. All I need to do in reigning in your awesome ideas is to confirm channels for movement on stage during these various scenes. In other words, I need to consult with you and which side we're saying is the entrance to the bakery, and which portion is the backroom, etc.

A few other things to keep in mind. Part of Charlie's progression is a realization that certain things in the world simply are not the way he remembers them to have been. Case in point, when he finally returns to his childhood home he is amazed that it is dilapidated and dingy. Why? We can argue that 1) it has gone into disrepair following his mother's descent into madness or 2) he could not perceive the condition of the home as a mentally-challenged youth. Let's go with number two, because it fits where I'm going with all of this. We can go further. I would LOVE IT if you could devise ways to alter the condition of many of the settings throughout the show to reflect Charlie's changing ability to perceive his surrounds. What can change in the bakery as he develops from the first to the third scenes in this location? Lighting will help with these new revelations, but some dramatic changes in the set will hit home our progression.

A few last items for scenic design consideration. Strauss' office requires a few pieces of furniture. We'll need a desk with a chair, a guest chair, and an analyst's couch. On the opposite side of the stage (DSR) is Charlie's room and later his apartment. There we'll need a bed, a small table with a chair, and eventually the learning machine.

Lighting Design:

First of all, you need to support the concepts already addressed in just above. We need to use light in a manner that further communicates Charlie's progression in intelligence and later its decline back down again. Secondly, I want lighting to take the reins of communicating the tension between emotion and intelligence. There are some emotional hot-button points that I think we can exploit with (hope this isn't too clichéd) reds, greens, etc. For example, and I don't want to hit people over the head with this, but what if we use reds to communicate Charlie's passion for Alice, which is abruptly dropped with the immergence of flashbacks/hallucinations of his past childlike self. This will make sense after you've read the script. Let me try to give you a full rundown of the things to pay attention to as you read-through the script.

Lighting should attempt to communicate:

- Charlie's intellectual/perceptual growth in the world
 - o Colors (specials) could also be used to identify small areas of locations that reveal things Charlie did not perceive before (a sign that's crooked in the bakery, etc.)
- Color to accentuate the battles between emotion and intelligence
- Specials to isolate Charlie during moments of heightened tension (the concert in the park, etc.)

Projections:

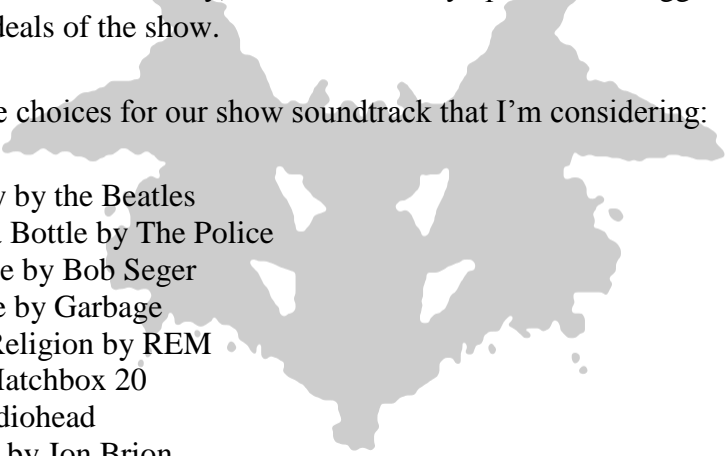
The projections in this show are NOT going to be the incongruent, obnoxious siblings of those from shows past. They will reflect some things more akin to *Brave New World*, which we staged in the fall of 2004. In that show, we used projections across the full stage as coverage for scene changes. We might do something akin to that in this show, only on a smaller surface area. I would envision back-projections onto the scrim surface US walls that back the platforms. These areas could also be used to hide and then reveal the faces of Charlie's parents, which are hidden "memories" to him early in the show. I would like to use project on the SR wall US of Charlie's room as a visual display of his progression in writing. First, he is given a notebook to capture his thoughts. At this stage, projections of his garbled grammar and spelling spill onto the screen, mirroring Charlie's monologues of the content. As time passes, the notebook is replaced with a notebook

computer. We see text rapidly fired onto the screen. I'm also thinking the Rorschach test's inkblots could be candidate projects. During scene changes, we utilize short snippets of songs that capture the themes, feelings, and ideals of the show. We also see projections on our screens that reflect still images of Charlie as he experiences the world through increasingly discerning eyes. I almost feel as though we may need an additional two members of the lighting design staff brought in to facilitate the projection element I'm seeking. Thoughts? Oh, also, some of the projections should be slightly out of focus (reflecting Charlie's diminished cognitive abilities) but then come into focus as his abilities increase.

Sound Design:

There are some wonderful audio design choices we might play with that I've never requested before. Case in point, what if during the concert in the park the ambient sounds of the philharmonic concert become distorted and tangled (reflected also in the lighting) as Charlie's manifestation of his mother's repression of his sexuality appears on stage? You don't know what I mean, but you will once you've read the script. I think you can weave some wonderful ambient sounds throughout the show. The lab, the hospital. Let's build a beautiful soundscape and immerse the audience in it. There's also the soundtrack of the show to cover major scene changes. I have some songs outlined already, but I'm definitely up for some suggestions as well. They just need to fit the themes and ideals of the show.

Here are a few of the choices for our show soundtrack that I'm considering:



- Elenor Rigby by the Beatles
- Message in a Bottle by The Police
- Turn the Page by Bob Seger
- Happy Home by Garbage
- Losing My Religion by REM
- Unwell by Matchbox 20
- Creep by Radiohead
- Little Person by Jon Brion
- Mad World by Gary Jules
- Let Down by Radiohead

Property Design:

I hope you realize the significance of your role. It's not minor. People see your choice quite clearly and characters *use* your choices. We need to have discussions about the items you pull, find, purchase. They need to speak volumes about our world and the characters that populate it. I've got a few exercises I will be running with our actors using props. They will pay special attention as never before to consideration of how the items you chose will be used, perceived, and treated. We'll have fun with this. More to come.