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Ivory Theater
7620 Michigan Ave

Autism Imitates Life: Deanna Jent's *Falling* will knock you on your ass

By Paul Friswold
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John Lamb



Jonathan Foster is heartbreaking as Josh, an eighteen-year-old with autism.

Details:

Falling

Through September 18 at the Fontbonne University Fine Arts Center Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard, Clayton. Tickets are \$25 (\$20 for students and seniors).

Call 314-719-8060 or visit

www.mustardseedtheatre.com.

Subject(s):

[plays about autism](#), [Deanna Jent](#), [Mustard Seed Theatre](#), [Lori Adams](#), [Jonathan Foster](#), [Michelle Hand](#)

There is no "I" in mother, but there certainly is an "other." For Tami Martin, the dominant other is her eighteen-year-old son, Josh, who has autism. This means everyone in the family lives around Josh's needs and desires, all of which must be negotiated with caution; Josh is a big boy, and when he doesn't get his way, he can be impulsively violent.

Two facts about Mustard Seed Theatre's current production, ***Falling***, are important to note before we go much further. One, playwright Deanna Jent is the mother of an autistic teenage son. Two, *Falling* is neither an autism advocacy play nor a plea for sympathy, money or pity. *Falling* is a dramatic representation of what life with autism can be like. It is art, and it will kick your guts so hard that your heart is forced into your throat before the evening is over.

Jent and director Lori Adams pull no punches in conveying what an autistic young adult does to your home life. Tami (Michelle Hand) possesses the outward calmness of a hostage negotiator and the relentless cheerfulness of a morning-talk-show host when Josh (Jonathan Foster) is present, but that front drops as soon as he has left the room. Controlling all stimuli Josh encounters, from the sound of a blender to the appearance of a new object in the family home, requires every

erg of her concentration and energy. There are code words to remember, behavior-modification strategies to plan and weekend schedules to work out about who watches Josh and who gets to leave the house.

Tami is Josh's bridge to the rest of the world, but the strain of being his filter is grinding her down to the point where she displays many of the characteristics of autism herself. She's no longer connecting emotionally with her teenage daughter, Lisa (played with percolating indignation by Katie Donnelly),



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and she shuns even casual physical contact with her husband, Bill (Greg Johnston). Her sense of boundaries with other people has diminished as well, as she glibly relates Josh's masturbation habits to her horrified mother-in-law with the same unself-consciousness Josh displays while masturbating on the couch behind them.

But Josh himself keeps you from pitying Tami. Jonathan Foster speaks in a high-pitched, ethereal voice, as if he's transmitting his thoughts from a faraway place. His is a remarkable performance, one that draws you in even as he insulates himself from the world. He hunches his large frame, cocks his head back with slitted eyes and turns slightly away from everyone, doing everything possible to put distance between himself and every other human being. There is a childlike wonder to Josh that vanishes when he casually grabs Tami by the hair and drags her up to her toes because he's being denied something. When Josh is scared, he launches into a rampage that culminates in him throwing Tami around the living room and choking her nearly to death. It's terrifying — and made more so because afterward Josh realizes what he has done and howls out a wordless scream of inchoate fury, directed at himself, at what he understands about his condition and what he can't communicate to anyone.

But this frustration is not the lasting image of *Falling*. That moment comes when Tami tells Josh she needs a hug, and he ignores her, but then sidles up to her and lets her embrace him for less than a second before shuffling back out of reach. In that moment of contact, all the weight drops from Tami's body and Josh is still and calm; Tami is no longer the mother of an autistic child, just simply a mother. The rewards are fleeting, but they're priceless when you can hold them.