

Plays for Young Audiences

A PARTNERSHIP OF SEATTLE CHILDREN'S THEATRE AND CHILDREN'S THEATRE COMPANY - MINNEAPOLIS

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Akeelah and the Bee

By
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Based on the Book by
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Akeelah and the Bee was first presented by the Children's Theatre Company in the 2015-16 season.

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Characters:

- Akeelah
- Gail
- Reggie
- Dr. Larabee
- Georgia
- Batty Ruth
- Drunk Willie
- J.T.
- Dylan
- Javier
- Dylan's Dad
- Izzy
- Ratchet Rhonda
- Trish
- Principal
- DJ Rule
- Judge
- TV Announcer
- Chucky
- Pronouncer
- Snorting Girl
- Crying Girl
- Foxy Fay
- Horse Girl
- Mohawk Girl

Suggested Doubling:

- Akeelah
- Gail
- Reggie
- Dr. Larabee
- Georgia
- Batty Ruth
- Drunk Willie/Principal
- J.T./DJ Rule/Judge/TV Announcer
- Dylan
- Javier/Chucky
- Dylan's Dad/Pronouncer
- Izzy/Snorting Girl/Crying Girl
- Ratchet Rhonda/Foxy Fay
- Trish/Horse Girl/Mohawk Girl

AKEELAH & THE BEE

AKEELAH'S BEDROOM - LATE NIGHT - MAY

In the distance, a police bubble light rotates, illuminating the space. Sound of gunfire, sirens. Rap music underscores. Akeelah wakes screaming, terrified.

AKEELAH

No, please. Oh, God. Mama? Mama? REGGIE!

Her mother, GAIL, runs in wearing hospital scrubs, car keys in hand, purse strapped across her chest. She turns on the bedside lamp, grabs up Akeelah to calm her.

GAIL

It's okay, baby. You're okay. Mama's here.

AKEELAH

No, no...Are they still shooting? I want my daddy. I want...

GAIL

Honey...honey, it's okay. They're not shooting on this block.

REGGIE, (thuggishly dressed) ambles in. Gail frowns, irritated with him.

GAIL

Didn't I tell you to be in this house before I leave for work, that I didn't want your sister here by herself?

REGGIE

Yeah, and you haven't left yet. I'm here now so...

GAIL

Boy, you really better be glad I can't afford to be late.

REGGIE

So you need me to walk you to your car or not?

GAIL

I'll be alright. You stay here with our sister. I'll call you two on my first break. And Reggie you better be here to answer that phone. See you all in the morning. I love you.

Gail exits. Reggie crosses to the window. Akeelah goes ballistic.

AKEELAH

(Grabbing for him)
NO REGGIE, GET OUT OF THAT
WINDOW! THEY MAY START
SHOOTING AGAIN.

REGGIE

Akeelah. Akeelah. Nobody's shooting. It's
over girl.

AKEELAH

I need... I need Daddy's hat.

REGGIE

(Retrieving the hat)

I got it.

She grabs it out of his hands. Once on, she calms some.

AKEELAH

You're not going anywhere, are you? Promise me, Reggie, you're not going to sneak out.

REGGIE

(He grabs a pillow, makes himself comfortable on the floor)

I'm not. Sibling code, I'ma stay right here on this floor till you fall asleep. Go 'head, turn
off the light.

*Akeelah turns off the bedside lamp. Still the bubble light rotating
illuminates the space. A beat, sirens in the distance.*

AKEELAH

(She waits, no response from Reggie)

Ever wish, Reggie, you and me could live somewhere else, even be somebody else? I
would be like some kinda superhero girl who wasn't afraid of nothing and you could be....

REGGIE

Chill, like you need to do. Go to sleep girl, wouldya?

AKEELAH

But Reggie if you could, wouldn't you wanna live in a utopia? Isn't that a great word? Utopia*

REGGIE

Yeah, I guess if I knew what it meant.

AKEELAH

Means some place perfect. No guns, everybody has so much money that they'd never rob anybody, and you could eat all day long some really good food like daddy makes.... used to make....

REGGIE

New address, same problems, Kee. Why don't you do that thing, the one you used to do with dad to calm down? Spelling them words...tran...what was it?

AKEELAH

Tranquil. T-R-A-N-Q-U-I-L. Serenity. S-E-R-E-N-I-T-Y..

REGGIE

It's working for me. I'm 'bout to catch some z's. You okay?

AKEELAH

Yeah... I guess.

But she's anything but. Lights shift.

ATMORNING LIGHT

We get to experience Akeelah's 709 neighborhood in all of its chaos. At present, there's a loud cacophony of city sound including distant Chicago El trains rumbling on the tracks.

GEORGIA

AKEELAH, WHAT'S TAKING YOU SO LONG? AKEE-LAH?

GAIL'S VOICE

WHO ATE UP ALL THE DANG
COOKIES WITHOUT EVEN ASKING?

GEORGIA

I SWEAR I'M LEAVING YOU.
AKEELAH?

Akeelah moves to the railing, calls down.

AKEELAH

I'm coming. Could everybody stop screaming?

BATTY RUTH, 70'ISH, a woman with elaborately coiffed hair, (a wig-wearing woman who always looks either dressed for church or for an upscale nightclub), steps onto her porch.

BATTY RUTH

(Yelling out)

Who's going to join me for choir this morning? Bible says make a loud and joyful noise. Come on babies, let's start the day singing His praises. *(Waits a beat; no one comes)* Okay, then, I'll start us off.

(Sings loudly)

This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine

GEORGIA

OKAY, AKEELAH, I'M ON MY WAY
DOWN.

BATTY RUTH

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it
shine*

AKEELAH

I'm coming. Just gotta get my backpack.

BATTY RUTH

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it
shine/Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

From the basement apartment, DRUNK WILLIE, 70'ISH, the Super, emerges, wearing his tool belt and humorously using a broom to chase flies. At some point, takes a swig from his ever-present flask.

DRUNK WILLIE

Where are all these dang flies coming from? Okay, so who needs something fixed this morning? Super Willie raring to go.

BATTY RUTH

(Yells down at Willie)

Where you need to go is back in that nasty apartment of yours and sleep it off, cause everybody know you ain't gon' fix nothing. And why don't you shave that weed patch growing on your face, you old drunkard.

DRUNK WILLIE

(Takes a swig from his flask)

Your lips may be moving but I sho can't hear what they sayin!

And to drown her out, Drunk Willie turns up the volume on his huge, dated boom-box and we hear the sound of R&B. He dances old school.

DRUNK WILLIE

Aw, baby....

ALL

TURN THAT OFF, DRUNK WILLIE!

Batty Ruth sings even louder.

GEORGIA
COME ON AKEELAH.

GAIL
AKEELAH, HAVE YOU LEFT YET?

IZZY, 11, a girl terrified of her own shadow, enters carrying huge vegetable crates.

DRUNK WILLIE

Hey you? Ever heard of good morning?

(Izzy, looks like she's going to say something)

Chile, if you gon' stay around here, you better learn to be heard.

Izzy quickly exits. Drunk Willie back to dancing. JT, 20'ish (very tatted and very buff) emerges scowling. He angrily yells toward Batty Ruth's apartment.

JT

What the...don't ya'll know I'm trying to sleep! Man, turn that music down.

(Yelling up toward Batty Ruth)

And why can't you shut up that singing ev'ry morning?

DRUNK WILLIE

Who you telling to shut up? That ain't no way to talk to a woman.

JT

Ya'll gon' respect me today!

(as he exits inside)

Yeah, I got somethin for you.

GEORGIA

(Yelling down)

Mr. Willie, Mama wanna know when you're going to fix the window? It's been a month now.

DRUNK WILLIE

I'm gettin to it. I'm gettin to it. Yes suh.

Reggie dashes out at the same time as Akeelah.

REGGIE

Girl, why you clothes look like that? Why didn't you hit that skirt with an iron?

AKEELAH

Because I'm late.

GAIL O.S

Akeelah, tell Mr. Willie the dang sink is backing up again!

WILLIE
Yes suh. I'm gettin to it.

GAIL
REGGIE?

REGGIE
I'm out.

Reggie disappears down into JT's apartment while...

GEORGIA
AKEELAH COME ON!

Georgia passes Batty Ruth's stairwell, quickens her step - she knows what's coming.

BATTY RUTH
Oh, Georgia. Wait just a minute. I keep after you and Akeelah 'bout joining my children's choir. I don't have anybody regular yet but God promised me more are coming.

GEORGIA
I don't know Miss Ruth, school keeps us pretty busy.

BATTY RUTH
But we could do practice before and after school and with summer coming...

GEORGIA
Yes, mam. But I better go so Akeelah and I can help the little kids cross the street.

BATTY RUTH
(Calling after her)
Make sure to ask that hurt looking child to walk with ya'll, the little Asian one. Half the time she don't look like she belong to nobody. She and her mama run into that store like scared rabbits and then the mama don't come out till she puts up her closed sign. Shoot, maybe I can get her to join my choir.

Before Georgia can respond, the sudden ear-splitting sound of thumping hip-hop music coming from JT's apartment.

BATTY RUTH
...IF THAT BOY DON'T TURN DOWN THAT MUSIC.

JT
(Appears, postures up to Batty Ruth)
Now what you gon' do?

BATTY RUTH

Boy wait till I get my bat.

Georgia escapes as Batty Ruth exits to look inside for her bat. More collision of sound - sirens, Willie's music. JT's music. It's deafening. Akeelah descends.

AKEELAH

Why does everybody have to be so loud? GOD, I HATE LIVING HERE!

BATTY RUTH

(Reappears with her bat)

I FOUND MY BAT, NOW START SOME CRAP! Oh, Akeelah, just the person...

AKEELAH

Yes mam. God every day, all day. Hallelujah! Thank you Jesus!

And Akeelah makes her escape, joins Georgia in the "yard." Izzy approaches, steals hopeful glances in their direction. Georgia whispers to Akeelah.

GEORGIA

Batty Ruth said we should let her walk to school with us being she's new around here.

(Turns to Izzy)

Do you wanna walk with us?

Izzy is about to say something but can't quite get it out. Akeelah frowns, runs ahead.

GEORGIA

Akeelah? Wait up?

(Apologetically to Izzy)

Sorry, about that. Akeelah and me, we stay in a hurry. I don't know why, 'cause neither one of us really like school. What about you?

(Izzy timidly shrugs, not making eye contact)

Well, o-kay! Nice talkin to you again.

GEORGIA

(Realizing Akeelah's exited)

For real, Akeelah?! You leaving me behind after I waited on you all morning.

Georgia runs to catch up with Akeelah as school "first bell" rings.

SOUTHSIDE SCHOOL

Where Akeelah hurriedly hides her Daddy hat before her biggest tormentor, RACHET RHONDA, 13, discovers her. Too late.

RACHET RHONDA

Well, if it ain't the Brainiac. Hand it over and it better be good today.

Akeelah hands over several mini cookie packs.

RACHET RHONDA

That's all you got? These stupid cookies again? Should still give you a beat down for making us do this stupid spelling bee.

AKEELAH

But I said I didn't wanna do it. I don't even like spelling.

(Ratchet Rhonda shoves Akeelah down)

Why don't you leave me alone sometime!

RACHET RHONDA

Why don't you make me?

(Discovers the "Daddy" hat)

So you call yourself trying to hide your man hat today, huh?

AKEELAH

Give it back. I mean please give it back.

Georgia joins them out of breath as Rhonda holds the hat out of reach.

GEORGIA

Hey, leave her alone, Ratchet Rhonda, 'less you ready to fight us both.

RACHET RHONDA

Girl, who you calling ratchet?

Principal Welch enters. Rhonda sees him first, dramatically grabs her face, and pretends Akeelah just slapped her.

RACHET RHONDA

Ouch, girl! What you hit me for? That hurt.

GEORGIA

Rhonda, quit lying, ain't nobody hit you. Not yet with your ratchet self.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

What's going on here?

RACHET RHONDA

Akeelah started it. She was calling me stupid and I wasn't doing nuttin to her.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Why, Akeelah? Today of all days you fighting again! Rhonda, get to the auditorium.
(Rhonda smirks, runs off laughing)

AKEELAH

By the way, I thought about it and I cain't do that spelling bee thang today.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Well, it's up to you. Of course I can always call your mother and get her opinion.

AKEELAH

Principal Welch, please, they'll make fun of me the rest of the day.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Who? Give me their names and I will make sure...

AKEELAH

Forget it. Just don't expect me to spell good.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

I don't know what gets in you, Akeelah. Let's go.

Applause and rowdiness and we're thrust in the throes of the

SOUTHSIDE SCHOOL SPELLING BEE

Principal Welch acts as the spelling bee judge. He pounds his gavel to control the rowdiness. Akeelah shrinks in this environment. CHUCKY, 12, (played by the same person who plays Javier) is already at the mic singing and clowning.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Let's settle down. Settle down now. Chucky, your word is grovel.

Clowning, Chucky thumps the mic, causing feedback. The kids howl.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Chucky, let's try and keep it together. Only a few more minutes. Your word is grovel.

CHUCKY

Like the rocks in a driveway?

PRINCIPAL WELCH

No gravel. Like get down on your knees and...

CHUCKY

(Dramatically drops to his knees)

Like help me, help me, please! PLEASE!

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Chucky, get up from there. Show some respect for yourself and what we're trying to accomplish here.

CHUCKY

Okay, okay. Grovel. G-R-A-V-E-L.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Close. But gravel is spelled with an "o" not with an "A"!

The kids hoot and holler. Principal Welch pounds the gavel.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Akeelah, your turn.

Akeelah begrudgingly moves to the mic. Georgia claps, the only one to do so.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Only two contestants left in our first, but hopefully not our last, annual school spelling bee. Akeelah, please move a little quicker.

Akeelah adjusts the microphone. Microphone feedback. Laughter.

Akeelah horrified, this is her worst nightmare - being laughed at.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

ALL RIGHT WHO WANTS DETENTION? Now the winner today will represent Southside at the District Bee next month, sponsored by the Chicago Tribune! The newspaper. Our school will finally have some much needed press, some good press. Isn't this all so exciting?

(The kids react - no!!!!)

So Akeelah... your next word is...Your word is doubtful.

GEORGIA

Whoo-hoo, easy greasy. Girl you can do it, nuttin to it!

RACHET RHONDA

(Chanting, getting all involved)

She's so whack/ the bah, bah, Brainiac

OTHER KIDS

She's so whack/ the bah, bah, Brainiac. She's so whack/ the bah, bah, Brainiac.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

I said quiet, Southside! QUIET!

AKEELAH

(Spells while tapping her thigh)

D-O-U-

Akeelah hesitates, deciding if she should misspell it just to get this over with. Georgia senses what Akeelah is about to do.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Please speak up, Akeelah! We can barely hear you.

GEORGIA

Akeelah, don't be trippin now. Do you, girl!

AKEELAH

(Trigger-quick)

B-T-F-U-L. Doubtful!

Georgia hoots. Tepid response from everyone else. Akeelah looks down, hurries back to her seat, avoiding eye contact.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Very good, Akeelah. Rhonda, let's go, your turn. Isn't this thrilling? Can you believe we're down to just the two of you?

Rhonda dances up to the mic. Loud clapping and hoots from the student body as Rhonda fist bumps the air, does her own little rap and dance...

RACHET RHONDA

Yeahhh, ya'll!/They call me Ratchet Rhonda/Not chimichanga/ I'll beat you down, that's my mantra/ clap an' I'll spell double-entendre! D-O...

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Rhonda! Rhonda! Please! This is a spelling bee, not a rap concert.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Your word is attitude.

RACHET RHONDA

Y'all must just want me to win. I am Miss Attitude. A-T-A-yea atta -T-U-E-D. At-tit-tude!
So bow down 'cause I'm right...

(Does a little triumphant dance)

I know I'm right. I am so good an' right!

PRINCIPAL WELCH

You are so good and wrong, Rhonda! Attitude is spelled with two 'T's' and the 'E' comes after the 'D'. I'm sorry. That means Akeelah if you get this next word correct...

RACHET RHONDA

Who cares about these stupid words nobody uses? Akeelah always gotta show off. I'm glad this excrement is over. And I can spell it. S-H-I...

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Rhonda, spell another letter and you're looking at double detention. Now return to your seat. Akeelah?

(Rhonda stomps over to her seat, pouts)

Akeelah, if you get this next word correct you'll be the winner. Your word is dictator.

AKEELAH

(Taps her thigh, again spells trigger-quick)

D-I-C-T-A-T-O-R! Am I done now?

RHONDA

(Chanting louder, crueler)

What's the fuss/She think she better than us!

KIDS

What's the fuss/She think she better than us! What's the fuss/She think she better than us!

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Southside, settle down. I know you're excited for our winner Akeelah...

But it's a free for all. More chanting. More mayhem.

RACHET RHONDA/KIDS

She's so whack/ the bah, bah, Brainiac...she's so whack...

*Akeelah frozen in place until, from the back, the distinguished DR.
LARABEE, 50'ISH, stands, then over the chants.*

DR. LARABEE

Young lady, spell prestidigitation.

He speaks with such command, the kids actually quiet enough to be curious.

RHONDA

Presdi...Nobody can spell that. I don't care if they are a Brainiac.

Chucky gives Rhonda a high five on that.

DR. LARABEE

Are you unable to spell it?

AKEELAH

(Akeelah hesitates but then takes the challenge, again tapping the letters out on her thigh)

P-R-E-S-T-I-

PRINCIPAL WELCH

We can't quite hear you Akeelah. Please speak up.

AKEELAH

D-I-G-I-T-A-T-I-O-N.

DR. LARABEE

Correct.

Georgia lets out a loud whoop. Other kids gasp.

DR. LARABEE

Ambidextrous.

AKEELAH

A-M-B-I-D-E-X-T-R-O-U-S...

CHUCKY

DANNNNGGGGGG!

DR. LARABEE

Correct. Pterodactyl.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Josh, so glad you could come, but seriously these words are much too advanced.

AKEELAH

P-T-E-R-O-D-A-C-T-Y-L.

DR. LARABEE

Correct. Pulchritude.

AKEELAH

(Stumped but gives it a try; taps)

P-U-L-C...Uh...R-I-T-U-D-E. Pulchritude.

DR. LARABEE

That's incorrect.

RACHET RHONDA

See, ya'll, I told you, she ain't no better than nobody. What a loser!

More laughter. Humiliated, Akeelah bolts for the exit.

RACHET RHONDA/KIDS

Let's all cheer/Akeelah outta here!

KIDS

Loser...Akeelah. Loser...Akeelah...She's
so whack...

RACHET RHONDA

Bye Felicia!

BEHIND THE SCHOOL

Akeelah frantically puts on the Daddy hat, immediately calms.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Akeelah, there you are. I knew it. I knew it would be your moment to shine.

(Akeelah quickly hides the hat)

I am so proud of you.

AKEELAH

Why did you make me do that? Why? So they could all laugh at me?

PRINCIPAL WELCH

But Akeelah, you were...

AKEELAH

A joke. Like I always am at this stupid school. Haven't learned anything here since third grade.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Now Akeelah....

DR. LARABEE

(Entering)

Did it ever occur to you that they laugh
because you intimidate them?

PRINCIPAL WELCH

You're right, Josh. Akeelah is one of the most gifted students we have at Southside.

(More for Larabee's benefit)

Didn't you even skip a grade, Akeelah?

AKEELAH

Yeah, but why we talkin about that? Just 'cause I couldn't spell "pulcha-whatever," I still know how to spell.

DR. LARABEE

And with proper coaching, I'm fairly certain you could have spelled the word pulchritude. It's from the Latin root pulcher, meaning beautiful.

AKEELAH

Hope you're not suggesting that you become my coach cause I'm "fairly certain" somebody like you would make me hate spelling.

DR. LARABEE

(As he exits)

Sorry, Milton, I thought she had potential, but I don't work with students who have bad attitudes.

AKEELAH

Who does he think he is? Like I need him to coach me.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

What if I tell you he made it all the way to the National Spelling Bee when he was your age?

AKEELAH

And????

PRINCIPAL WELCH

He's a wonderful teacher, a PhD who used to chair the English department at Northwestern. He lives close by, grew up in your neighborhood.

AKEELAH

So!

PRINCIPAL WELCH

Akeelah, I am trying so hard to change the culture at this school and this is an opportunity to represent our school in a more positive...

AKEELAH

Why would I want to represent a school that don't even have decent doors on the toilet stalls? That don't even have books from this century?

PRINCIPAL WELCH

I tell you what. Why don't you watch the spelling bee from last year? Then meet with Dr. Larabee at least once... And here's his address.

AKEELAH

I said...

PRINCIPAL WELCH

And I said I can always arrange a parent teacher conference about your involvement in yet another fight this morning.

Akeelah yanks the address from him, storms off.

MUCH LATER AT 709 - AFTER SCHOOL

Akeelah and Georgia appear. Excited, Georgia dances and chants.

GEORGIA

Akeelah, first place! Akeelah first place!

AKEELAH

Would you stop it?! I hated every minute of that stupid bee.

GEORGIA

But you won. Hands down. You're so good at it. You should keep doing it.

AKEELAH

You crazy. I ain't doing that mess again.

BATTY RUTH

(Enters with her bat positioned)

Good ya'll home. Of course nan one of your parents home so I'm here if you need me. When my kids got home from school I was always there to open the door even if I had me a customer. Shoot, that head had to wait until I greeted my kids. Ya'll wanna come up and get some hot rolls?

AKEELAH

No, Miss Ruth, homework.

GEORGIA

Maybe later, Miss Ruth, I'll come down.

BATTY RUTH

Used to bake rolls for my kids all the time, from scratch. Oh, did they love them some hot rolls. You kids always grow up too fast. What I wouldn't do to have those days back.

Behind Batty Ruth's back, Akeelah makes the cuckoo sign.

GEORGIA

Ms. Ruth, guess what? Akeelah, she won...

BATTY RUTH

Won?

GEORGIA

(Despite Akeelah's frantic "don't gestures)

She won the school spelling bee. The first winner ever!

BATTY RUTH

(Kissing Akeelah repeatedly, much to her chagrin)

You did? Baby, that is so good.

GEORGIA

And she's gotta chance to go to the next level. First she gotta watch this video...

AKEELAH

But I don't think I'm going to do...

BATTY RUTH

I know your daddy is dancing in heaven. Ever since you were little, ya'll two were 'round here spellin. It was the cutest thing. Go on now, watch whatever that is you gotta watch...

AKEELAH

(Exits peeved)

Thanks a lot Georgia!

GEORGIA

Akeelah, don't be mad. I was just trying to get you to do it.

BATTY RUTH

She gon' do it. Akeelah made to win. Let me get on upstairs. I don't know if I left the oven on or not.

GEORGIA

Miss Ruth, now to think about it, I am a little hungry. Maybe I will take a hot roll to go. Maybe two. And some milk if you got it.

(Batty Ruth happily leads Georgia upstairs)

And of course I do love those ham sandwiches you make with them pickles and...can you touch up my hair a little?

Batty Ruth happily puts an arm around Georgia and leads her off.

AKEELAH'S BEDROOM

Akeelah enters. Clicks on her computer, mutters to herself.

AKEELAH

Okay, just watch the stupid thing, get Principal Welch off your back.

She watches and we see the arrogant Dylan in a special.

DYLAN

"I have a winner mentality which has been fostered by my father.

AKEELAH

Well, boo-hoo for you.

DYLAN

"Losers are people who give up too easily, which is certainly not in my DNA.

AKEELAH

Wow, is he arrogant!

PRONOUNCER

Your word Mr. Chiu, is grandiloquence.

DYLAN

Grandiloquence.

AKEELAH

I wonder what that even means.

DYLAN

G-R-A-N-D-I-L-O-Q-U-E-N-C-E. Grandiloquence. The use of lofty words or phrases.

AKEELAH Now that's kinda impressive. Plus, I like that word.

(Reaches for one of her notebooks to write the word down)

Grand-I-L-O-Q-

GAIL (OS)

Reggie? REGGIE?

Reggie rushes in, thrusts some papers at Akeelah.

REGGIE

Quick, fill out these applications for me so I can show Mama I did something.

(Yells)

Mom, I'm in Keelie's room. I'll be out in a minute.

AKEELAH

Why don't you fill them out or let me show you how...

REGGIE

You know I get my letters mixed up. Come on Kee-kee. Sibling code.

Akeelah takes the papers, sits on them as Gail appears in the doorway.

GAIL

Did you get a job today, Reggie? Meet with the GED people? Do anything of merit?

REGGIE

I was, but...

GAIL

But what, Reggie? You can't just live up on me and not work or finish high school.

Reggie, you can even go to junior college if you...

REGGIE

Why? You didn't go. You always talking about going back, but...

GAIL

That's cause I'm too busy putting food on the table, boy! Keeping a roof over our heads.

What am I working for, if not for you and your sister to amount to something? Just once I'd like to see you do something of merit.

AKEELAH

Mama, I did something of merit today.

GAIL

I know, baby but right now I'm more concerned about this pathway to failure your brother seems to be on.

REGGIE

So I'm a failure now?

AKEELAH

Guess what? I won the school...

GAIL

I didn't say you were a failure but...

AKEELAH

Now I might get to do the next...

GAIL

If you just get your GED...

AKEELAH

Does anybody want to hear about my life today?

GAIL

You have a baby to support and hanging out with thug life JT...

REGGIE

JT makes bank. And he's the only one checkin for me.

GAIL

Yeah, he's gon' check you, right to the jailhouse or six feet under.

REGGIE

Well then I'd least be with daddy.

(Everyone freezes)

Oh, that's right, I forgot, nobody in this house supposed to mention daddy...

GAIL

All this anger, son, is not going to change any...

REGGIE

What? That I want to kill whoever killed him.

AKEELAH

Reggie, don't say that.

REGGIE

And you sending me to counselors and programs ain't gon' "change" that fact.

GAIL

Reggie, Mama's only trying to help you son, trying to keep you alive, baby, so you at least get a chance to grow up. What about your sister? What kind of role model you call yourself being...?

Reggie storms from Akeelah's room, yelling.

REGGIE

I'm ain't trying to be nobody's role model, Mama! That's your job.

GAIL

What about your son? That my job, too?

Gail follows behind Reggie, their argument escalating until the both exit.

GAIL

I'm up to here with you, boy.

REGGIE

See, this is why I don't ever wanna come home.

Akeelah turns up the spelling Bee louder, too loud and again we see Dylan in his special.

DYLAN

I am second in the country but this year I plan to be National Spelling Champion. Actually, I guarantee it.

Akeelah grabs her cell phone, and the piece of paper with Dr. Larabee's info. She starts punching in numbers as she exits. Classical music over the transition. Eventually Akeelah arrives at...

DR. LARABEE'S TALL, IMPOSING GATE - DAYS LATER

Akeelah compares the paper in her hand with the address. Over the tall gate, she spots Dr. Larabee pruning his plants. Akeelah clears her throat. He doesn't look up.

DR. LARABEE

You're late.

AKEELAH

Few minutes, you couldn't wait? What, you got a hot date?

She laughs. He glares, begrudgingly opens the gate.

DR. LARABEE

I fail to see the humor.

AKEELAH

Yeah, lotta times people don't get my humor. I thought I was at the wrong place when I heard that white people's music....

DR. LARABEE

Music is not created for color. Nor are words. Maybe this is a bad idea. I am a very serious-minded....

AKEELAH

What you think I'm not? Everyday, as soon as my father finished his first shift at the restaurant, we would spell and read the paper. He started me playing Scrabble at three just like them national spelling bee kids...words and people, that was my Daddy...

DR. LARABEE

Why isn't your father still teaching you?

AKEELAH

Because...because he had to go away.

DR. LARABEE

Right! Like every other man in this neighborhood.

AKEELAH

Hey, you don't talk about my daddy like that.

DR. LARABEE

Okay, then let's talk about your technique. You have none. Spell staphylococci.

AKEELAH

(Tapping her thigh)

UH- S-T-A-

DR. LARABEE

What is that you're doing, the tapping of your thigh? I noticed it at the school spelling bee.

AKEELAH

It's my rhythm. Mama said before I could even walk, daddy was teaching me how to spell with a beat.

DR. LARABEE

I see. Staphylococci again.

AKEELAH

S-T-A-F...

DR. LARABEE

"F" is the exact grade I'd give you. There is no F.

AKEELAH

A-F-H...

DR. LARABEE

Do you not pay attention? S-T-A-P-H-Y-L-O-C-O-C-C-I!

AKEELAH

So! At least I knew it ended with an "i."

DR. LARABEE

Not one point will that earn you. "To whom much is given, much is required."

AKEELAH

Now what you talkin 'bout?

DR. LARABEE

You don't read the bible, either? If you're going to learn language, you have to read all types of...

AKEELAH

I do read. When my head is wrapped right, I can memorize any word.

DR. LARABEE

And getting your "head wrapped right" will never happen if you don't know a word's origin, its root...

AKEELAH

Maybe, Mister, you been playing in the dirt too long, cause you don't need to know a root to know how to spell a word. Just sayin!

DR. LARABEE

I see.

AKEELAH

You see what?

DR. LARABEE

That you are incredibly rude and insolent...

AKEELAH

What about you? Ever since I opened my mouth, you been trying to put your foot in it.

DR. LARABEE

Please tell me why you're still here.

AKEELAH

'Cause I thought you were supposed to be somebody's coach. I'm trying to give you a chance here, so blow a whistle, get me some words going. Then watch me put the press to the impress!

DR. LARABEE

Whatever you just said, I suspect is slang or some type of ghetto-speak... And I will never entertain slang in my house, ever!

AKEELAH

But we ain't quite made it into your house. We still camped out here at the prison gate. Just sayin.

DR. LARABEE

Listen, you were the one who called me...

AKEELAH

Obviously a big mistake...

DR. LARABEE

No, the mistake is me wasting my time on a little second rate girl like you. JUST SAYIN!!!!

AKEELAH

Second Rate? How you gon' call me second rate when you're the one that supposedly went to the National bee - you went but you didn't win it.

(He doesn't respond. Continues his garden work)

You know what, I can memorize any word so who needs a dictatorial, truculent, supercilious man that thinks you need to dig up roots to spell? I can win any spelling bee on my own. O-kay! And I'm O-U-T. And that's slang for outta here case you didn't know!

She storms off. Dr. Larabee smirks - at least she has spirit.

RADIO DJ

And in other news, last night five shot in a laundromat, four adults and one toddler, with only the toddler expected to survive. A round of bullets and three generations of his family snuffed out. Now washing your clothes in Chicago can get you killed? So I'm praying for my city tonight. And I'm Fay-Fay Foxy at 104 FM.

AKEELAH'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Akeelah appears in her bedroom. She gets out her laptop, huge dictionary, clicks on the radio. Akeelah puts on her daddy's hat and gets to work studying the dictionary and writing new words in her notebooks. Radio Music.

AKEELAH

(Reading aloud)

"Staphylococci. A bacterium that can cause pus formation, especially in the skin and mucous membranes." Yuck.

(Writes as she spells aloud)

S-T-A-P-H-Y-L-O-C-O-C-C-I!

Akeelah stretches, yawns. Her mother, wearing nurse's scrubs, knocks at her bedroom door. Enters.

GAIL

Now you know you have no business still being up?

AKEELAH

Gotta learn more words before Saturday. Remember, I told you about the district spelling bee up north at Barrington Hills.

GAIL

Land of the rich white folks? I don't know about you going all the way up there for...Is this part of your school 'cause you need to be focused more on raising your grades.

AKEELAH

Let me show you. Everyday, I've been watching this National Spelling bee over and over again and this boy Dylan...

GAIL

No, baby Mama's tired. I worked overtime today and the supervising nurse...

AKEELAH

The one you don't like...

GAIL

Yep. As usual she had all us aides doing everything she can't stand to do. I tell you if I ever go back to school and become a nurse...

AKEELAH

Mama, why don't you really do it?

GAIL

Yeah, well, good-night, honey. I'll see you in the morning.

AKEELAH

But Mama, what about the Bee?

GAIL

If it's a one-time thing maybe I can send Reggie with you. Maybe he and Brandy...

AKEELAH

Uh-uh. Then I'll have to deal with them and that whining baby. I won't be able to concentrate.

GAIL

You'll be fine. Wish the day would come when I can say that about your brother. Night, I love you...

(As she exits)

Don't stay up all night.

Lights shift. Sound of the District judge checking a microphone and we're at...

THE DISTRICT SPELLING BEE

DISTRICT JUDGE

We ask that our spellers return to their seats in five minutes. This is our last break. Again, we would like everyone to take note of this year's sponsors. Without their generous support we could not put on such a fabulous event.

Akeelah fiddles with her crooked number tag. JAVIER, 12, a gregarious Latino kid with a preppy style, steps forward.

JAVIER

If I could be of service. I have surgeon's hands so don't worry I won't impale you. First time and you've made it through to the final round.

AKEELAH

Who you tellin'?! I can't believe it myself.

JAVIER

But you're amazing.

Akeelah spots DYLAN and his rather severe-looking father, MR. CHIU.

AKEELAH

No, he's the one that's amazing. I don't think he ever asked for a definition.

JAVIER

No, Dylan never does.

AKEELAH

How does somebody get that smart? I mean he's like a genius.

JAVIER

No, he really is a genius. He has an IQ of 160. All three of us are from Barrington Academy. Dylan, Trish (*Trish crosses, waves excitedly*) and yours truly. I placed thirteen at Nationals last year.

AKEELAH

Thirteen. Wow!

JAVIER

The name is Javier, speller extraordinaire! So, I gave you mine. I'm still waiting for yours. Otherwise I'll have to keep calling you very pretty smile.

AKEELAH

Oh, sorry, Akeelah. Akeelah Anderson.

First alert bell rings

JAVIER

Well good luck Akeelah Anderson. When in doubt, spell it like it sounds.

(Reggie enters pushing the baby stroller)

Who would bring a baby to this?

Javier to his seat. Reggie beckons Akeelah. She gestures "not now."

REGGIE

GIRL, YOU BETTER GET YOUR BEHIND OVER HERE... I'll turn this place out!

AKEELAH

Reggie, stop being so loud. You were supposed to stay in the back. And pull your pants up some.

REGGIE

Naw, I ain't pulling up my pants and I'm sick of sitting way in the back. So, this last round, so me and the baby'll be right here on the front row so everybody know you got family, too. You doing good, Kee, so stop acting all nervous. And you know what daddy would say, put some stank-stank on it.

Second bell sounds. Akeelah hurries on stage, looks around, grossly uncomfortable while Reggie gets situated in the audience with the baby as

REGGIE

'Scuse me. I'll take that seat.

JUDGE

Again, only the top ten will qualify for the Illinois state finals. And the top three from the State contest will proceed to the National spelling Bee in Washington DC.

The baby frets. Akeelah mortified. Reggie pulls from the diaper bag, noisy, squeaky toys, then to audience...

REGGIE

Sorry ya'll.

PRONOUNCER

Number 102, Your word is cacophony.

SNORTING GIRL

(At the mic, snorts like a pig)

Yes, cacophony. C-A-C-O-P-H-O-N-Y. Cacophony!

JUDGE

Correct.

She gives a special snort of celebration.

PRONOUNCER

Number 104, your word is Rhesus.

Javier shoots Akeelah a goofy grin as he goes to mic.

JAVIER

Definition please?

PRONOUNCER

A macaque monkey native to southern and southeastern Asia.

JAVIER

Ahh. Rhesus. R-H-E-S-U-S. Rhesus!

JUDGE

Correct.

JAVIER

Okay!

No bell. Javier attempts to give Dylan a high five as he returns to his seat, but Dylan ignores him. Akeelah to the mic.

PRONOUNCER

Contestant 1-0-8, your word is Eminent.

(No response from Akeelah)

Young lady, did you hear the word?

AKEELAH

Nuttin' wrong with my hearing. I'm just not sure if you saying imminent or E-minent. They do sound the same, just sayin.

PRONOUNCER

Eminent, rising above other things or places - high, lofty... eminent.

AKEELAH

Real talk. I gotya.

(Akeelah taps her thigh as she spells)

E-M-I-N-E-N-T. Eminent.

JUDGE

Correct.

AKEELAH

I was right again?

JUDGE

Did I not say correct? And there was no bell.

Reggie on his feet hooting and bustin' a move. Akeelah follows suit.

AKEELAH

Yeah, buddy, putting a little stank-stank on it!

JUDGE

Young lady, this is not a dance show. Please take your seat.

Reggie cracks up. Akeelah quickly retreats to her seat as...

DYLAN

(Whispering loudly to Akeelah as he passes)

Pay attention, you might learn something.

PRONOUNCER

Number 89, Your word is zeitgeber.

DYLAN

Zeitgeber. I believe the origin is German. "Zeit" meaning time and "geber" meaning giver. Z-E-I-T-G-E-B-E-R. Zeitgeber.

JUDGE

Correct.

DYLAN

Which is, by the way, defined as an environmental cue, such as...

JUDGE

You have spelled it correctly Mr. Chiu, thank you...

DYLAN

But ...

JUDGE

Again, that's all we need, Mr. Chiu. Just the correct spelling.

PRONOUNCER

Your word number 6 is abseil.

A scowling MOHAWK WEARING GIRL with a huge dangling earring steps to the mic. Mohawk girl does a ritual with cracking her knuckles before she spells her word. After she spells, there's a rapid succession of contestants.

MOHAWK GIRL

A-B-S-E-I-L. ABSEIL!

SNORTING GIRL

H-E-U-R-I-S-T-I-C. Heuristic! (*She snorts*)

JAVIER

S-O-U-C-H-O-N-G. Souchong!

DYLAN

(Glaring directly at Akeelah)

E-V-A-N-E-S-C-E-N-T. Evanescent. Meaning fleeting, short-lived, fading!

JAVIER

(Grins, points to Akeelah)

E-X-E-M-P-L-A-R-Y. Exemplary.

PRONOUNCER

Number 1-0-8. Your word is Synecdoche.

AKEELAH

Si-neck-do-kee?

PRONOUNCER

Synecdoche.

AKEELAH

Oh. You wanna tell me what that means? I mean give me a definition please.

Reggie's baby starts to cry again.

PRONOUNCER

A figure of speech in which a term for a part of something refers to the whole of something, or vice-versa.

AKEELAH

I don't mean to shout but please somebody take that baby out...

REGGIE

(Standing up to rock the baby)

Sorry, Akeelah. Do your thang.

(Loudly to the audience)

That's my sister up there ya'll, she like the family genius. Yeah, okay.

Akeelah mortified.

AKEELAH

S-I-N-E-C-D-O-K-E-Y. Synecdoche.

THE BELL! The audience collectively gasps. Akeelah deflates, stands in the loser section.

DYLAN

And to the loser section she goes.

JUDGE

(To Mohawk girl at the mic)

#6, if you spell this correctly, you'll be our tenth and last finalist.

PRONOUNCER

Your word is carmagnole.

MOHAWK GIRL

C-A-R-M...Sorry. Sorry. May I start over?

JUDGE

You can but you cannot change any of the letters you've already spelled.

Mohawk girl wipes sweat, looks out into the audience for somebody.

MOHAWK GIRL

C-A-R-M- A-UH-..G-N-O-L-E. Carmagnole.

JUDGE

That is correct!

Mohawk girl grins triumphantly, fist pumps the air, and is about to take her seat when Reggie bursts to the front.

REGGIE

Uh-un, ya'll ain't clownin my sister like this. I saw her - Mohawk girl -getting the answer from somebody over there. Ain't that called cheating?

MOHAWK GIRL

I don't know what that boy is talking about.

REGGIE

Boy?! Who you calling boy?

JUDGE

Did anyone in the audience mouth you a letter?

MOHAWK GIRL

Of course not.

JUDGE

Young lady, this is very serious.

MOHAWK GIRL

I don't know why you all are picking on me. I study more than any kid here. Everyday, from five in the morning until I go to bed at night, for frigging six years!

REGGIE

Well you should have studied another six years, baby, cause I know I saw your mama mouthing you a letter...

MOHAWK GIRL

Can you blame her? My mother knows how hard I've worked. And it was just one letter...

JUDGE

And that one letter disqualifies you.

MOHAWK GIRL

Who cares? REALLY, WHO FRIGGIN CARES?

JUDGE

And since number 6 has been disqualified, that means Number 108, if you spell the next word correctly, you may join the other nine as the tenth and final contestant.

Akeelah goes to the mic.

PRONOUNCER

Your word is noctambulist.

AKEELAH

N-O-C?-tambu-T-A-M-uh -B-U-L-I-S-T? Noctambulist.

JUDGE

That is correct. You may join the other nine for you are now the final contestant to move on to the State Finals in December. Congratulations to all ten.

Enthusiastic applause. Reggie hoots. A disappointed Akeelah joins Reggie.

REGGIE

Anderson in the house. In the house, whoo-whooh! *(To no one in particular; all dramatics)*. Yeah, this my sister. Akeelah Anderson. She one of the ten champions!

AKEELAH

Reggie, stop, you sound crazy. I won by default, which to me is not really winning.

REGGIE

Ain't no default if you one of the ten! Ask the hundred going home losers.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

(Rushing over)

That was amazing. Hold still Akeelah. I want to get a picture of us and your certificate, something to show the school board. Come on smile.

He takes the picture on his phone as...

BEE CLERK

A reminder, all permission slips should be signed by your parents and returned to your host school principal to assure your spot at the State Bee.

PRINCIPAL WELCH

One more.

(Reggie jumps in the picture)

Reggie, I just need Akeelah. Move out the way! *(Reggie does, but there's a flash of hurt)* Hold the certificate up higher, Akeelah. Great. Akeelah, two more bees to go and I will be looking at a National champion.

And he hurriedly exits before Akeelah can protest. As Mr. Chiu and Dylan pass, Mr. Chiu speaks just loud enough for Akeelah to hear.

MR. CHIU

Clearly, she hasn't been coached and has no idea what she's doing. I hope someone informs her that the Spelling Bees aren't ruled by affirmative action.

REGGIE

Hey, Jack, what you mean by that? Better back up, my sister smarter than any of ya'll.
(As they move on, Reggie yells)
She don't need no affirmative action 'cept how to beat you spellin it!

AKEELAH

Reggie, just go get me a pop out the vending machine and then let's get outta here.

REGGIE

Ignore them people. Jerks!

As Reggie exits, Dr. Larabee appears from behind her.

DR. LARABEE

Perhaps it's too much soda pop that's affecting your brain. Perhaps if you had asked if 'syn' was the greek root meaning "with or together..." Or 'ekdoche,' meaning interpretation. Synecdoche. The first difficult word you were given all day and you missed it.

AKEELAH

Well maybe if I had had me a coach, I woulda done better.

DR. LARABEE

Perhaps if you had been a student willing to learn without rudeness, you would have done remarkably better.

AKEELAH

(Yelling to his departing back.)

Why'd you even bother to come if that's all you had to say?!

*As Dr. Larabee exits, Trish encourages Javier to approach Akeelah.
Javier hands Akeelah a slip of paper.*

JAVIER

We have a spelling club at our school. That's how all of us have gotten better. It's fun. Trish keeps us all focused and she brings really great snacks.

TRISH

Very good snacks.

AKEELAH

Wow. Really? You're inviting me into your club? *(They nod)* Okay. Thanks. Thanks Javier and Trish.

LATER AT 709 GANGWAY/ YARD

Akeelah waits on her mother. Eventually, Gail enters carrying Target bags and talking on the phone.

AKEELAH

Mama, I made it. I made it. I missed this big word but...

GAIL

(Gestures she's on the phone)

His fever is a 101? Wait, I just got here. Let me ask Akeelah

(To Akeelah)

Where's your brother? Brandy thinks the baby is getting sick and Reggie left there hours ago.

AKEELAH

No, he just dropped me off after the bee, which, Mama, it was so hard but so ex [exciting]

GAIL

(In the phone)

Brandy, he's not here but I'll go pick up some medicine...no, it's okay. He's my grandson.

She clicks off.

AKEELAH

Mama, I get to go to the next step, to State! See, I got a certificate and everything.

GAIL

That's nice honey as long as it's helping your grades but right now Mama...

AKEELAH

I just need you to sign this consent...

GAIL

(Hands off the bags to Akeelah)

Let's talk about all of this later. Okay?

As Drunk Willie crosses with a newspaper. As she exits, Gail calls out to him.

AKEELAH

But we never do. Later never comes.

GAIL

Mr. Willie, I'm still waiting on my sink to get fixed.

DRUNK WILLIE

It's on my list. I'm getting to it.

(Approaches Akeelah, outstretches a newspaper)

Got today's paper in case you want it. Used to love watching you and your daddy read the paper, working them crossword puzzles together. That man could conversate on any subject. Could've been a teacher.

AKEELAH

He wanted to be.

DRUNK WILLIE

See, that's why you so smart 'cause he was and he never looked down on nobody...

BATTY RUTH

(Yelling from her apartment)

Man, would you leave that child be? She don't need to hear all that... Why don't you collect your plate off the porch while it's hot and leave that poor child alone.

DRUNK WILLIE

Oh, Lord, baby, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to upset you... I just know what it is to miss...oh forget it, don't pay me no mind. I don't know why I thought we could do the crossword together but shoot, I can't put two words together let alone two letters.

(Muttering as he exits)

And folks wonder why I drink.

JT emerges from his apartment with Reggie. Surprised, Akeelah, is about to call out to him until she sees JT hand Reggie a wad of bills. She hides to watch.

JT

There's more where that came from. Just do as instructed. You run into any problem, let 'em know who you working for.

Reggie nods, excited but trying to play it cool. JT exits into his apartment. Reggie immediately starts to count the money. Akeelah steps out of the shadows, glares at her brother, forcing him to meet her gaze. He can't.

REGGIE

Just trying to make a little money, Keelie.

(Seeing the tears running down her face)

Don't look like that. Soon's I get a job. Really, I'll stop. I promise.

AKEELAH

You killing daddy all over again.

REGGIE

No choice, Kee. Can't live on this block and not make a name for myself. If I don't hang with JT, then my name's on somebody else's bullet.

(Akeelah doesn't want to hear it, exits)

Akeelah?

A beat, then Reggie exits in the opposite direction. ALTERNATIVE MUSIC over the transition as Akeelah and Georgia arrive

WEEKS LATER AT JAVIER'S HOUSE - JUNE

Outside the house, Akeelah and Georgia stare, awestruck. They look to each other. Then stare wide-eyed again. Both carry gift bags and are dressed in their best summer dresses. Georgia's is of course is a bit over the top as are her glittery accessories. Note: Akeelah wears her mother's string of pearls.

GEORGIA

WOW, okay, this be a mansion. This what you call White House big. Shoot, these some different kinda suburbs up here. You sure this is Javier's house?

AKEELAH

It's the address he gave me. It's so quiet. No horns, no sirens, no screaming. Georgia, we could live like this one day, peaceful-like, in a house this beautiful, have our whole family living with us...

GEORGIA

Yeah, if we married us some basketball players!

AKEELAH

It's just like their school. They got everything...

GEORGIA

I know, Akeelah, I know, don't start that. I'm sick of hearing 'bout what their school got and what ours don't. You sure I look okay?

AKEELAH

Georgia by Design in the house. Girl, you workin it!

GEORGIA

You watch I'm gon' be like that girl who made her own prom dress and put it on Instagram and next thing you know she designing for the stars. That's gonna be me one day. Rockin' that glue stick. It's on Twitter I'm the glitter outfitter.

AKEELAH

And what about me? Are the pearls too much?

GEORGIA

Well, they do look a little church lady. You should've let me dress you. Now, you made me take the train and two buses, brought me all the way out here... Oh, and look, look what I got.

(Showing her an I-phone; both pose for selfies)

My step daddy forgot it today, and you know he never gets mad at nothing I do, so I kinda borrowed it so we could take us some good pictures...

AKEELAH

Just don't post them anywhere. I'm not tryin to die for sneaking out.

Akeelah takes Georgia's hand but Georgia yanks her back. Akeelah puzzled.

GEORGIA

I don't know. Think I'm getting nervous. You know these people. I don't so what if I don't fit in?

AKEELAH

Georgia, anyone that meets you loves you. Just be yourself.

GEORGIA

Well, o-kay 'cause you know how we do it. Georgia 'bout to turn up with the rich white folks! Let's do this thang.

They laugh, grab hands, and enter as the new age music greets them. Dylan and a frustrated Trish play Scrabble at a portable table with a spinning scrabble board. Javier moderates with a wireless mic.

AKEELAH

(Whispering to Georgia)

That's him.

GEORGIA

HIM?! THAT'S THE GREAT DYLAN?

AKEELAH

Not so loud, Georgia. People from here don't talk loud and they kinda whisper when they play Scrabble.

GEORGIA

(Looking around)

But who plays Scrabble at a birthday party!

AKEELAH

Yeah, and see how quickly Dylan plays his letters? No one has ever beaten him.

GEORGIA

Akeelah, I don't know. I ain't feeling this.

AKEELAH

I just want to beat him one time.

GEORGIA

This really ain't my kinda crowd.

AKEELAH

Just once....I've been practicing.

GEORGIA

Did we get on the wrong bus and stop at crazy? 'Cause girl he's not even that cute for you to be all agitated and....

JAVIER

Welcome to Javier's birthday spelling extravaganza!

DYLAN

(To Trish as he plays the last of his spelling tiles)

You're done. I win again!

TRISH

Dang, Dylan, how do you keep doing that when I had the better letters?!!

JAVIER

(In his wireless mic)

And Dylan has just beaten his fourth opponent in *(looking at his watch)* just under an hour.

Trish notices Georgia, lights up, stares.

GEORGIA

What's up with her staring at me like that?

(Loudly, to the assembled)

Hey now! I'm Georgia. *Let's get this party started, HEY!*

TRISH

Too loud. Your voice is too loud. I have very sensitive hearing.

GEORGIA

(Whispering to Akeelah)

Now I know it's time to go. Girl, let's get away from this weird.

Trish retrieves a tray of crackers and olives.

DYLAN

The chair is open? Anybody else daring enough?

Akeelah hesitates, nervously looks around. Dylan starts to get up.

DYLAN

Okay, I guess that's it. No one else wants to take on the master.

(Akeelah slides into the opponent seat. Dylan smirks)

This should take all of two minutes.

GEORGIA

(Turning up her nose at Trish's food tray)

Akeelah, what in the world kind of party did you bring me to?

HOURS LATER

Akeelah and Dylan play their third Scrabble game. Georgia bored out of her mind while Javier excitedly talks into his wireless microphone.

JAVIER

“Again you're at Javier's birthday spelling extravaganza and for the last two hours Dylan and Akeelah have ferociously battled at Scrabble. The previous two games were close with Dylan winning both but as they play their third...

GEORGIA

And hopefully FINAL...

JAVIER

Yes, their final game. “Akeelah is closing in on finally beating Dylan.... And she's shuffling her tiles. That great mind of hers working feverishly.”

GEORGIA

Can we at least turn on some music we can dance to? Party and good music, now that's two words that go together.

Everyone shushes Georgia.

JAVIER

“The score stands at Dylan with 460 and Akeelah 450. The closest anyone has even gotten to Dylan. What will Dylan do? What will poor Dylan do if he loses?”

DYLAN

Javier, would you please shut up so I can concentrate?

JAVIER

It's my party, Dylan, which means for once I don't have to shut up.

Georgia peruses the food table, mutters to herself a little too loudly.

GEORGIA

Been here for hours and the food ain't even good.

JAVIER

If the food is not to your liking, our cook can prepare you anything you wish.

GEORGIA

No thank you, I don't wish for nothing except to go home.

Trish steals glances at Georgia, then slowly inches closer. Georgia looks at her approach suspiciously.

TRISH

Okay, I just have to say it. I can't tell you how much I appreciate your sense of style. Your sense of pizzazz. As you can see, I have none. I'm Trish again.

GEORGIA

Yeah I know. You told me three times. Akeelah can you stop with the Scrabble now? Please!

AKEELAH

This the last game, Georgia. I promise.

JAVIER

"And Dylan spells the word lucid. Using the triple word score, Dylan takes the lead by thirteen..."

DYLAN

(To Akeelah)

So, how many languages do you speak? I'm fluent in four. Half the kids at Nationals speak more than one language.

Akeelah looks like a deer caught in headlights, Javier to the rescue

JAVIER

Which means half don't Dylan.

DYLAN

Does your school at least have Latin?

(She shakes her head no)

How are you going to master enough words without knowing Latin or Greek or....

JAVIER

As long as she can spell in English, Dylan, that's all that counts.

DYLAN

So spell xanthosis.

Georgia gets in the way to take a shot of Akeelah on her phone.

AKEELAH

Z-A-....

GEORGIA

(Overlapping)

Look over here Kee. Let me get a picture with you and your new friends....

DYLAN

Xanthosis starts with an 'X', not a 'Z'. Wow, you're really out of your element.

Georgia snaps another picture of Akeelah's irritated face.

AKEELAH

Georgia!

Georgia, laughs, insists on showing the camera picture to Akeelah.

GEORGIA

Look at your expression. You look kinda stupid, don't you? Maybe one more.

DYLAN

X-A-N-T-H-O-S-I-S. Simple.

So irritated, Akeelah harshly shoves the phone away.

AKEELAH

WOULD YOU PLEASE STOP WITH THE PICTURES, GEORGIA!

GEORGIA

How about you stop being so fake.

DYLAN

I agree with your homegirl, maybe you're a little out of your league here.

JAVIER

Stop being a jerk, Dylan.

Akeelah places her tiles on the board.

AKEELAH

That's okay, 'cause this homegirl just took the lead. YES!

JAVIER

"Akeelah just spelled the word funnel and is now ahead by seven points with only a few letters left. Looks like in this third game, she might finally beat Dylan. Wahoo!

But Javier suddenly turns tense. Mr. Chiu has entered looking rather disgruntled, especially after hearing the last. Javier notices him first.

JAVIER

Oh, Mr. Chiu. How was your golf game with my Dad?

(Mr. Chiu ignores Javier, glares at Dylan.)

We were just celebrating my birthday, having a scrabble bee, nothing serious, uh...

Dylan looks incredibly distraught at the sight of his father.

MR. CHIU

Did I hear correctly? That you are losing to this girl?

DYLAN

(Nervously laughs)

No. Of course not father. I allowed her a few charity moves but... but I would never lose.

MR. CHIU

I DIDN'T RAISE YOU TO COME IN SECOND TO ANYONE.

DYLAN

Yes, sir.

All intimidated. Dylan shuffles his tiles, focusing hard.

GEORGIA

(Easing over to whisper in Akeelah's ear)

Akeelah I ain't feeling this vibe with little Hitler over there. Let's ease on to the exit.

DYLAN

(Suddenly grins, places his remaining three tiles)

Au revoir, petite fille. Tu ne gagnerez jamais contre moi! [Bye, Bye little girl, you'll never win against me!]

JAVIER

“And seven points ties the game. But Akeelah has two tiles left worth three points and if we add that to Dylan’s score....”

DYLAN

It means I win. Again. See, I told you Dad.

Dylan looks to his father for approval. Akeelah devastated that she lost. Again.

MR. CHIU

It’s time to go. NOW DYLAN.

DYLAN

But we haven’t had cake and...

MR. CHIU

I said now.

(Leading Dylan out with)

That’s it. No more parties. Obviously we need to intensify your training if you’re still almost in a tie with some untrained girl that doesn’t even have a coach.

GEORGIA

(After the Chiu’s are gone)

That man is so mean.

JAVIER

(Re: Akeelah’s silence, crestfallen expression)

It’s okay, Akeelah. No one’s ever gotten that close to beating Dylan, which is why I think he’s especially mean to you. I think he finds you a real threat.

AKEELAH

But I’m not. Dylan’s unbeatable.

TRISH

Just keep coming to the spelling club. Dylan does challenge us all to elevate our game.

JAVIER

Okay, everybody. Time for ice cream.

GEORGIA

Thank you lord and savior, finally we gon’ get this party started!

AT709 - MUCH LATER

Much tension among the adults who wait anxiously - Batty Ruth, Gail, Drunk Willie. Reggie checks his cell.

REGGIE

She still not answering. And Georgia's Mama said Georgia doesn't have a phone. Maybe I should go look for 'em.

GAIL

No. You stay your behind right here. I don't need you coming up missing, too.

REGGIE

But Dad, would want me....

GAIL

I'M THE ONE HERE, YOU HEAR ME? I'M THE ONE STILL HERE!

REGGIE

What's wrong with you? You never used to get this mad...

DRUNK WILLIE

(Easing Reggie away)

Your mama just worried, that's all. Like we all are.

Akeelah and Georgia emerge from the gangway. They take one look at everybody waiting and duck back out of sight, undiscovered.

GANGWAY - AKEELAH AND GEORGIA

GEORGIA

Yep, we getting killed. You always getting me in trouble Akeelah. I don't know why I listen to you. Oh, God, what we gon' do? What we gon' do?

AKEELAH

You're going to let me do all the talking, that's what.

GEORGIA

Oh, Lord, help us.

AKEELAH

Now take my hand. We need to present a united front. And remember, I do all the talking.

With a collective breath, they emerge from the gangway to face the music.

BATTY RUTH

Thank you, Jesus!

GAIL

Where you been?

BATTY RUTH

Yeah where you two been?

REGGIE

Where your fast butt been?

GAIL

We've been calling your phone for the last...

AKEELAH

I forgot to charge it.

BATTY RUTH

You done worried the whole neighborhood. Georgia, your Mama and step daddy out looking for you, 'bout to call the police.

DRUNK WILLIE

Me, I was so worried. I had to start up drinking again.

BATTY RUTH

Man, hush up, nobody talking to you with your drunk self.

DRUNK WILLIE

I may be drunk but I care about these babies... All of 'em runnin 'round here.

GAIL

You got a whole lot of explaining to do... And why are you dressed like that? Are those my anniversary pearls?

AKEELAH

We went to a party, a little birthday party...

GEORGIA

I'm not supposed to say anything but we got on the wrong bus because some people don't like to listen...

BATTY RUTH

Bus?

GAIL

Where'd ya'll go that you had to take the bus?

AKEELAH

We went to a birthday party with the spelling club and....

GAIL

You mean that club in Barrington Hills?! You two took the bus all the...

GEORGIA

And the train...

BATTY RUTH

Oh lord, ya'll was up there with them white people all by yourselves. Lord, lord. Lord!

AKEELAH

Well, no one was here to take us...

GEORGIA

But Akeelah goes out there...

(Akeelah frantically gestures for Georgia to stop)

...all the time so I thought...

GAIL

All the time? Akeelah, I never gave you permission...

GEORGIA

Well, I do wanna say one thing. We didn't have any fun, NONE, if that makes you all feel any better!

GAIL

It doesn't. Your parents are not happy and I certainly am not with you, Akeelah.

REGGIE

You can tell she sorry, Mama. Why don't you...

GAIL

Boy, who's the parent here?

REGGIE

(Storms off)

Fine!

BATTY RUTH

Come on Georgia, you come and wait up in my apartment until your parents get back. Anything could've happened to you two. Akeelah had no business going out there. My children knew better.

Batty Ruth guides Georgia upstairs. Everyone disperses/exits except Gail and Akeelah.

GAIL

So, I gather you been sneaking out there for a while...And if your antics today weren't enough, look what I got in the mail.

(Showing her a letter)

It's from your guidance counselor, saying that you need to go to summer school because you've been half turning in your work. How could you be almost failing English, Akeelah as much as you like words?

AKEELAH

Cause we do the same ol' juvenile assignments and read the same old stupid books...

GAIL

And that attitude is exactly why your little defiant behind is going to summer school. I expect this from Reggie but you...

AKEELAH

But Mama, I can't go to summer school. I need to train all summer for the State bee. I've just been waiting for you to sign the permission slip...

GAIL

I'm not signing anything. You think you so grown, then you sign it.

AKEELAH

Mama, you know I can't sign it.

GAIL

Exactly! 'Cause you're not that grown. So from here on out, you will not leave this yard except to go to summer school, which means no spelling club or Barrington Hills or any other kind of foolishness. I don't even want to hear the word spelling bee. Am I clear? Am I clear?

(Akeelah runs ups tairs crying)

And take off my dang pearls!

DAYS LATER - DR. LARABEE'S GATE

Akeelah paces, working up her confidence.

AKEELAH

Just go through the gate. Maybe compliment him on his little plants...

Dr. Larabee appears. He points to his watch.

AKEELAH

I don't care what brand of watch you wearing, I know good and well I ain't late!

DR. LARABEE

“Ain’t?!” A word I hope to never hear again.

AKEELAH

I am not late... And I have totally purged myself of all slang and all rudeness! And may I say your little yard plants are looking truly splendiferous. S-P-L-E-N-D-I-F-E-R-O-U-S.

Dr. Larabee swallows a smile, opens the gate and is about to usher her inside when Reggie suddenly appears talking on his cellphone. Akeelah aghast.

AKEELAH

Reggie, what are you doing here? Boy, did you follow me?

REGGIE

(In his phone)

“Baby, hold up for a sec.”

(To Akeelah)

Girl, somebody gotta check him out.

(To Dr. Larabee)

Man-to-man, I got me one sister so I needs to know, is you on the up and up?

AKEELAH

He doesn’t like slang. You’re going to ruin this for me. Go, please!

DR. LARABEE

Young man, my intentions are nothing short of honorable, much like yours, I’m sure.

REGGIE

Yeah, okay... okay, then. Long’s we straight. But, *(holding up his phone)* I got your number programmed just a click away. ‘Cause I’ll do some damage about my sister.

AKEELAH

WOULD YOU GO!

Reggie laughs, and as he exits.

REGGIE

Okay baby I’m back.

Dr. Larabee ushers Akeelah into

HIS STUDY

Where there's an easel, lots of books and art. Akeelah chatters nervously.

AKEELAH

Sorry about my brother. We kinda got this sibling code and...

(No response, she touches things in awe)

Hey, you got a pretty nice place here, kinda like a museum. Look at all these books. Reggie, that's who you just met, he would love all this artwork. He's an artist, too but I think he should go into fashion like my best friend Georgia. They both always trying to tell me what to wear.

DR. LARABEE

And so today they didn't quite bother?

AKEELAH

What's wrong with what I got on? Oh, I see you got jokes.

(Notices his degrees on the wall)

Man, you went to Yale and UCLA? I heard those some decent schools to graduate from. I think I'd like to live in California, anywhere other than around here. Oh, wait...1979, Maculature. M-A-C-U-L-A-T-U-R-E. 1990 FIBRANNE, F-I-B-R-A-N-N-E. 1996. VIVISEPULTURE...

(She takes a breath)

I learned all the winning words since 1970.

DR. LARABEE

I see.

AKEELAH

And I learned how to spell that other word, the one about the pus. S-T-A-P-H-Y-L-O-C-O-C-C-I! See, sir, doctor, I'm trying to show you I'm serious and that I'm sorry for you know, how I acted before. I was a little out of pocket...

DR. LARABEE

You're clearly very mercurial...

AKEELAH

Well, you're no walk in the park yourself. Oops, sorry, that was just a little slip. I spent all night after I called you, thinking about how I was gonna convince you to give me another chance. 'Cause I'm tryin to tell you, I don't have much time and I need a coach bad.

DR. LARABEE

Badly.

He stares at her, so long, she shifts uncomfortably. She picks up a framed photo from his desk

AKEELAH

So who these two pretty people?

DR. LARABEE

(Ignoring the question, returns the photo to its place)

Please refrain from touching things without my permission. I hope you realize luck was on your side at the district bee. At the state level, the competition will be much more advanced.

AKEELAH

So start advancing me then!

DR. LARABEE

What are your aspirations, Akeelah? What do you want to be when you grow up?

AKEELAH

How should I know? I'm not good at anything but spelling. You want me to spell some more of the winning words?

DR. LARABEE

No, I want you to read that plaque on the wall. Read the first part. Aloud.

AKEELAH

(Reading)

“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure...”

DR. LARABEE

What do you think that means?

AKEELAH

I don't know.

(He glares her into trying again)

Well...maybe...maybe it means that sometimes you're like, you know, kinda afraid to be the best you can be at something.

DR. LARABEE

And how does that resonate in your life?

AKEELAH

A lot of people laugh at me, especially at school.

DR. LARABEE

I saw that. I also saw you encourage it.

AKEELAH

You cray. How can you say I ask people to laugh at me??

DR. LARABEE

What if, Akeelah, you were so powerful and so courageous that all those who laugh now will one day want to be you?

AKEELAH

You trippin, I mean, who would wanna be me? Half the time I don't even wanna be me.

DR. LARABEE

No, you don't get to bully yourself in my presence. Ever! You will stand in your power, which starts by standing up straight and being focused on the goal at hand.

AKEELAH

So does that mean you decided to be my coach? Really? Please?

DR. LARABEE

I suppose we can work here in the mornings...I teach online classes in the afternoon.

AKEELAH

Mornings? That's so perfect. -

She digs a soda from her backpack. He immediately pitches it in garbage.

DR. LARABEE

And no more of these.

AKEELAH

But I been cutting down...

DR. LARABEE

None! The brain needs nutrition, not empty calories. And I assume your mother is in agreement that I can coach you and prepare you for the next level.

AKEELAH

Yeah. I mean yes. Winning has a way of bringing families closer together, don't you think?

He grabs reference books from bookshelves, stacks them in her arms.

DR. LARABEE

Guard these with your life. They will help you as you learn how to deconstruct language. Latin, Greek. French. And I want you to read, read, read. Words are pictures. Pictures of ideas. If you can see the picture you can see the word to spell.

(Hands her a tape)

And learn these by the morning. I've dictated a list so you will know the correct pronunciation.

(Off her puzzled look)

Don't you have a tape recorder?

AKEELAH

For what? We just use our phones. You know it's the twenty-first century.

DR. LARABEE

(Hands her an old fashioned recorder.)

Here. Take this one. We'll start with the Greek and Latin roots.

AKEELAH

Good, Dylan takes Latin...

DR. LARABEE

Fifty words by morning.

AKEELAH

Fifty? Are you kidding me?

DR. LARABEE

This is summer school, remember? And every minute will be dedicated to learning without complaint. I will not tolerate any foolishness, which means no tardiness, no laziness, no slang and no self-sabotage. Otherwise, you can find yourself another coach.

AKEELAH

I feel you. No, sorry, I meant to say that's a deal.

(Extends her hand. After a beat he shakes it.)

See, I already think you're starting to like me.

DR. LARABEE

I'm not here to like you. I'm here to teach you. Please don't ever confuse the two. Goodbye.

She exits, then retrieves from her backpack the consent form and a pen.

AKEELAH

He's not you, daddy, but he can help me win and then you won't have to worry. We'll all be happy again, especially Mama. She'll never sign this so I kinda have to lie...

(As she signs the consent form)

“I consent for (*writes in her name*) Akeelah Anderson to participate in the State Spelling Bee. Relationship to the child, (*writes in*) father, Sam-u-el Ander-son.”

END OF ACT ONE

