

Review: Autism the focus of thoughtful 'Falling'

October 19 2012, by Jennifer Farrar



This publicity image released by David Gersten & Associates shows Julia Murney, left, and Daniel Everidge, in a scene from "Falling," performing off-Broadway at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York. (AP Photo/David Gersten & Associates, Carol Rosegg)

(AP)—It's hard enough to imagine the everyday tension created by the mood swings of a child with special needs, let alone one who keeps getting bigger and more volatile.

Deanna Jent has written a thoughtful, unsentimental play, "Falling," that provides a snapshot of a day in the life of an average family struggling to cope with that difficult situation.

Jent, who has an autistic son, examines the daunting effects of severe [autism](#) on family members. A well-acted, affecting production of

"Falling" opened Monday at the Minetta Lane Theatre in New York City.

Large and awkward, Josh (Daniel Everidge) is an 18-year-old autistic boy with the comprehension and personality of a toddler. Everidge gives a sensitive, convincing performance, both lovable and frightening, as an unpredictable boy with limited communication skills but great [physical strength](#). More and more, Josh is quickly spiraling into anger over trivial things and attacking people, either his parents or a revolving door of aides.

Director Lori Adams presents a detailed complement of ordinary household activities, along with touching or harrowing interactions between Josh and his parents, as the tension builds over Josh's volatility and the strain it causes his relatives.

Josh's frazzled parents spend their days carefully dealing with his rapid mood swings, using a series of catch phrases, games, gestures and rituals they've developed over the years to capture his attention and calm him down. His childlike laughter is a little heartbreaking to hear, as when Josh repeatedly tips an overhead box of white feathers onto his head and does his "happy dance" while they fall around him.

Tami, Josh's devoted mother, bears the greatest burden of his care. Playing her is Julia Murney with a strong, centering presence. Complicating matters is the arrival of Tami's Bible-quoting mother-in-law for a week's stay. Grammy Sue (played with sweet bewilderment by Celia Howard) hasn't seen Josh for three years, and is alarmed by the ill-tempered giant who has replaced her teenage grandson. More bad news: Yet another eagerly anticipated weekend aide has just quit.

Murney and Everidge's interactions form the heart of the play. It's painful to watch Josh switch from loving and playful to suddenly

attacking Tami when he gets frustrated or upset. He could easily kill someone, but Murney displays an air of unconditional motherly love, as well as Tami's fearfulness as she frantically tries to think of the right ritual to get Josh to stop hurting her.

Josh's father, Bill, (Daniel Pearce) is as patient with Josh as Tami is, but we can sense his anxiety and underlying desperation through Pearce's constant, slightly forced smile and Bill's tense interactions with Tami. Jacey Powers is spiky as Josh's resentful younger sister, Lisa.

Nothing is resolved, but there's a surreal plot twist near the end that's effective, if a little confusing. Grammy Sue's annoying chatter about how Josh's condition is either "part of God's plan" or can be "prayed away" does allow stressed-out family members the luxury of a few emotional outbursts that may provide some much-needed temporary catharsis.

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