

CHARM

BY PHILIP
DAWKINS

INSPIRED BY
MISS GLORIA ALLEN



DRAMATISTS
PLAY SERVICE
INC.

*Dedicated to and inspired by the work of Miss Gloria Allen
And her Babies*

And Andrew Burden Swanson

CHARM was originally produced by Northlight Theatre (BJ Jones, Artistic Director; Timothy J. Evans, Executive Director) in Chicago, Illinois, on October 14, 2015. It was directed BJ Jones, the costume design was by Izumi Inaba, the lighting design was by JR Lederle, the sound design was by Lindsay Jones, the dramaturg was Polly Hubbard, and the stage manager was Jonathan Nook. The cast was as follows:

MAMA Dexter Zollicoffer
D Elizabeth Ledo
ARIELA Monica Orozco
JONELLE Armand Fields
VICTORIA Brittneylove Smith
DONNIE Julian Parker
BETA Namir Smallwood
LADY/EMILY POST Matthew Sherbach
LOGAN Awate Serequeberhan

CHARM was developed at the Orchard Project (Ari Edelson, Artistic Director; Dean Strober, Executive Director) in Saratoga Springs, New York.

CHARM premiered Off-Broadway at MCC Theater (Robert LuPone, Bernard Telsey, and William Cantler, Co-Artistic Directors; Blake West, Executive Director) on September 18, 2017. It was directed by Will Davis, the set design was by Arnulfo Maldonado, the costume design was by Oana Botez, the lighting design was by Ben Stanton, the sound design was by Palmer Hefferan, and the production stage manager was Erin Gioia Albrecht. The cast was as follows:

MAMA	Sandra Caldwell
D	Kelli Simpkins
ARIELA	Hailie Sahar
JONELLE	Jorja Brown
VICTORIA	Lauren F. Walker
DONNIE	Michael David Baldwin
BETA	Marquise Vilson
LADY/EMILY POST	Marky Irene Diven
LOGAN	Michael Lorz

INTRODUCE YOURSELVES, PLEASE (Cast of Characters)

MAMA DARLEENA ANDREWS. 67. African American. Trans woman. Pronoun: She. A former nurse, Chicago born and raised. She is of a certain era now long gone. She somehow manages to be classy and charming even in six-inch gator-skin heels. She's got class and she's got sass, both in equal proportions. And opinions, she's got those too. She's not afraid to tell it how she sees it. Retired now, she could use a little community of her own, and she thinks the tacky, uncouth kids at the Center could benefit quite nicely from her company.

D. Late 30s. Any ethnicity. Gender-nonconforming, nonbinary, or genderqueer. Pronoun: They. The administrator of Youth Programs at the Center. D's gender assignment at birth was female. They care deeply about the kids at the Center, but are also swamped down in the politics of the organization. D is super vocabularied, highly studied and grad-schooled. A social worker steeped in queer theory and good intentions.

ARIELA. 33. Puerto Rican American. Trans woman. Pronoun: She. She is a stunning woman. What she lacks in conventional good taste, she makes up for in natural beauty. No high school education, Ariela has spent most of her life turning tricks on the streets of Boystown, and she knows how to take care of herself. A definite chip on her shoulder about being lumped into this group with so many kids, still she attends Mama's Charm Class voluntarily, mostly to see Mama. She has a vicious tongue, and don't you dare cross her. There's a reason she's still alive after more than twenty years on the street. She survives. She's recently made an active decision to turn her life around, and is in the process of getting out of The Life, and making healthier choices.

JONELLE. (*Pronounced "John L."*) 19. Any ethnicity, not white. Trans woman, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, or genderqueer. Pronoun: She. Jonelle, though assigned "male" at birth, is more comfortable expressing herself with feminine terms

and clothing (which she wears quite well). She's experimenting with her gender expression, and hasn't yet landed on any over another, if in fact she plans to at all. She's smart—sometimes flaunts it—and is currently finishing her first year at a community college in Uptown. Dry, sardonic, already over it. She comes from a rough background, but finally found her way into a supportive foster home that helped her get out of a bad situation. Now her life is on track, but she can “turn street” at the drop of a hat, and gladly. Over the course of this play, she'll start to discover that she's a natural nurturer/caregiver.

VICTORIA. 23. African American. Heterosexual, cisgender woman.

Pronoun: She. Experiencing homelessness. Mother of two young kids who live with her grandma. She's kind, gregarious, energetic, and generous even though she has nothing. In a relationship with her babydaddy, Donnie. She isn't bright, but she's loyal and a hard worker. Victoria is overweight and has trouble with hygiene. Victoria will always put other people's needs before her own, to a fault.

DONNIE. 21. African American. “Mostly” heterosexual, cisgender man. Pronoun: He. Experiencing homelessness. Victoria's babydaddy. He has no education or job and no desire to change his situation. Defensive and overly sensitive, he can dish it out but can't take it. Mostly, he dishes it out to Victoria. Donnie is threatened by anyone he perceives is trying to show him up. Likes to clown around.

BETA. 20ish. African American. Male-identified; nobody knows that he is a trans man. Pronoun: He. A gangbanger. Thuglife from head to toe. Dresses all in black with dark sunglasses a permanent fixture on his face. He's quiet and mysterious, the last flame in a scorched field. A dark mystery to most people. His intentions for coming to Charm are unclear, but his history of violence and his association with danger are well known to everyone.

LADY. Early 20s. Any ethnicity. Trans woman, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, or genderqueer. Pronoun: She. Assigned a male gender

at birth, Lady is having a really hard time expressing her gender to the world successfully. Her long hair is confounded by the fact that she is going rather quickly and badly bald on top in a typically “male” way. She’s not conventionally attractive, and has trouble sifting through the Goodwill bin to find something that helps her body look remotely feminine. Lady is a person living with autism as well as other undiagnosed illnesses. She has run away from her assisted-living situation in another state to come live in some awful, public housing for people with mental disabilities on the far West Side of Chicago. She has no friends, no family, and nowhere to go outside of her public housing and the Center.

LOGAN. 18. Any ethnicity. Cisgender gay man, but very androgynous. Pronoun: He. A pretty kid. Comes from money and privilege and reeks of it. He’s been told he is smart. A lot. He’s lacking in charm in his own myopic way, but he recognizes on some inexplicable level that he belongs in Mama’s Charm School. At the same time, there’s almost nowhere he could possibly be more out of place.

ON CASTING

The trans and gender-nonconforming characters *must* be played by trans and gender-nonconforming actors or people of trans experience. The cisgender roles may be played by cisgender people, or by trans and gender-nonconforming actors comfortable with playing the gender of the characters.

SETTING

Chicago, 2014.

In and around “The Center,” a shelter and community safe space for the queer community.

NOTES

Though the play is inspired by the work of Miss Gloria Allen at the Center on Halsted in Chicago, all characters including Miss Darlin are fictional, as is the place I have designated as “The Center.” Though the world the characters inhabit is real, they are in no way meant to represent any person, living or dead. Any fault in logic, accuracy, or etiquette is squarely mine, and I hope I can ask you to “Excuse me, please.”

The * indicates a quick shift in time and sometimes space.

Indented dialogue indicates a sort of rolling dialogue, continuous or under the previous line, mumbled or hollered against an ongoing flow of verbal acrobatics. Indented lines are not necessarily the lines that should be given focus at the moment, or even lines that should be waited on before beginning the next line. However, they exist as part of the aural architecture of the scene and should be there strong and true to hold it up.

/ indicates the beginning of the next speaker’s line.

CHARM

ACT ONE

Introductions, Greetings & Farewells

Lights up on Mama Darlin. She is 67 years old, immaculately dressed in a classic suit-skirt ensemble and heels. She's just this side of pushing the colors and accessories, and her make-up belongs on someone maybe twenty years her junior, but she's wearing it well and—more importantly—wearing it proud. Her white-gloved hands folded politely in front of her, she addresses us, her guests.

MAMA. Good Evening.

Pauses. She'll wait for a response. Once she gets it:

Oh thank you, yes good evening. I'm so glad to see all of you here tonight. You. Look. *Beautiful.*

My name is Miss Darleena Andrews. You may call me Miss Andrews. You may call me Miss Darleena. But most people just call me Mama Darlin. And I like that.

I am so lookin' forward to getting to know each and every one of you. *But* before we get started, there is one thing I need to make perfectly clear and that is, I have zero interest in lookin' at your butt crack. So, young men, I want you to look down at your lap, if you would for me please. *If* you are wearin' pants with a waistband that is somewhere down around your knees, I want you to stand up.

She waits a hot second, then with teacher voice:

Stand Up! Ladies, do me a favor, look at the man seated beside you. If you can see his underpants, make him stand up. Ooo, and ladies, you too. If you got your nekkid behind hangin' out the back of your pants, nobody wants to see that, either. And I'll tell you now, the people on the street who *do* want to see that are not the people you

want seein' it. So, do yourselves a favor and *stand up*. Now, grab your pants and lift them *alllll the way* up ABOVE your waist. For those of you who need help locatin' your waist, it is that area just below your bellybutton. I should see *no* Organ Trail coming up from your fly. Once you have pulled your pants *allllll* the way up, *tighten* that belt. Real tight. And be seated.

There. Don't you feel like a whole new you? Instead of some ho you knew?

Alright. Now *that's* out of the way,
Welcome to Charm!

*

D and Mama in the classroom. D, in the middle of an instructional talk to Mama, goes about the room, pulling out chairs that are sloppily stacked in the corner, picking up some food wrappers left in the room, opening windows, etc.

D. Try to get them to sign in if you can. Even if they only poke their head in. We need to show we have “numbers,” you know? God forbid we provide a service that's only helpful to one person. It has to be a whole group or no one at all.

Sorry, I can preach.

MAMA. You go right ahead.

D. So, this is the room. It's a dump, I know, but if your group takes off—*when* your group takes off—we can see about moving you to a bigger space. This room can get a little hot with a bunch of people in here. But I can bring in some electric fans if you find that it's—You know what? I'll just do that. Oh, and these chairs are heavier than they look, Miss Darleen. So, let me know how you want the room set up each week, and I'll have Maintenance do it, alright? And remind me to grab you some markers for the whiteboard. Just don't let the youth get a hold of them. Markers have a way of disappearing up their noses. God, it's already getting hot in here, isn't it?

MAMA. I thought maybe I was having a hot flash.

D. You and me both, sister.

MAMA. Amen?

D. (*Looking round the room.*) What else, what else?

The lights suddenly go out.

MAMA. Uh / oh.

D. Ah, God, *This room!* (*Crossing to the back corner and waving their arms around.*) The lights are on motion sensors and the motion sensors are on meth, apparently. You practically have to—

Lights come on.

There we go. You must feel like we're shoving you in a supply closet.

MAMA. I think it's charming.

D. Well, I'm glad you think so, Miss Darleen.

MAMA. Thank you. It's Darleena.

D. I'm sorry?

MAMA. My name is Darleena. You were saying Darleen.

D. Oh my God, Darleena, I'm so sorry.

MAMA. Honey, that's alright.

D. No, it's terrible. I'm sor—Names are / so—

MAMA. It's *fine*. Tell you the truth, honey, I don't always hear so good. I wasn't sure you were saying it wrong until we got somewhere quiet. Then I could hear you were wrong.

D. Oh.

Well, thank you for correcting me. Names have power. Positive *and* negative. I really believe that.

MAMA. Mm-hm.

D. I mean, when I chose "D" as my name, I had no idea *how* much power I was claiming. People ask me what D stands for, I tell them "It stands for *me*." So believe me, Darleena, I *appreciate* the power of names. You know?

Beat.

MAMA. I think D is a lovely name.

D. Can I just say—again—thank you? For volunteering your time and your energy and, you know, your *fierceness*.

Mama's lost on that. D reins it in.

I think Charm School is a very interesting idea, and most of all, I

think the youth will get a lot out of just knowing you. They don't have a lot of older trans role models—I mean, senior, um—
MAMA. Old trannies?

Whoa, that's a loaded word.

D. Oh. That's...not a word that we use. In here.

MAMA. Tranny?

D. *No.* It's...derogatory.

MAMA. Honey, back in my day, “tranny” was about the nicest thing anyone ever called me. See, now, we've already learned something from each other. That's a good start.

D. Oh and speaking of learning, do you think you could write me up something about your projected outcomes? Nothing fancy, just a short paragraph I can show to the board so they understand what you hope to accomplish for the group.

MAMA. For Charm? I'll need more than a paragraph, alright now!

D. (*Laughs with Mama.*) Yes, exactly. (*Then serious.*) But if you could keep it to a paragraph.

MAMA. I'll do my best.

D. Oh and I know you had asked if the Center might be able to provide some food for the youth?

MAMA. We did, / yes.

D. Right, so, in the past when we've offered programs with food, it's tended to bring in a kind of—uh—a hostile element. Some of the youth who show up pretend to be allies for the free food, but back on the street, they're just haters. The trans youth recognize the hater youth from the street, and the space starts to feel unsafe.—I don't think you'll have a problem with *any* of them. But if you do, I want you to come to me immediately. We have a zero-tolerance policy here when it comes to violence. One bad apple, you know?

MAMA. Oh, there's no such thing as a bad apple. Not when they're kids. They might cut up and act a fool, but all they need is some discipline and some manners.

D. Manners?

MAMA. Charm.

D. (*Beat.*) You do know that most of these kids are homeless, right?
MAMA. Miss D, everybody needs Charm.

*

Loud, Loud, LOUD music. Nicki, Beyoncé, Lupe, Le1f, Zebra Katz... Any of it and all of it. It fills the room as the kids spill into it like a great chaotic flood of youth, rebellion, and I-don't-give-a-fucktivity. They invade the space, dancing, singing, voguing, fixing their makeup, yelling at each other. Your grandmother would say they look like prostitutes. You might respond that some of them are. It's a new teacher's worst nightmare of a class. At the same time that they invade the space, they also create it, hauling out the tables and chairs, forming an environment the way they want it. Let chaos reign. All of what follows, happening sorta all at once and all over the place.

Throughout all of the below, Lady sits at the table in her own world, sifting through her Magic: The Gathering cards. She lays them out in front of her in a specific order that makes sense only to her, muttering a constant stream of thought, barely audible and running beneath all of the above. Lady is somewhere on the Autism spectrum, and has specific mental health needs that are not being treated. This results in an inability to read social cues or know when to stop talking or how to engage in the topic being discussed rather than the topic she wishes were being discussed. No matter the chaos around her in this moment, she continues her little rant to herself. It doesn't matter if she doesn't finish it before she's cut off, she just goes until she's forced to stop. (See page 18 for the full text of the rant.)

Jonelle enters with her small clutch purse and carrying school books, as she assaults Ariela, who is already seated and brushing her hair out.

JONELLE. Hey Ariela, you lookin' good. You had work undone?

ARIELA. Lick my clit, you ugly bitch.

JONELLE. Luv you too, gurl.

ARIELA. Thinks she better than me.

Ariela pulls a handheld battery-operated fan from her purse and

CHARM

by Philip Dawkins

2 trans w, 1 trans m, 1 cis w, 2 cis m, 3 genderqueer

When Mama Darleena Andrews—a 67-year-old, black, transgender woman—takes it upon herself to teach an etiquette class at Chicago’s LGBTQ community center, the idealistic teachings of Emily Post clash with the very real life challenges of identity, poverty, and prejudice faced by her students. Inspired by the true story of Miss Gloria Allen and her work at Chicago’s Center on Halsted, *CHARM* asks—how do we lift each other up when the world wants to tear us down?

“CHARM is an uplifting LGTBQ fairy tale... [an] urgent dialogue about identification and acceptance. ...CHARM is a celebration, a story rooted in reality but touched with a kind of optimist fantasy: It is attempting to create the world it wants us to live in.”
—New York Magazine

“...[a] funny, heart-warming play... [a] bona-fide charmer... The playwright’s command of language puts a nice kick in his dialogue.” —Variety

“...bold and tender... CHARM is inspired by the real-life work of Miss Gloria Allen, but it is richer and more complex than mere homage. Dawkins...juggle[s] a colorful array of characters with skill...”
—Time Out New York

“[CHARM] is that rare play that is simultaneously funny, smart, and emotionally gripping... Dawkins leaves us swimming in crucially relevant questions: ...at what point does etiquette become less about fostering comfort and respect, and more about enforcing an exclusionary class system? ...CHARM exercises our brains, [hearts], and our funny bones, resulting in a very satisfying night at the theater.” —TheaterMania.com

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