



BWW Reviews: Mustard Seed Theatre Premieres Dramatic New Play - FALLING

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by Chris Gibson



Playwright Deanna Jent's *Falling* is an intriguing piece of theatre, drawing on her own real

life experiences caring for a teenager with autism, but creating something wholly original in the process. As the parent of a five year old, there's a frightening aspect to watching this tale unfold, thinking all the while that this could have been something I'd have had to deal with had this specific condition occurred to my own darling little boy. It's a scary thought indeed, and one that constantly cropped up in my head as I watched the story unfold. Would I have had the inner strength necessary to cope with such a problematic situation? Would my marriage have been able to withstand the strain? Mustard Seed Theatre's production raises these questions and more while also managing to entertain, and bring a certain degree of good humor to the proceedings as well.

The Martins are a typical family in a lot of ways, but the one atypical aspect is that they struggle daily to deal with the issues regarding the aggressive nature that their autistic son Josh occasionally displays. This behavior has left them without a therapist willing to work with him, and during the particular time frame we're covering, husband Bill's mother Sue, a bible-thumping believer, is coming by for a visit while her house is being tended to. Naturally, since she hasn't seen the boy in a few years, she's quite unprepared for how much he's grown, and how his actions have placed family members in danger at various times. That's a part of the story, but there's also the relationship between wife Tami and husband Bill, which is becoming



strained at best, and also daughter Lisa, who has begun to hate the restrictions placed on her own life and aspirations by having to act as part-time caretaker as well. However, a conceit that occurs about three-quarters of the way through the play, when Tami has a peculiarly lucid dream about something dreadful happening to Josh, puts a dramatic spin on the whole thing. One thing is clear, Josh will never get the chance to realize any kind of dream himself.

Jonathan Foster does excellent work as Josh, and his movements are completely believable, and even a bit disturbing in their authenticity (in part, thanks to the fine work of movement and combat director Shaun Sheley). Foster also makes another appearance which is best left unspoiled. Suffice to say it plays into the dream sequence. Michelle Hand gives a phenomenal portrayal of a mother struggling to hold on to her son, even though some might say he'd be in better hands if he was in a group home setting. Greg Johnston is also equally up to task as her husband, who's about had his fill of the day to day rigors, as well as his mother's constant reliance on the Bible for platitudes which can no longer bring them any sense of comfort.

Katie Donnelly does good work making sister Lisa more than just a caricature, imbuing her with a genuine sense of frustration, and even occasionally disgust at what she's had to sacrifice in order to keep the home as peaceful as possible for her brother's sake. Carmen Russell is excellent as Bill's mother, maintaining a quiet dignity in spite of her being aghast at some of the behavior she sees Josh display. Russell, too, plays this for more than a cardboard creation, making the character seem real and honest in her execution.

Director Lori Adams keeps the action focused and fluid for the most part, and it's brevity (about 80 minutes) is well paced and engaging throughout. John Stark's smart set design is expertly lit by Julie Mack, and it really seems like a home with it's slight clutter (props by Meg Brinkley). Jent contributes the costuming, which works well for each character.

Falling is a fresh and invigorating new work, occasionally frustrating because you want the characters to make choices they can't, but that's how things are in real life. There are no easy answers in these kind of situations, and *Falling* doesn't offer them up. The play continues through September 11, 2011 in the theatre on the campus of Fontbonne University.

Correction: Run extended through 9/18/11!