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Review: "Falling," Mustard Seed Theatre

Deanna Jent's play, based on her own experiences as a parent of a child with autism, is pitch-perfect.

BY DEVIN C. BAKER



Brace yourselves: I've somehow managed to get away with (milk?) this here thee-ay-tur beat for just about a year now. Look, Ma! My collegiate pursuits didn't amount to a colossal, crippling waste of time and money after all! Snark aside, I've truly enjoyed the opportunity to actively engage in our impressive local theater scene in my own little way, and I appreciate any and all who have read and/or commented upon my missives, even if I only managed to incur your ire. My ire-incurrent tendencies are the stuff of legend. Here's hoping I can continue to amuse, inform and irk you in the seasons to come. If memory serves, one of the first pieces I reviewed for Look/Listen (was it the first?) was a production from Mustard Seed Theatre. In the intervening time, I've endeavored not to repeat a company; less for fairness than a desire to explore and exhibit the richness and variety of St. Louis theater. The first birthday of this gig brings my first company re-visit: Mustard Seed's premiere of *Falling* by the company's artistic director Deanna Jent. I couldn't pass this one up.

Falling

Mustard Seed Theatre
Fine Arts Building at Fontbonne University
314-719-8060

\$25, \$20 students/seniors

through September 18

The meat of *Falling* derives from Deanna Jent's own experiences parenting a child with severe autism—specifically as that child enters his late teens as a large, powerful presence whose violent outbursts threaten the family's safety in the home. Her first-hand perspective informs the play with a particular frankness and humor, where an outside observer might be tempted toward movie-of-the-week style sentimentality. We encounter the Martin family in media res, preparing son Josh (Jonathan Foster) for school, a ritualistic process wherein every hurdle and roadblock presented by his particular collection of autistic triggers must be met with a fusillade of games, distractions, diversions and codewords. We learn through the course of this morning routine that the Martins have had little luck with in-home care, aides resigning when the situation gets a bit too real.

As for the notion of a group home, it seems nothing suitable has been found, though one suspects that mom Tami (Michelle Hand) may have an unattainably high standard in that regard. Meanwhile, she and husband Bill (Greg Johnston) soldier on, well aware that their life's laser focus on Josh's needs threatens their marriage, the needs of their teenage daughter Lisa (Katie Donnelly) and everyone's physical safety, unable to realistically set their sights further sown the road than Josh's next need. We catch the Martins as they prepare for a visit from Bill's mother, Grammy Sue (Carmen Russell), a Bible-toting scripture-quoter whose surety that prayer is the only answer ratchets up the already crackling household tension.

Laying out the action as a slice-of-life steers the focus onto the characters more than the action. There's no broad narrative story arc per se; rather, the quotidian snapshot illustrates and reinforces how extraordinary circumstances can become unremarkable to those at their epicenter—the old eye-of-the-storm thing. What's normal stuff to the Martin household is jarring to us, as well as Grammy Sue, who operates as an outsider like us. Sue also represents the world of well-meaning folks who just don't get it and are sure that there's just some number you call to just get Josh fixed. Teenager Lisa, quite understandably, resents Josh for missed attention and opportunities: both parents can never attend her school events; the whole family can never go on vacation. Most at-risk is Bill and Tami's marriage. Tami is the captain of the team, and as far as Bill is concerned, he's all but benched. Where he must consult on a change in Josh's routine, she's calling audibles at the line of scrimmage.

When she's not trying to single-handedly wrangle her son, Tami's online searching for the next possible clue to ameliorating the situation. She maintains an unimaginable calm during Josh's outbursts only to self-medicate with a glass of wine or shot of whiskey when the storm has died down. Bill, meanwhile, misses closeness with his wife, which manifests in clumsy suggestions and advances which Tami summarily rebuffs. He wants in to the club in any way possible, but can't find an inroad. In one biting summary of this conflict, Tami spits, "Sex is your prayer for a miracle, and look what that got us!" Scathing with an underpinning of dark humor; that's good writing.

Not long ago, I reviewed the debut of another local playwright's work, and found the production lacking. I averred that the script needed work, review, re-work, discussion and aggressive editing that, it seemed, it had not received. It needed purpose and shape. In the program notes for *Falling*, Deanna Jent details a rigorous development process wherein she actively sought input from colleagues to build and refine her script. This show affirms the value of an active, critical editing and workshopping process in the creation of a theatrical text. She has constructed, from experience, a real, plausible milieu wherein chaos is normalcy, and we buy it right off the bat. It just feels spot-on. The near-mundanity of the

Martin household's extreme situation is expressed through details within the action rather than expository explanation.

We learn that Josh responds to tactile stimuli by seeing the calming effect of a shower of feathers from a rigged up cardboard box on a living-room shelf—no one has to tell us that that's a thing in this house. Likewise, Josh's marble collection: we see him soothed by their touch and transfixed by looking through their colored swirls. The first violent outburst we witness seems all the more shocking for how sudden yet somehow expected it comes off.

Some dots only connect later in the play, such as a seemingly out-of-place moment at the computer, when Tami rocks out to a song by Hole, complete with spotlight. A head-scratcher at first, it illustrates Tami's propensity for escaping into her own head-space, setting up a frighteningly real dream-sequence later, as well as the fantastical ending. If I have a gripe, it's that maybe I could have wanted that through-line clarified a bit, because until the dream-sequence, I was lingeringly perplexed at the lip-synch moment. Perhaps one more early instance of Tami's escapism might have drawn a stronger line. Really, that's the harshest thing I can say about this script.

While I'm often given to individual assessments of the cast, I don't know how useful that will be here. This is an excellent cast, period. No one stands out, because all are working together as a true ensemble. What I will say is that there is a universal resistance of caricature, and I have to believe credit for this goes equally to Dent, director Lori Adams and their fine collection of actors. Sue, for example, could be exaggerated into a one-note scold, but she's clearly trying to understand and wants to help. Anyone familiar with someone on Josh's end of the autism spectrum will recognize how careful and restrained Jonathan Foster's performance is, especially when we see him embody another character deep into the play's run. Bill and Tami's strained relationship is palpable and realistically gets no definitive resolution.

Donnelly conveys through body language Lisa's aversion to Josh's very presence. The characters are so well-rounded that we just buy in to their universe unquestioningly. I'd be remiss if I didn't mention one particular contributor to the feeling of abnormal normalcy in *Falling* and that's the Martin house itself. I've seen many a living-room/dining-room set up on St. Louis stages, and I can't recall one that looked more like it was plucked from a street in Kirkwood or Webster or Florissant or Anytown, USA and plopped down into a black-box performance space. Kudos to John Stark for his set design, which serves as every bit a member of this ensemble.

Falling tackles a tough subject with a matter-of-fact approach that bespeaks its author's closeness to the material. This play isn't pretending to solve any problems or plant any signposts, but simply to offer a glimpse of stuff that real people, people you probably know, are going through day in, day out. As awareness of autism has grown in recent years, understanding in the world at large hasn't. I'd like to hope that Jent's play will get some traction and be picked up for presentation by other companies around the country, around the world. Insight like this sticks with people because it's delivered with honesty and authority, without pontification. For now, let's just get as many folks as we can in to see this show, by this company in this town. The conversation has to start somewhere.