BRAIN TRUST

Synopsis:

Married since medical school, Miles and Candace are scientists working together on researching neural enhancements for the treatment of depression. Miles has become depressed and withdrawn from the work, until he makes a new discovery and wants to experiment with it on himself. He convinces Candace to abandon her principles and help him temporarily implant an electronic device in his own brain — and then refuses to allow her to remove it when the results reach far beyond his expectations, forcing them both to face the moral, ethical, and personal implications of what they’ve done.

Cast:

One man, one woman

Characters:

MILES: a doctor/scientist focusing on neural enhancement research, suffering from depression, a risk taker, frustrated, manipulative, married to his work partner, CANDACE

CANDACE: a doctor/scientist focusing on neural enhancement research, a rule-follower, cautious, ambitious, married to her work partner, MILES

Time & Setting

Contemporary. A scientific research laboratory.
BEFORE

(MILES is alone in the lab. He’s wearing a lab coat and looking in a mirror: combing down his hair or doing something on the right side of his head, then probing his right skull, which causes his left eye and mouth to twitch. He puts on a surgical hat, reads some paperwork, makes notes, then paces, muttering to himself. When he exits to the next room, CANDACE enters from the outside: takes off jacket and hangs it up, etc. MILES re-enters, startling her.)

CANDACE
(shrieking)
Miles!

MILES
(overlapping)
Honestly, Candace, no need to holler like a fishwife.

CANDACE
Sorry, I was just—surprised. What are you doing here?

MILES
I work here, remember?

CANDACE
Yes, of course you do, but—I didn’t expect you. You could have let me know—

MILES
I was busy. I’m trying to get myself back in the game here.

CANDACE
Well, good. That’s great news, sweetheart. I could use your help—
(goes to kiss him)

MILES
(pulling away)
Don’t. You smell like a zoo.

CANDACE
I do not!
MILES
I’m telling you, you do. You just can’t smell it on yourself because you’re around them all the time.

CANDACE
Come on. You know monkeys don’t smell.

MILES
They smell to me.

CANDACE
Besides, don’t I always wash up when I’m done with the animals?

MILES
Well, that stink doesn’t wash out.

CANDACE
(teasing, playing Lady Macbeth)
Out, damn spot! What, will these hands never be clean? All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand!

(MILES looks at her blankly.)

Never mind.

(MILES goes back to his paperwork.)

So what are you working on?

MILES
Perfecting my whiffle ball swing. What do you think I’m working on?

CANDACE
I meant, specifically, in this moment. Can I take a look?

(tries to read over his right shoulder)

MILES
(pulls away again)

I’m—not quite ready to share it yet.
CANDACE
OK.
(preparing to work)
Well, I had a good morning, you’ll be pleased to know. Natalia seemed a little less lethargic today, so I think the electrode site we’re using on her may be starting to take effect. Also, I heard from the NIH that our research grant is under review, so I think—

MILES
Candace. Do you not see that I’m trying to focus here?

CANDACE
Sorry! Sorry, I just thought you’d like to hear the latest on our project. It is the first day you’ve been back in the lab since—

MILES
Because I don’t give a shit about the goddamn monkeys!

CANDACE
Well, you’d better figure out how to change your tune about that, because those monkeys are our livelihood for the foreseeable future.

MILES
That’s a depressing thought. And no, the irony of being depressed while researching neural implants to treat depression is not lost on me, Lady Macbeth.

CANDACE
So you haven’t completely lost your sense of humor.

MILES
Candace. I need you to listen to me. Because I’ve had this idea, and I think I’m on to something. Something that could blow our research right out of the water.

CANDACE
I’m glad you’re feeling positive about something, but I’m not sure I want years of work blown out of the water. And I’m pretty sure the NIH doesn’t either.

MILES
That’s not what I mean. I’m taking about a breakthrough.

CANDACE
Really?
MILES

Really.

CANDACE

I’m all ears!

MILES

I think we’re going about this work the wrong way. How many teams are out there, studying the same questions about the brain and depression, each of us hoping to get to the answer first? We’re all targeting the same general sites. We’re all slogging along with dubious models of depressed monkeys or rabbits or rats, trying to guess if any given rodent is more or less down in the dumps on any given day. I mean, come on!

CANDACE

Yes…?

MILES

I think there’s another way. I think there’s a better site for the implants that no one else is testing. In the ventral tegmental area.

CANDACE

The ventral tegmental area? But—

MILES

And I think it’s time to stop—monkeying around with the damn animals as test subjects. I want to try this on myself.

CANDACE

You want to do what?

MILES

Now, Candy, hear me out—

CANDACE

(overlapping)

Oh no, you don’t. You don’t get to call me Candy when you’re proposing something like this.

MILES

Just listen. We both know I’ve become profoundly depressed.

CANDACE

It’s situational. It’s just about our lack of progress with the work.
MILES
Maybe so. But I’ve been here before, and work is not the only trigger.

CANDACE
You’ve always come out the other side of it!

MILES
So far.

CANDACE
What does that mean?

MILES
(ignoring her question)
It makes me the perfect test subject. And if I’m right, this new site will give us results immediately. We’ll be killing two birds with one stone! Our work will move forward, and I won’t be depressed by it anymore!

CANDACE
Dr. Miles Wallace, professional guinea pig?

MILES
Why not?

CANDACE
Do you really need me to list the reasons?

MILES
No, but I can refute every one of them.

CANDACE
Deep brain stimulation in humans is only approved for significant medical conditions like Parkinson’s.

MILES
I’ll sign a waiver.

CANDACE
It’s risky.
MILES
Life is risky. Remember when I asked you on our first date? You thought that was risky.
(imitating her, teasing)
What would happen to our work together if the relationship was a failure?

CANDACE
That’s not the kind of risk I’m talking about.

MILES
Fine. I’m fully cognizant of the physical hazards, and I’m still a willing subject.

CANDACE
Chance of infection. Further physical impairment. You could hit a blood vessel!

MILES
Luckily, I have a doctor I trust with my life to do the implant.

CANDACE
Wait a minute. Me?

MILES
Who else?

CANDACE
No way.

MILES
You prefer I try to do it myself? Or enlist some incompetent technician?

CANDACE
What if something goes wrong?

MILES
It won’t.

CANDACE
Oh, so now you’re an optimist? We could both lose our medical licenses.

MILES
I’ll take full responsibility.
CANDACE
You think the NIH or the Medical Board would buy that? Especially if I’m the one to implant the electrodes—which I will not be, by the way.

MILES
If it doesn’t work, if there’s nothing to report, then it can be our secret. A little private experimentation between husband and wife.

CANDACE
That’s completely unethical.

MILES
But if this site works—when it works—think about what we’ll have done! While everyone else is still plodding along with the animals like Dr. Doolittle, you and I will have actually achieved a real breakthrough—discovered a new area of the brain that can reverse depression. Think of the applications. Think of the notoriety. Think of the funding.

CANDACE
The NIH is never going to fund us in some unauthorized, half-cocked experiment—especially not one based on illegally obtained results.

MILES
That’s because the NIH is too conservative and narrow-minded for this level of innovation. But there are plenty of other funding sources that would be thrilled to support the cure for common human depression! Imagine how many people’s lives we could change. Not to mention how much your life would improve by not being married to someone depressed.

CANDACE
That’s the thing, Miles. You’ve been depressed. You’re not thinking clearly. If you were, you’d know that this is simply wrong.

MILES
How is taking that stand an exercise of your scientific mind? You’ve got to think outside the box to get anywhere in this business. You should know that better than anyone, Candace.

CANDACE
That’s not fair.

MILES
The truth is not fair?

CANDACE
Playing on my bruised ego is not fair.
MILES
Your nomination for the Taubman Prize. You *had* that award. Remember how excited you were?

CANDACE
I remember.

MILES
But you were too careful, too methodical. You all but handed it to Druker and Sawyers.

CANDACE
We’re talking about manipulating the human brain! There’s no such thing as too careful or methodical.

MILES
There is when it robs you of a well-deserved chance at recognition for so many years of dedicated effort.

CANDACE
You’re playing dirty.

MILES
I’m being honest. Sometimes the truth hurts. But you are a scientist, my darling. You deal exclusively in truths.

CANDACE
Objectivity.

MILES
Yes.

CANDACE
And you don’t think this idea is outrageously *subjective*? It would completely compromise both your status and mine as neutral researchers.

MILES
If this is successful, no one is going to scrutinize our methodology.

CANDACE
And that’s what you’re counting on.
MILES

Elementary, my dear Dr. Watson!

CANDACE

No, Miles! You don’t get to prey on me with pet names and private jokes. This is a professional matter.

MILES

Exactly! It is professional. That’s why I’m trying to include you. You think I couldn’t do this on my own? Hire some post-doc flunky who’s desperate to get in on the ground floor of something to drill a hole in my skull? And then I take the credit for discovery and success. But I want to do this with you. My partner. My wife.

CANDACE

You’re manipulating me.

MILES

I wouldn’t be if I didn’t feel so confident. Candace, we have this power. Less than 150 years ago, there was no such thing as science. People like us called themselves “natural philosophers” and their work was all about finding God in nature. We know so much more now. We can do so much more. Aren’t we morally obligated to put that knowledge and ability to use?

CANDACE

Are you actually claiming the moral high ground?

MILES

Would you just take a look? Just read what I’ve got and see what you think for yourself. Please.

(CANDACE reviews his materials)

CANDACE

I see what you’re getting at here, Miles. I really do. But it’s too dangerous. On so many levels.

MILES

The dangers are trivial compared to killing myself.

CANDACE

What?

MILES

Look at me, Candace. Suicide is a real possibility with this degree of clinical depression. You have to know that.
CANDACE
Miles, if you’re considering suicide, then we’ve just stepped over a very important line that is way beyond—if this is some kind of cry for help, then we need to get you—

MILES
No! This is the help I need! This is all I need.

CANDACE
Miles, you just threatened me with suicide! Did you not expect me to take that seriously?

MILES
I’m sorry. Candace, please. You have to trust me. This is the answer. Not a suicide hot line or psychotherapy. Just—this.

(Beat)

CANDACE
So if I did agree to do this—if!—it would have to be temporary.

MILES
Fine.

CANDACE
Just long enough to determine initial results.

MILES
Absolutely.

CANDACE
And then if it’s successful, we go about it through the proper channels.

MILES
You got it.

CANDACE
Testing in animal models.

MILES
Monkeys and bunnies from here to next Tuesday.

CANDACE
All right. Let me think about it.
Think about it?

You know I don’t like snap decisions. Let me mull it over a few days. Process.

No! It has to be today. Now!

Why?

Because I’ve got everything ready to go.

(indicates the other room)

So you thought you could just steamroll me into doing whatever you wanted?


Miles!

Haven’t we?

The first time you show up for work in months—months, Miles!—while I’ve beenshouldering all the responsibility myself, keeping up with the records and data, smoothing ruffled feathers, making excuses—

I am well aware of how much I’ve burdened you here. And then coming home to a silent, depressed spouse every night? How do you think it’s made me feel, knowing how difficult I’ve been making life for you?

That’s not what I meant—
MILES
What kind of man does that to the woman he loves? Not pulling my weight, doing my share. No, Candace. That’s why we have to do this. Because it’s the first thing that’s gotten me out of bed in months. Our work is stagnating as it is, and you know it. We both need this.

CANDACE
It’s illegal. It’s immoral. It’s unethical. It’s—everything you and I are against. Miles, if you really have a theory you want to try, there are right ways to go about it. Let’s follow protocol—

MILES
I can’t wait, Candace.

(reveals that he’s already started to drill a hole in his right skull)

CANDACE
Oh my god, Miles.

MILES
I tried. I was going to do the whole thing without you. But I can’t. I need help placing the electrode.

CANDACE
Jesus.

MILES
I didn’t want to screw this up!

CANDACE
Miles, you have really gone too far.

MILES
Come on. I’ve got everything prepped. And you know that every minute we spend arguing while my brain is exposed increases the chance of infection.

CANDACE
I can’t believe you’ve done this.

MILES
I just need you to place the electrode in the site I’ve designated. Just like you’ve done a hundred times before, in the monkeys. Easy as pie.
CANDACE
Don’t be glib. There’s nothing easy here.

MILES
It’s you and me, right? Wallace and Watson. Just like it’s always been, ever since med school. Remember?

(he’s said this many times before)
If there’d been a Walton or a Washington to separate us, we might never have been thrown together like we were. Might never have known that we belonged together. The great cosmic fate of alphabetical order.

CANDACE
That was a long time ago.

MILES
But we’re still us. Still together. I still need you, Candace. Help me. Please!

(Beat)

CANDACE
Temporary.

MILES
Yes.

CANDACE
Just to confirm the effect.

MILES
Right.

CANDACE
No other tricks up your sleeve.

MILES
None.

(Beat)

CANDACE
Show me what you want me to do.

END OF SCENE
AFTER

(A few days later. CANDACE is alone in the lab: working, organizing materials and equipment, agitated. She makes a phone call, listens.)

CANDACE
(on phone)
Voicemail box is full!? Yeah, no kidding, full of my messages! Goddamn you, Miles!

MILES
(entering)
Candace, my lass, my lovely, top of the morning to you!

CANDACE
Miles! Where the hell have you been all this time?

MILES
Oh, out and about. Here and there and everywhere. You know how it is.

CANDACE
No, I don’t know “how it is,” because we agreed—

MILES
It really is a wonderful world out there. Miraculous.

CANDACE
Miles, I do not believe you. I have been calling and calling since—

MILES
On my phone?

CANDACE
Of course on your phone—

MILES
Oh darling, I gave that little curio away a lifetime ago.

CANDACE
You gave away your cell phone?

MILES
What do I need with such a prosaic communication device?
CANDACE
What are you talking about?

MILES
There was a homeless woman on the street downtown who clearly needed it more than I do.

CANDACE
You’ve been wandering around on city streets? Downtown?

MILES
I told you, I’ve been everywhere.

CANDACE
With a stimulating electrode halo attached to your head.

MILES
I kept my hood up. No one could see a thing. Look.
(shows her)

CANDACE
Miles, it is unbelievably foolhardy to walk around like that and you know it.

MILES
Well, that’s why I came back here.

CANDACE
Great. So let’s get you unhooked, because—

MILES
No, you misunderstand me. I didn’t come back to remove it. I’m here so we can cement the electrodes in place permanently.

CANDACE
Permanently? Are you out of your mind?

MILES
Quite the contrary, my dear. As a matter of fact, I’ve never been more fully in my mind. Well, first I had to get a larger battery—

CANDACE
You did what?
MILES
So the implant can deliver more current. Now I can control the intensity.

CANDACE
You’ve increased the current.

MILES
Yes, and the results are phenomenal!

CANDACE
(ignoring his enthusiasm)
Miles, maybe you lost track of time out there, but this crazy experiment of yours has now exceeded the terms we specifically outlined when—

MILES
But Candace, you can’t possibly expect me to abide by those terms now. Not when this crazy experiment, as you so eloquently describe it, has gone far beyond anything you or I could have imagined. Those parameters are completely meaningless.

CANDACE
Are you listening to yourself?

MILES
Of course I am.

CANDACE
I don’t think you are, or you would understand how imperative it is that we remove those electrodes immediately.

MILES
How do you figure that?

CANDACE
It didn’t work!

MILES
You call this not working?

CANDACE
I mean, yes, the initial test showed some efficacy—
MILES
Candace, with the increased current, what’s happening to me now is beyond anything we could have hoped for. It’s euphoria!

CANDACE
Euphoria.

MILES
Now you’re with me!

CANDACE
You know as well as I do that euphoria is a common response to the release from depression.

MILES
That doesn’t make it inherently invalid.

CANDACE
It’s not real, Miles. It’s an illusion triggered by electrical stimulation.

MILES
The light bulbs in this room are sparked by electricity. Does that mean that it is not, in fact, light in here?

CANDACE
A few days ago, you were threatening suicide!

MILES
And now I couldn’t be farther from it. Isn’t that preferable?

CANDACE
What you are experiencing is not an effective treatment for depression.

MILES
Don’t knock it til you’ve tried it.

CANDACE
This isn’t a joke!

MILES
No, it’s not. And I’m serious. I’ve entered into a state of absolute well-being and clarity, and you say that’s not an acceptable alternative to depression? I can see, literally see, how everything is connected. I can feel all living things, and beyond. I am at one with the universe. I am the universe.
CANDACE
You think you’re God?

MILES
No, my darling. I realize that I am God. There is a difference.

CANDACE
You have no objectivity.

MILES
I am God! How can you say I have no objectivity?

CANDACE
You’re on an LSD trip. Just let me take out the electrodes and you’ll see.

MILES
That makes no sense. Do you really not understand? We’ve more than achieved our goal!

CANDACE
We most certainly have not.

MILES
We have found an effective site for the immediate treatment—no, the reversal of depression.

CANDACE
Maybe, but with hallucinatory side effects that the medical community would never accept, let alone the general public.

MILES
Are you really calling spiritual enlightenment an unacceptable side effect? I sincerely doubt the public would agree with that.

CANDACE
Think about how this could be misused. Abused.

MILES
Impossible. In fact, just the opposite. The world would be transformed if we all lived on this higher plane of existence. Imagine! All of humanity, awakened, together!

CANDACE
Are you serious?
MILES
Why not? I now understand that, on a fundamental level, we are all one, Candace. It’s incredible. We need to share it.

CANDACE
You want to implant electrodes into the brains of the whole human race? Literally?

MILES
You think some people deserve to be happier than others?

CANDACE
Sex offenders? Serial killers?

MILES
Brilliant! Opening the universal mind in this way would surely eliminate that kind of anti-social behavior. In fact, that’s probably the population we should start with.

(makes a note)

CANDACE
Oh my god…

MILES
Yes, darling?

CANDACE
(as in: “Oh no, you didn’t!”)

Oh no—

(stops herself)

What about just—ordinary people who are perfectly content with their lives as they are?

MILES
When they’ve attained enlightenment, they’ll be even more appreciative of what they have—and satisfied with having much less, come to think of it. The environmental impact alone could make the planet healthier in a decade!

CANDACE
And who pays to put everyone in the world on a permanent bliss trip?

MILES
There you go, thinking inside the box again. Once we’ve reached critical mass, the economics become irrelevant. No more have-s and have-nots. No more first world/third world. We won’t need economics.
CANDACE
You really have an answer for everything, don’t you?

MILES
That’s because there is an answer for everything.

CANDACE
Who are you? Not the Miles I know and love. Where is he?

I’m right here.

CANDACE
No. I want the old Miles back.

MILES
Why? The old Miles was a depressive. He made you and himself miserable.

But he was mortal.

MILES
This is the real me, Candace. My true ultimate Self. You just need to try it.

CANDACE
Out of the question.

MILES
But then you’d understand! Trust me—

CANDACE
I don’t trust you. Not in this state.

MILES
You would feel so much better.

CANDACE
I don’t need to feel better. I’m not depressed. I’m angry. With you!

MILES
Think about how we’d enjoy making up...
CANDACE
Miles, stop! Listen to me. We’re supposed to be finding a treatment for depression, not a way to manipulate the fundamental brain activity of—humanity!

MILES
You’re looking at this with way too narrow a focus.

CANDACE
That’s our job description!

MILES
You only think that because you can’t see what I see. Not yet. But you will. Let me put it into terms you can currently understand.

CANDACE
Don’t you dare patronize me.

MILES
This discovery goes so far beyond our original scope. Isn’t a revelation like this exactly why you chose to pursue neural research? To truly understand the capacities of the human brain, and to use that knowledge to make a profound and lasting difference in people’s lives? To achieve a groundbreaking new conception of the most complex, beautiful organism on Earth? This is our life’s work!

CANDACE
What about your speech the other day, about the absurdity of looking for God in nature and calling it science?

MILES
I can admit when I’m wrong. It’s all true. The natural philosophers of yesteryear understood something essential that has since been obscured. But we can fix that.

CANDACE
This is ridiculous. And you’re just prolonging the inevitable. We’ve tested your hypothesis. We’ve seen the results. Now we need to remove the electrodes and evaluate with clear heads.

MILES
So you won’t join me?

CANDACE
Absolutely not. Miles, seriously, what do you think you’re going to do from here? Publish? Proselytize?
MILES
Your imagination about this is so—limited. So human. I don’t need to publish. The experience itself is what will convince others. It’s completely self-validating.

CANDACE
This experience doesn’t pay the mortgage!

MILES
(musing)
It’s like we’re speaking different languages now.

CANDACE
At best, you’ll be the laughingstock of our research community. At worst, we both will. We’ll lose all standing, all funding. Is this really worth sacrificing our careers and livelihoods? What you just described as our life’s work?

MILES
I’ll never go back.

CANDACE
That’s not an acceptable or even remotely realistic choice.

MILES
If you won’t cement the electrodes on permanently, I’ll do it myself.

CANDACE
Like hell you will.

MILES
I can do it.

CANDACE
Because you’re the all-powerful, all-seeing.

MILES
I’m not the Wizard of Oz, Candace.

CANDACE
No, you’re God, because that’s so much more rational!

MILES
I wish you could see it the way I can.
CANDACE
I don’t! In fact, what I really wish is that I’d never let you coerce me into this fiasco in the first place.

MILES
I’ve crossed over. I’m existing on a new plane. It’s not possible for me to go back.

CANDACE
Look, if this discovery is so monumental, it will hold. Now that we know this site works, we can investigate it with a monkey. We can use that to get the support we need for a human trial, the right way.

MILES
I won’t be able to do that, Candace. Not if you take these electrodes out.

CANDACE
Well, we can’t move forward with those electrodes in.

MILES
So we are at an impasse.

(Beat)

CANDACE
Look, I do think you’re on to something, Miles. You’ve found an important new site in the cognitive machinery of the brain. I’m sure it will have important applications far beyond alleviating depression. It’s an incredibly exciting discovery.

MILES
Thank you.

CANDACE
So let’s make sure we can communicate that to others in a way they can hear and understand. I promise you, as one of those people out here, this is not it. So please, let me do what I have to do. And then we can address this together, two rational human beings. Scientists. Partners. Like we’ve always done.

MILES
(grabbing an instrument as a weapon)
I’m sorry, Candace. I can’t let you do that.

CANDACE
Are you threatening me?
MILES
I will stop you from removing this link to transcendence at all costs.

CANDACE
At all costs. Including, what, murder?

MILES
This is too important.

CANDACE
More important than my life.

MILES
It seems like it’s your life or mine.

CANDACE
What?

MILES
You’re talking about this at the level of a scientific experiment. But it’s gone so far beyond that. This is about my existence.

CANDACE
What about my existence?

MILES
You’ve said it yourself. Sometimes there are sacrifices that need to be made.

CANDACE
You’re right, Miles. Sometimes there are sacrifices.

(Beat)

All right.

MILES
All right?

CANDACE
I see this isn’t the way. And I’m as much to blame as you are. God, Miles, just put that thing down, would you? You’re frightening me!
MILES

Oh, Candy, I’m sorry, you know I’d never—

(He drops his weapon and goes to hold her. As he does, CANDACE pulls a syringe from her lab coat pocket and injects him.)

Candy?

CANDACE

I’m sorry, too, Miles.

MILES

What have you done?

CANDACE

I didn’t want to do it like this. But I will, if I have to—

Candy, please, no—

MILES

Just relax. Relax, sweetheart. I’ve got you.

(.helps MILES sit down)

CANDACE

Miles, I’m telling you! It will kill me!

No, I promise—

MILES

It will!

CANDACE

Miles, just calm down—

MILES

You don’t understand. If you—the new current—I’ll die, Candace—

(loses consciousness)
CANDACE
(picks up her equipment and prepares to remove the electrodes, taking off his jacket, then stops)

This is more than just a new battery. What have you done to yourself?

(puts the equipment down)

What have you done to us?

(picks up equipment, puts it down again and steps away from MILES.)

Oh god, Miles. What am I going to do now?

END OF PLAY