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Writer draws on experience raising an autistic son for new play

BY JUDITH NEWMARK • Post-Dispatch Theater Critic > jnewmark@post-dispatch.com > 314-340-8243 | Posted: Thursday, August 25, 2011 9:00 am

In the snug St. Louis theater community, Deanna Jent enjoys a sterling reputation: versatile, insightful and industrious.

The head of Fontbonne University's theater department, Jent, 49, is also artistic director (and a co-founder) of Mustard Seed Theatre, a troupe that's staged everything from Shakespeare to the Appalachian gospel show "Smoke on the Mountain." In demand as a director with other companies as well, she's also written several plays, including an adaptation of C.S. Lewis' "Till We Have Faces" that Mustard Seed staged last season.

Who has the time and energy for all of that?

Surely not the mother of an autistic teenager.

But now the struggles that inform day-to-day life at the Jent house are the subject of her latest play. It opens the Mustard Seed season Thursday.

"Falling" focuses on a couple (like Jent and her husband, Steve, an elementary school teacher) trying to care for their severely autistic son (like Andy Jent, 17). "Falling" is the first play that Jent drew from her own experience, rather than history or a work of literature — a depiction of a family in which nothing is ever easy and disaster is never more than a split-second away.

Of course, she works hard, Jent said.

"When I teach or direct, people do what I say," she said. "I can control that world — unlike at home. The theater and the classroom are where I find energy and refreshment."

The Jents, who also are the parents of twins Chris and Lindzey, 19 and in college, are accustomed to rituals that make Andy feel secure, to frustrations that can explode into physical aggression, to a pervasive anxiety that doesn't let up.

The mother in the play "thinks if she just cares enough, she can keep everybody safe," Jent said. "But she can't. She says, 'I am always going to be afraid, whether he's here or somewhere else. I choose this fear (of living with her son.)' There's not a happy ending."

Jent said that she realized something was different about Andy when he was about 18 months old and started to lose words instead of increasing his vocabulary. Then he began to engage in repetitive behavior, drawing into himself instead of exploring his world.

"It was like watching someone have a stroke over the course of a year," Jent said.

The parents in the play confront some of the same issues that the Jents do. In the play, the parents have another, "neurotypical" sibling whom they also love and don't want to neglect.

"I had to learn that fair doesn't mean that everybody gets the same thing," Jent said. "Fair means that everybody gets what they need."

They also face questions of where their son will live and how he will spend his time when he is older.

Jent knows that she and her husband aren't the only people facing those questions. In an essay she wrote on "extreme parenting," she wrote that they belong to a "tribe" whose members recognize each other on special-school parking lots, in support groups, sometimes in public places. Part of her reason for writing the play was to paint a portrait of that tribe, "an adult population who live in a war zone, trying to figure out how to go on with their lives."

"I know that after they see the play, some people are going to say that they're sorry, that they didn't know my life was so hard. OK, they will," Jent said. "But this is not about sympathy, or solutions, or more programs for autistic adults, or anything like that.

"There's no panacea, and there's no happy ending. This play is about loving somebody who's hard to love. It's about questions, not answers."

"Falling"

Who Mustard Seed Theatre at Fontbonne • **When** Thursday-Sept. 11; 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays • **Where** Fontbonne University Fine Arts Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard • **How much** \$25; \$20 for students and older adults • **More info** 314-719-8060; mustardseedtheatre.com