

FALLING

BY DEANNA JENT



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FALLING
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First produced at Mustard Seed Theatre, St. Louis, MO, September 2011.

Subsequently produced by Terry Schnuck, James & Catherine Berges,
Crystal Beuerlein and Michael & Noemi Neidorff
Off-Broadway at the Minetta Lane Theatre, New York City, October 2012.

*This play is dedicated to
the love and lessons learned from my Dad.*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My heartfelt thanks to:

- Jason Sommer and Kim Wylie, who said “write it.”
- the original cast, who helped me fix it and brought it to life; the crew who made feathers fly.
- my friend and colleague, Lori Adams, who directed the St. Louis and New York productions.
- Terry Schnuck, for believing.
- Michelle and Leslie, for sharing coffee, laughter and tears.
- my children, Chris, Lindzey and Andy; my siblings and extended family near and far.
- my husband, Steve, for first being my madrigal partner and then my life partner.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Words are chosen and used carefully in this house. The shortest and most direct statements get the best results with Josh, so resist the urge to add anything to “fill the silence.”

Avoid sentimentality. Tami and Bill don't feel sorry for themselves — they're simply doing what needs to get done to get through another day (until that becomes impossible).

The key to playing Josh is not to mimic people with autism — it's to discover what inner forces drive Josh's behavior. His almost constant movement feeds his under-reactive nervous system the input to help him maintain balance. His delight in visual stimulation (feathers falling, videos, wheels moving) comes from a need to tune out unwanted noise and to control his visual environment. He plans everything in advance, because surprises are so scary. His frustration with a DVD breaking is not out of love for that particular DVD but because he has an order in which DVDs must be watched, and if he can't watch that one, he can't move on to the next. When scared or stuck, he pushes on his chin because the pressure is calming to him. If the situation escalates and he loses control, he creates all-over pressure on his body and muscles by grabbing and holding tightly whoever is with him. His violent episodes are much like a “melt-down” in a toddler — a period of time in which pure emotion overcomes thought. When the episode is over and thought returns, Josh grieves his actions and lack of control. His violence never comes out of a desire to hurt anyone or anything.

Mostly, the actor playing Josh needs to understand that his mind is constantly busy running scripts of favorite shows, planning future events, taking in each new stimulus in his environment. His inability to communicate does not indicate a lack of intelligence or focus or problem-solving abilities.

Both the original St. Louis and the New York productions held talkbacks after EACH performance. Since the show ran 75–80 minutes, a break became a kind of intermission, and the talkbacks became a sort of second act. Audience reactions varied from anger to gratitude. Some saw their story told truthfully for the first time;

some had no idea this sort of family dynamic existed. I strongly encourage you to plan for talkbacks — it worked well when some of the cast or production team stayed to respond to audience questions and remarks. Below are some talking points you can use at the start of the talkback; these are answers to the most commonly asked questions.

- The playwright has a son with severe autism, very much like Josh. Her son, Andy, was sixteen years old when she wrote the play. The information presented about lack of resources and housing options is true. Efforts are being made on many fronts to address these ongoing issues. (It would be great to have information about your own community resources available.)
- All people with autism are not like Josh. In fact, no two people with autism are quite alike. It's a spectrum disorder and Josh is at the severe end of the spectrum.
- Ultimately, this is not a play about autism, but about Loving Someone who is Hard to Love.

Finally, the best comment I received about the play was this: “Do you know what’s wrong with your play? Everybody’s right! It’s so much easier if someone is wrong.”

Make everybody right. Embrace the hard.

Deanna Jent
January 2013

FALLING was developed and produced by Mustard Seed Theatre in St. Louis, Missouri, opening on September 1, 2011. It was directed by Lori Adams; the set design was by John C. Stark; the costume design was by Deanna Jent; the lighting design was by Julie Mack; the sound design was by Zoe Sullivan; movement and combat were by Shaun Sheley; prop design was by Meg Brinkley; the stage manager was Adam Flores; and the assistant stage manager was Jessica Haley. The cast was as follows:

JOSH MARTIN Jonathan Foster
TAMI MARTIN Michelle Hand
LISA MARTIN Katie Donnelly
BILL MARTIN Greg Johnston
SUE MARTIN Carmen Russell

FALLING was subsequently produced by Terry Schnuck, James and Catherine Berges, Crystal Beuerlein, and Michael and Noemi Neidorff at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York City, opening October 15, 2012. Jeffrey Chrzczon was Executive Producer. Casting was by Pat McCorkle. It was directed by Lori Adams; the set design was by John C. Stark; the costume design was by Tristan Raines; the lighting design was by Julie Mack; the sound design was by Raymond Shilke; movement and combat were by Rick Sordelet; prop design was by Zachary Roland; the stage manager was Brian Meister; and the assistant stage manager was Pamela Edington. The cast was as follows:

JOSH MARTIN Daniel Everidge
TAMI MARTIN Julia Murney
LISA MARTIN Jacey Powers
BILL MARTIN Daniel Pearce
SUE MARTIN Celia Howard

Adam Donschik, Shannon Koob, Susan Lehman and Jonathan Judge-Russo were the understudies.

CHARACTERS

JOSHUA — Age 18, with severe autism. He is large and strong. Most of the time he is happy, and does what will be referred to as his “happy dance” — big movements of his shoulders, back and forth, accompanied by guttural sounds and smiles and head tilts. He is fascinated by visual stimuli and scared by loud and unexpected noises. He has limited verbal/communication skills.

TAMI — His mother, in her 40s. She and her husband have been trained in behavioral intervention and teaching skills, which is evidenced in how they interact with Josh and sometimes bleeds over into their interaction with others. She sells real estate part-time. Fantasy and alcohol are her stress relievers.

LISA — Age 16, his sister. Wants to be a typical girl in a typical home. Isn't and is frustrated by that. She and her father take yearly summer vacations to visit his mother (Grammy Sue). This is their two-week escape from daily home life. She may deal with her stress by overeating.

BILL — His father. Tries to relieve stress by making jokes — would like to relieve stress by having sex. Neither are working too well for him right now. His job isn't mentioned, but he is a supervisor (mostly office work) at a construction firm.

GRAMMY SUE — Bill's mother. She brings with her the hope that her sincere Christian faith can intervene to help everyone in her son's family. She is genuinely concerned and confused, but she is not a scold. She is in a “boot” because she broke two of her toes a few days prior to this visit.

LAWRENCE — Caseworker for the Department of Child and Family Services, played by the same actor who plays Joshua. This character should be quite different in bearing and speech from Joshua, but there shouldn't be a huge effort to “disguise” the fact that it's the same actor.

SETTING

A living room and dining room. There is a front door and two other exits — one door to the kitchen and a hallway that leads to bedrooms. In one part of the room there is a box rigged with rope and filled with feathers that can be tipped over so they float down on a person's head. An office area contains a computer, many books, some empty food wrappers. There is a hutch and a dining room table that seats four, a couch a coffee table, and a small TV/VCR unit in a corner on the floor. There is a visible calendar on the wall, filled with writing. Videotapes are stacked in exact piles of four around the perimeter of the television space. There may be many trains lined up as well. Every toy has a specific place in Josh's world.

It is March 2011. The play is set in the suburbs of a Midwestern city.

NOTE

The bus safety vest is designed to keep the person wearing it from unbuckling the safety belt and standing up/walking around the bus. It zips in the back and has loops at the shoulders that are linked to loops on the bus seat once the person wearing the vest is seated.

FALLING

Scene One

Joshua enters the room from the hallway/bedrooms. As he walks through the room, he occasionally pulls his shirt partially up exposing a nipple (one of his habits). Josh moves under the feather box, does a short ritual of touching certain things and moving a certain way, and then dumps the feathers on his head. He squeals and is doing his happy dance as Tami enters from the kitchen carrying a laundry basket.

TAMI. Hey, Josh — I like that smile! Remember, feathers go back in box, please. *(She exits to the bedrooms, and Josh begins picking up the feathers and placing them in the box. Tami and Lisa enter, talking. As they walk across the room toward the kitchen, Tami keeps herself always between Lisa and Josh, although this should not call attention to itself. Lisa is brushing her hair as she talks.)*

LISA. ... and so we'll be working on club stuff till 5:30, and then we're going to Lori's to eat and study ...

TAMI. Did you forget that Grammy Sue is flying in this afternoon?

LISA. So?

TAMI. I'm sure she'll want to see you — I thought you'd plan to be home tonight.

LISA. She's gonna be here for a week, right?

TAMI. What do you need to do at Lori's?

LISA. Study and stuff. You told me yesterday I could ... *(And they're in the kitchen. Josh has finished putting the feathers in the box. He does his short ritual and drops them on his head again. He is doing his happy dance as Bill enters from the kitchen with Josh's backpack and bus safety vest. Bill is partially dressed for the day in khakis, a T-shirt and socks. He puts the backpack and vest on the side table by the door.)*

BILL. Feathers back in box please. Bus soon.

JOSH. No bus. No thank you.

BILL. Feathers back in box.

JOSH. No bus.

BILL. Feathers in box. Bus at 7:45. *(Josh makes a fist and pushes on his forehead between his eyes. [This is a stress reliever.] After a moment, he starts picking up the feathers and putting them in the box. Bill moves toward the kitchen as Tami enters, drinking a cup of coffee.)*

TAMI. *(To Bill.)* Smoothie time. *(To Josh.)* Lisa is going to use the blender. We'll do "cover our ears" and then you can pick a game. Ready? *(Josh covers his ears with his hands and crouches. Bill moves to the kitchen door.)* OK Lisa! *(To Josh as he covers his ears.)* Here we go! *(Tami signals Bill and they both start counting down on their fingers — Tami so that Josh can see and Bill so that Lisa can see. A blender runs in the kitchen.)* 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2- *(Bill signals Lisa to stop and the blender noise stops.)* and 1. Noise is all done. *(Josh pulls his hands away from his ears.)* Good job! Now, do you want to do "London Bridge" or "Big Bad Wolf"?

JOSH. *(Excited.)* And blow the house down!

TAMI. Alright! Dad — can you be a big bad wolf? *(Bill joins them. Josh is excited.)* Once upon a time there were three little pigs who went out in the world ...

JOSH. *(Grabbing a finger with each word, hurrying the story along.)* Straw, wood, bricks.

TAMI. OK! Aaaaannnd ... So the three pigs were safe in their house of brick when along came the ...

JOSH. *(In a deep but not very loud voice.)* Big Bad Wolf

TAMI. And he said:

BILL. *(In deep voice, which makes Josh laugh.)* "Little pigs, little pigs, let me in."

TAMI. And the pigs said ... *(Cueing Josh.)*

JOSH and TAMI. *(Together. high voices.)* Not by the hair on my chinny-chin-chin

BILL. *(Really getting into it.)* Then I'll huff, and I'll puff, and I'll blow your house in! *(He blows as hard as he can, then he stops.)* Wait a minute, that didn't work! *(Josh nearly wets himself because this is so funny.)* Let me try again. *(He blows and blows, until finally he "passes out.")*

TAMI. And the wolf blew himself out, and the pigs lived ... *(Cueing Josh.)*

JOSH and TAMI. Happy ever after. *(Tami claps and helps Bill back to his feet. Josh is very happy, maybe squealing.)*

TAMI. Yay for “Little Pigs”! Now let’s finish picking up feathers. *(Josh resumes putting feathers back in the box. Tami gives a nod to Bill and exits back into the kitchen. Bill helps Josh with the feathers.)*

BILL. When we’re finished with feathers, we’ll get ready for the bus. *(The following conversation is matter-of-fact from Josh, he’s still in a good mood, just stating his version of fact.)*

JOSH. *(Leaving the feathers task.)* No bus.

BILL. Sure there’s a bus! It’s Thursday, school day.

JOSH. There’s no school. No thank you.

BILL. What?

JOSH. No school. School is stuck.

BILL. Bus at 7:45 to take you to school.

JOSH. *(Frowning, louder.)* No school. School is stuck.

BILL. Today’s a school day, buddy!

JOSH. *(A strained voice, agitated.)* A school day buddy!

BILL. Do you want to do “Little Pigs” again?

JOSH. No thank you.

BILL. Do you want to watch computers or read a book? *(Josh responds with the fist to forehead. Bill steps back.)*

JOSH. No book. No school. *(He repeats his fist-to-forehead gesture with more force and some angry noises. He begins pacing rapidly as Bill moves away toward the kitchen door and calls out carefully.)*

BILL. Lisa, Tami — I’m getting hungry for some peanut butter, just so you know. *(Josh continues to pace. Bill carefully keeps some distance between them.)*

TAMI. *(From behind the door.)* Do you need some jelly with that?

JOSH. *(As before.)* A school day buddy!

BILL. Not just yet, I’ll let you know. *(Bill turns his focus back to Josh. Unseen by him, Tami cracks to door open to watch.)*

JOSH. *(Additional physical agitation.)* School is stuck.

BILL. I hear what you’re saying.

JOSH. School is stuck.

BILL. You don’t want to go to school.

JOSH. You don’t want to go to school

BILL. *(Sign language prompt as he says “I.”)* “I don’t want to go to school.”

JOSH. *(Loud and moving toward Bill.)* I don’t want to go to school.

(Tami sees that Josh is moving aggressively toward Bill, so she moves quickly between them, getting Josh's attention and turning him around.)

TAMI. Josh — Mommy has a surprise! Come with me. *(Josh pauses as Tami walks up toward the calendar and Bill backs away from Josh.)* Remember what's on the calendar today? Grammy Sue is coming. And she is bringing a present for you. Come look at the calendar. *(Josh walks up to look at the calendar. He takes Tami's finger and points to the current day.)* See. Grammy Sue after school.

JOSH. *(Grumpily.)* There's no school.

TAMI. *(Cheery but not too loud playful voice.)* Uh-oh! We can't change school days *(Exaggerated with a big gesture.)* Rats!

JOSH. *(Mimicking her gesture and sound.)* Rats!

TAMI. But after school, Grammy Sue will have a present for you.

JOSH. *(After a short pause.)* Birthday.

TAMI. Not birthday. A present because she loves you.

JOSH. Present. *(His agitation has stopped, and he smiles.)* Present! *(Josh moves to where his backpack and safety vest are and holds out his arms for the vest. Tami gets the backpack and Bill put on his safety vest.)*

TAMI. *(As Bill is putting on the vest.)* Grammy is bringing a present and she will be staying here for a few days.

BILL. So after school, when the bus brings you home ...

JOSH. No bus.

BILL. After school, when the bus ...

JOSH. Bus is gonna late.

TAMI. What?

JOSH. Bus is gonna late.

TAMI. You think the bus is going to be late?

JOSH. Yes. School is broken. *(Bill and Tami exchange looks. Tami steps "into the scene.")*

TAMI. I know you want there to be no school today. But it's Thursday, school day.

JOSH. Bus is gonna late.

TAMI. After school, Grammy has a present for you.

JOSH. No school.

TAMI. Remember, if it's a "safe-hands" day at school, when you get home you get to pick a new marble.

JOSH. Pick a marble.

TAMI. Yes, when you have safe hands at school, then...?

JOSH. Marble.

TAMI. Yes.

JOSH. Marble.

TAMI. Yes. After school. A present AND a marble.

JOSH. (*Looks out the window on the front door, in an animated voice.*) Where is the bus?

TAMI. (*Relieved, this is now part of the regular morning script — in a cheery voice.*) I don't know. Where is the bus?

JOSH. (*Starts keeping time with hand gestures, turns to Tami and takes her hands and beats time as he sings softly.*) "Wheels on the bus go round and round ... " (*He waits for Tami to sing her part. Bill joins in with Tami. This is not part of Josh's routine.*)

TAMI and BILL. "Round and round"

JOSH. (*Stops singing abruptly, looks at Bill.*) Dad. Stop singing.

BILL. (*Quickly, not a problem.*) OK. Sorry, buddy.

JOSH. (*To Tami.*) Wheels on the bus go round and round

TAMI. "Round and round."

JOSH. "Round and round." (*Together they sing, going faster and faster.*)

TAMI and JOSH. "Wheels on the bus go round and round all through the town!" (*Josh goes to the front door and opens it, then runs outside.*)

BILL. Do you want me to ... (*Tami gestures to Bill's shoeless feet and exits. Bill checks for messages on his phone as Lisa opens the door and peeks in. Bill sees her.*) He's outside waiting for the bus with Mom.

LISA. (*Entering and sipping her smoothie.*) It's not gonna work.

BILL. What?

LISA. Grammy here with him.

BILL. It'll be fine. It's just for a week while they ...

LISA. Yeah, but it only takes ...

BILL. We're taking care of it.

LISA. Whatever. Does she know to bring her helmet and shield?

BILL. I'm sure she's packed that, along with her teenage sarcasm deflector. (*Lisa shakes her head as she finishes her drink. She takes the glass back into the kitchen. Calling to her.*) Who's picking you up this morning? (*He picks up some empty food wrappers and moves toward the desk.*)

LISA. (*From the kitchen.*) Lori.

BILL. Did you rinse out the blender?

LISA. (*Entering.*) Yes. (*A honk from outside, Lisa grabs her backpack as Bill throws away the food wrappers. As Lisa reaches the front door, it opens, and Tami and Lisa nearly collide.*)

FALLING

by Deanna Jent

2M, 3W (doubling)

FALLING boldly explores the dynamic and complicated reality of a family with an autistic young man. When a relative comes to visit, the entire family is thrown out of equilibrium, with everyone trying to balance what is best for the family and what is best for them. The play bravely speaks a truth about love and family and about hopes and dreams. It asks, "How do you love someone who is difficult to love?"

"This heartfelt and nuanced family drama is shot through with dark humor. FALLING soars. The play packs a powerful punch."

—The New York Post

"Graceful writing. [FALLING] teaches you something and leaves you sated — and it rocks. Packs a huge emotional punch."

—The New York Observer

"FALLING sinks deep under your skin. Sharp and observant."

—The New York Daily News

"Audiences will be falling in love with this extraordinary piece of theater."

—TheaterMania.com

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