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## Of a Feather

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## Of a Feather

Deanna Jent '84 wrote the play *Falling* based on her experiences as the mother of a special-needs child. What surprises her is how strongly audiences have connected to the drama and its message.

Story by DEANNA JENT '84



**Jent held her son Andy's hand after he became distracted by the sound of an ambulance siren. (Photo by Emily Rasinski for theSt. Louis Post-Dispatch)**

In the summer of 2010, I started work on what I thought would be an essay about parenting a teen son with special needs. The piece began with me dropping him off at summer school, several miles away from our house in the suburbs of St. Louis:

*In the morning, the bus doors open, and the ramps slide down to start the parade of wheelchairs and walkers. Parents with specialized vans carefully ramp their children to ground level, handing off backpacks and medical equipment to staff members.*

*Then the other students fill the sidewalks. A thin teen boy walking on his toes, clutching a thick phone directory. Children wearing helmets and safety harnesses. A short, dark-haired girl with thunder in her throat, taking two steps and a stomp, two steps and a stomp. The runners: darting in between the other students with staff in pursuit. Two clumps of typical-looking teens, divided by gender. And my son — nearly 300 pounds of mostly giddy smiles and noises, a 16-year-old with severe autism and an unpredictable temper.*

*As the amazingly resilient and cheerful staff move the students inside, the parents in the parking lot share knowing glances. We are a tribe.*

*I believe that parenting is a struggle and a joy for everyone. Each family has a journey, and none is more or less important. But some journeys are so different, the terrain so unusual, that it bears reporting. I write from the War Zone of Extreme Parenting.*

*The enemies are many. Sometimes our own children are a danger to themselves, to their siblings, to us. Extreme Parents become soldiers on guard, alert to any eye-shift or noise that might indicate impending aggressiveness. It is by now such an internalized experience that in any location, I am immediately aware of where exits and “safe rooms” are. One mother of a son with a seizure disorder always knows the locations of glass windows or doors so she can keep him away from potential broken glass.*

And then ... the essay fizzled. I tried adding some poetic imagery, a piece of conversation I had with my daughter, but the parts never came together as a whole. A colleague asked me, “Why aren’t you writing a play?”

“This is my life,” I said. “A play has a beginning, middle and an end. I certainly don’t know what the end is! Besides, who would be interested in a play about a family like mine?”

At his urging, however, I took the challenge. Rather than writing a non-fiction essay about our experiences, I decided to create a drama in which the audience could experience the dizzying sensation familiar to Extreme Parents — the feeling that the world has dropped out from under your feet, and you don’t know where (or if) you’re going to land.

## From Life to Fiction

The play opens without words. A young man (Josh) enters the stage and moves around the room, putting toys in a certain order on the floor and arranging the placement of items at a desk. He stands under a shelf which has a cardboard box on top of it with a rope attached that dangles down. Slowly, Josh pulls on the rope and the box tips forward, dumping out feathers. He squeals in joy and laughs as he watches the white feathers fall to the ground.

We don't have a feather box at our house — I created it so the audience could see how important visual stimulation is for the character Josh (and for many people with autism). The mantra in playwriting is "Show, don't tell," and the feather box was the first of many theatrical elements that changed this from a story about my family to a play about the Martin family. Josh is 18 years old in the play, which means the parents (Tami and Bill) are trying to figure out where he will live now that he's an adult. His 16-year-old sister, Lisa, resents his presence in the house and is worried for the safety of her grandmother, who is arriving for a visit. With a stranger in the house, the routines that keep Josh content start to fall apart, and the family is thrown into crisis. This is an excerpt from Scene Two:

LISA: He could have killed Grammy.

TAMI: But he didn't.

LISA: It only takes one time to be dead. One time.

TAMI: He's not going to ...

LISA: He's a freak and he should be locked up!

TAMI: If there was a safe place for him to live don't you think we would have moved him there?

LISA: You keep saying that, but I don't know if you'd think any place was good enough for your precious baby boy.

TAMI: I really am trying to keep you safe. I know he's scary. And I know you hate him. And that's okay — you can hate him. But moms don't get that choice. *(Her voice cracks)* We can't help it — we just love our kids, no matter what.

LISA: *(fighting back her own tears)* It's all just so stupid. Everything. I wish he would just go away forever.

After my initial draft of the play was done, I spoke with my family — twin children who are two years older than Andy, and my husband. "Even though this play isn't really about us," I said, "people are going to assume that it is. So I need to know if you're okay with me continuing this project."

They agreed, after thoughtful discussion, to support my writing. And so the process began — I would gather friends to read the play (titled *Falling*) out loud and give me feedback, then go back and rewrite. I lost count of how many iterations the script went through. And it would take another essay (or book) to chronicle the process of casting, work-shopping and rehearsing the inaugural production. So let's just skip ahead to *Falling's* opening Sept. 1, 2011, at Mustard Seed Theatre in St. Louis.

While I knew that the acting, directing and designs were great, I was still worried that the story itself was not going to be of interest to a general audience.

On opening night, I watched with the audience as feathers drifted down through the dimming lights at the end of the show. A profound silence followed. When the stage lights rose for a curtain call, I looked around me. The audience seemed stunned. It was clear from the faces streaming with tears that the story had touched people.

After a short break, we had a post-show discussion. The overwhelming response from people who live with autism was, "Thank you for telling the truth!" Other audience members remarked that while they weren't familiar with the specifics of autism, the family's story resonated with them because they had a loved one with an addiction or cared for a parent with Alzheimer's. These comments made me see that the show is not just about this specific family; *it's about loving someone who is hard to love*. And that's a nearly universal experience.



***The play takes audiences on the emotional journey of a family caring for an aggressive teen boy with severe autism. (Photo by Carol Rosegg)***

The show was initially scheduled for 10 performances. The Friday night opening audience went home and apparently called everyone they knew, because by Sunday morning (before any reviews had come out) the show was sold out for the next weekend. We added five more shows, which sold out by the following Friday, added five more (which was as far as we could extend), and those sold out as well.

Amidst the tearful stories shared by the audience, certain similar questions kept recurring: “Why isn’t this play in New York?” and “How can more people see this?” I had invited Terry Schnuck— a St. Louis native who is a Broadway producer — to see the show, but he wasn’t available. And then, in the first of a series of serendipitous events, his schedule opened up and he was able to see the final performance. Afterwards, he told me about a new show he was producing that was going to be his full-time job for the next 18 months, and he promised to send my script around to some producers he knew.

Two weeks later Terry set up a coffee meeting. As I sat down with my soy mocha, he asked philosophically, “Do you ever think things happen for a reason?”

“All the time!” I replied.

“Remember that project I told you about? All the producers met, and we realized that we couldn’t continue with it. There was a long silence after we made the decision, and then someone said, ‘I guess it’s time to move on to my next project.’ And I suddenly realized what my next project is. I want to produce *Falling* off-Broadway.”

That I did not snort mocha out of my nose is commendable. If my heart had been in a ballroom competition it would have won for the quickstep!

Fast forward to July 2012. I’ve just arrived in New York to meet with the casting director for *Falling*. My hotel has a rooftop patio, and I’m sitting under an umbrella on a lovely, sunny afternoon, looking over audition material. Something catches my attention, and my eyes start to fill with tears as one single white feather floats through the air and lands directly in front of me on the table.

### Bloomington to New York to Brazil

The story of *Falling* and its journey to the stage really begins in 1983 at Illinois Wesleyan. That year, I took my first playwriting class with Professor John Clark. I also met Lori Adams, who was a new acting instructor. We stayed in touch after my graduation and became close friends and colleagues, with Lori moving over to Illinois State to head its acting program. I first invited her to direct for my Mustard Seed theatre company in 2009 and later entrusted her with directing the St. Louis premiere of *Falling*. I was delighted when she was hired to direct the New York production. And so the two Midwest women moved to a little West Village apartment for an off-Broadway adventure!



**Jent attended the New York opening with her son Chris (IWU class of 2014), husband Steve and daughter Lindzey.**

In helping support the production, I spent a great deal of time in New York between July and December. At home, we focused with Andy on learning to become more self-sufficient, while both my daughter and extended family learned his morning and after-school routines so they could help as needed. I “skyped” into my Fontbonne classes when I wasn’t in St. Louis. In New York, I served as a resource for the actors as they mastered their roles. I also made connections with autism organizations and parenting groups. On Oct. 15, 2012, we had a fairy-tale opening night at the Minetta Lane Theatre, followed by a champagne-and-caviar party, where Terry Schnuck read a glowing review by Rex Reed in the *New York Observer*.

We continued to offer post-show discussions with the audience in New York, and while many of the reactions were similar to those in St. Louis, there were also some in our New York audiences who voiced anger at the actions of the character Tami and her protective relationship with her son. “She put her whole family in danger because she loved that boy too much!” one woman said. Another asked, “How would she feel if that boy did kill his grandmother?” (My response: “Obviously Tami would feel bad if anyone got hurt. But love is rarely logical.”)

The most profound comment I recall was from a woman who said, “Do you know what’s wrong with your play? Everybody’s right! It’s so much easier if there’s someone to blame!”

My little story kept gathering steam. I began receiving inquiries from theatres as far away as Australia and Israel. Dramatists Play Service published the play. Most astonishingly, the Drama Desk Awards nominated *Falling* as one of the Best New Plays of 2012. (Never thought I’d see my name next to Christopher Durang, Richard Greenberg and Amy Herzog!) I attended the awards ceremony in May at the Town Hall in New York City with Lori Adams and her husband John Stark (who also taught at IWU and was *Falling*’s scenic designer). We dined at Sardi’s and had a blast sitting with the likes of Tom Hanks, Judith Light, Cicely Tyson, Traci Letts, Steve Martin and a host of other amazing theatre artists.

From an essay inspired by a school bus to a play that has upcoming professional productions in Los Angeles, Michigan and Brazil — it’s been an amazing journey, for both me and my family. Andy has grown more independent, and when I drop him off now, it’s at a new day program called Achievements Unlimited. He and his colleagues spend six hours a day working on social skills, exercising, developing job skills through meaningful work and having fun. It’s the kind of program I used to dream about. Like a white feather falling from the sky, it’s been a year for many dreams to come true!

*The author, Deanna Jent, graduated magna cum laude in theatre from Illinois Wesleyan University in 1984. She earned her Ph.D. in theatre at Northwestern University in 1989. Jent is a professor at Fontbonne University in St. Louis, where she has taught and directed shows since the fall of 1995. She is artistic director of Mustard Seed Theatre, a professional company in residence at Fontbonne, dedicated to producing plays about faith and social justice.*

*Since 1995, she has directed 46 shows at professional theatres and 28 shows at the university level. She has received six “Best Director” nominations in the annual Kevin Kline Awards, winning last year for her production of Godspell. Recently named one of the 25 most influential people in St. Louis by Alive Magazine, Jent is also an educator on autism and its impact on families. Her play *Falling*, based on her experiences as the mother of a child with autism, returns to the Mustard Seed Theatre stage in April. It opened in Los Angeles in October, and performances are also being planned for Brazil in 2014.*



*Deanna Jent ‘84*

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