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Reading Autism as a Family Challenge in Deanna Jent's *Falling*

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Keywords: -Children - Deana Jent - Falling - Autism	Abstract: It is quite evident that autism is a problem children suffer from recently in real life. As such for its significant abundance, it has been presented in many literary works especially in drama. Such a case is particularly dealt with by playwrights who suffered from such a phenomenon in their own families as in the present case of Deana Jent. Jent presents autism as an urgent issue that hurts children in her play <i>Falling</i> . This paper sheds light on how children are ostracized by the society and the latter's negligence and lack of awareness which produces outcast children. In addition, this paper raises awareness, through exploring this issue inside theatre, on how such children should be treated. The American Psychiatric Association adopts many approaches to handle this case such as; Applied Theater Research and Autism Network (ARTRAN) which cites the theater to combat this disorder. Using theatre to get the communication in autism has been gaining popularity as it is an active means to overcome a lot of autism's disabilities. Theatre helps autistic teens understand how actions and words can influence in different social
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situations, because they think in images not in words as this paper will demonstrate in Jent's *Falling*.

دراسة التوحد كتحديات اسرة في مسرحية ديانا جنت "السقوط"

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جامعة الانبار، كلية التربية للبنات، قسم اللغة الانكليزية

الخلاصة: أنه من الواضح تماما ان التوحد اصبح مشكلة شائعة يعاني فيها بعض الأطفال في عصرنا الحديث . فلم يكن مستحيلا على العلماء من شتى الاختصاصات ان يواكبوا هذه الظاهرة والبحث عن أسبابها وإيجاد طرق العلاج بثتى انواعه . فكما تم تقديم هذه المشكلة بشكل وفير وذو أهمية في عصرنا الحديث من قبل علماء النفس كان للأب وخصوصا المسرح نصيب في طرح معضلات هذه المشكلة فكذا قضايا قدتم التعامل معها بشكل خاص من قبل كتاب مسرحيين الذين هم انفسهم عانوا من هذه الظاهرة في حياتهم وعائلاتهم . فالكاتبة المسرحية سلطت الضوء على كيف ان الأطفال المصابون بالتوحد منبوذين إضافة الى ان البحث يرفع الوعي عن كيفية معاملة هؤلاء الأطفال من خلال الإفصاح عن هكذا قضية . جمعية الطب النفسي الامريكية تتبنى عدة مشاريع لمعالجة هذه القضية مثل : المسرح التطبيقي للبحث والتوحد نت ورك

Applied theater Research and Autism Network (ARTRAN)

التي شهدت للمسرح مواجهته لتلك الإعاقة وهناك عدة مسارح رسمية مختصة في إعطاء العلاج لأطفال التوحد اثبتت نتائجها العلاجية بتطوير مستوى الطفل المصاب نحو الأفضل قدتم ذكرها بالتفصيل داخل البحث استخدام المسرح للحصول على التواصل عند التوحد، حيث يثبت هذا البحث من خلال تطبيق نظريات وتجارب العلماء المختصين في الادب وعلم النفس ان المسرح يساعد الأطفال المصابون بالتوحد كيفية فهم الأفعال المصابون بالتوحد كيفية فهم الأفعال وكيف تنطق الكلمات في مختلف المواقف الاجتماعية لان تفكيرهم يكون على شكل صور وليس كلمات كما سيضمن البحث في مسرحية جنت (السقوط)

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Theater as an effective therapy for Autism Spectrum

In the US, one in every 10,000 children was diagnosed with autism, that was in 1980. But by 2009, the number increased to one in 100. Through Jenni M.Loer's essay *"Full Spectrum Access American Theatre"*, he declares about various manifestations of Autism Spectrum symptoms that are summed up in: "lack of eye contact, facial expression, gestures, spontaneous sharing and emotional reciprocation, delay or lack of speech, repetitive use of language and mannerisms; preoccupation with a particular interest, inflexibility in routine (Loer1). They need to overcome the communication and social barriers inherent in autism. Traditional therapies --speech, behavioral, physical and occupational, can teach valuable skills, but don't advance socialization" (Ibid. 2). Andrew Nelson, a distinguished consultant of education in applied theater, co-founded an online forum called the Applied Theater Research and Autism Network (ARTRAN) which serves as an actual round table for therapists, social service workers, theater professionals, special educators, parents and applied theater practitioners. This approach inspired Nelson, he asks "What does it take to be an actor?" and adds : "You have a nonverbal expression, gestures empathy, being part of a large group, and fitting socially in that group. Actors must learn, by means of all those things, what these kids with autism need help wit." (Ibid.1)

Dr. Stanly Greenspan, creates a new developed approach called "Floortime", as he is a responsible on the disorder and treatment of developmental disorders in infants and children. By this authority he has become as a godfather of functioning drama as therapy for autism. "Floortime" conveys the behavior into play instead of obliging the child to modify his or her behavior. For example, flapping hands, are reimagined as flying bird. Elain Hall, a former acting coach, proves the success of "Floortime" when her son Neal did not respond to traditional therapy. She says: "After successfully treatment with Neal, it was easy to shift him from playroom to real world by practicing normal life events such as going to the doctor or to restaurants" (Ibid. 3).

Theater provides a home to autistic children. There is a unique theater called SENSE Theater. It has partnered with Magic Circle Theater, to put on stage 15 autistic children with 30 youth actors from the Master class production, SENSE Theater is a program which is designed to make the experience of theater as comfortable as possible for children with autism spectrum disorders.

SENSE Theater in collaboration with Magic Circle Theater in Roseville, California, is a program designed to develop the emotional and social functioning of autistic children. This is actually regarded as a fantastic experience for children. It aims at showing that art by all its qualities and science can mix to produce a suitable environment for autistic children to make them realize how to socialize, deal and communicate with others, and then express themselves. Some of the parents, who have enrolled their children in the SENSE Theater program, expose the results of this program, saying:"My sons showed me things I never knew they were capable of

doing" says parent Kristen Byrne who has two sons enrolled in the SENSE Theater program (Anonymous; Magic, 1). Briefly theater helps autistics teens to influence words and understand actions and in different social situations. So, using theater to overcome the communication in autism has been gaining popularity. Theater classes for autism are directed toward persons with a syndrome of autism who work primarily with nonverbal autistics cases as an Indian did Dr. Parasuram Ramamoorthi, co-founder of ARTRAN (Loer 2).

Another theater, which is interested in autism, is AMC Theater. It is a theatrical exhibition and entertainment company, announcing that it is partnering with the autism society. Gerry Lopez, president of AMC said that "As a leading theatrical exhibition company, AMC is proud of making a difference in the estimated 1.5 million Americans living with an autism spectrum disorder by offering families a chance to see a movie together, often for the very first time," (Anonymous; AMC, 12)

An artistic director, Travis Walter, talks about his goal in autism; says

My goal was always to spread awareness about autism and the need for programs, research, and help for families, but I didn't realize how completely the audiences would open their hearts and accept this family on stage into their own. We received standing ovations every night, which is a rarity, and the audience frequently stayed around in the lobby for a good 40 minutes to talk about autism, share their own stories, and find out ways that they could help in the community. It truly was a rewarding production. Word of mouth in the community was a big seller for the show, as it's a hard show to market. Many people who were buying tickets had told us that they had heard about the show from someone who had already seen it. (Jones 2)

Some of the families have been touched by autism expressing tearful gratitude that the insisted challenges were getting a respectful voice on stage.

It is worthy to say that theater now a days is grappling with autism, which is believed to affect about one in 68 American children. It has become familiar to many families; those who are doing their best to embrace the condition and everything that comes with it, both difficult and uplifting. Theater critic James Herbert, who has a child with autism, also took a broader look at how theater addresses those with special needs and their families and offers them chances of relief. He remarks that the director of *Falling*, Samantha Ginn, asks the younger actress a little about her life. It turns out that the teen-ager has a twin sister with autism. She says of her sister: "I'm lucky to have her". With affirmation about the role of theater, James Herbert provides that the theater world has embraced those with autism in different ways as well as through productions that make those with autism involved as both audience members and creative partners (Hebert; Training ,1-2)

Autism as a Family Challenge in Deanna Jent's *Falling*

Theater is exploring autism and connecting with people on the spectrum. The idea seems especially fitting for *Falling* which is a drama about family life with a young autistic man at its center. It is a play of all parents who live with and forced into such kind of turmoil.

Judith Newmark informs us that Deanna Jent, who is not only Mustard Seed's artistic director but the author of *Falling*, never expected her drama about a family dealing with a severely autistic son's problems to have that kind of wide appeal. She was surprised. "I have gone from thinking that I wrote a very specific kind of story -- one that I did not think would interest one outside of the autism community -- to realizing that family dynamics are something most people can relate to", said Jent, who was inspired to write the story by her own family. She and her husband have three children; the youngest, Andy, is autistic. "People see themselves in different parts of the story."

Falling as the centerpiece of Mustard Seed's new Autism Education Project, aimed at teachers, students, and parents -- anyone who deals with autism (Newmark; *Revival*, 2). As a matter of fact, Jent produced autism within the play not as a therapy for autism, but she produced autism as a social issue.

It is very obvious to follow every performance of *Falling* by a live discussion involving the cast, director and guest speakers from various organizations who are really dealing with autism. James Hebert shows how much Samantha Ginn, *Falling* director, is part of those efforts, too. Her work on local stages is not only helping to give the outside world a look at how autism can affect a family, but providing those on the autism spectrum (as well as people with other disabilities) a forum to show how deeply creative they can be. She reveals how much adults are very confusing, saying that "A big theme of this play is that the adults are very, very confusing". She adds "Sometimes people don't understand them just because they have a disability or a difference. But they're extremely intuitive and insightful, and we can learn lessons from them" (Hebert ; *Training*, 3) .

Falling is a delicate one-act play written in 2011. The play is about family challenges with autism. It reflects how much parents have had to give up, sacrifice and compromise for the sake of their children. It has been taking a broader look at those teenagers with autism and it explores the exhausting role of being a parent to an autistic child. They cannot live as normal family, for example when Lisa wants having a dog inside the house her mother refuses that, Tami " Having a dog is complicated" because Josh is afraid of barking, Josh " No barking" but Tami feels happy because Josh can express his feelings " That's really good telling me how you feel, Josh" (Jent:

Scene 3, 27-28). In 2012, it was the most successful show about family dealing with autism; the parents Tami and Bill Miller, dealing with their severely autistic teenager, Hulking 18-year -old boy named Josh, who can be by turns, both lovable and scary. Newmark describes *Falling* as "a gripping piece of theater, emotionally wrenching and theatrically a state, it has as they say legs. It also has a keen mind and a warm, though troubled, heart" (Newmark; *Falling*,1).

Family life, in a household with a severely autistic child, employs by the sounds of a mother's grief. It is a difficult play to watch, and even harder to think about, there's no happy ending and not a lot of hope to this disturbing play, it makes the audience search into its deep theme which is about the parents of severely handicapped children (Stasio 1).

As Jent based *Falling* on her own life, there have been some dramatic changes in Jent's family which is based on her own experience as the mother of severely autistic son. She was inspired to write the piece in part because of her own family's real life experiences in raising a son Andy, the youngest of Jent's three children, who also has autism. Perhaps some may ask why Jent wrote such a play. Actually she admits in different occasions about the reasons behind this work; she says, "this is not a play about autism, but about Loving Someone who is Hard to Love." Expressing her feeling; saying "not all of the stories were being represented," and through a phone interview from St. Louis, where she is head of the theater department at Fontbonne University, she says Specifically, "this story wasn't out there"(Hebert, Autism , 2). Meaning that of Josh, which draws on her family's experiences with her son Andy. She gives a perfect justification when she says "that's the thing good storytelling and good theater can do, where suddenly you feel that you're not alone". She also says. "That someone else is feeling that thing that you felt". Finally the best "short answer", to why she wrote the play, is: "I never knew what to say when people would ask, 'How was your day?'" (Hebert, Autism, 2).

Jent proves that the play can give a test of life in a household, especially when one of the audience said "we just want to know, how did you know that's how we were feeling?" Jent answers "that's the thing good storytelling and good theater can do, where suddenly you feel that you're not alone,". Her husband Stephen was a teacher and the inspiration for the character of the devoted dad Bill in the play who died of a heart attack. She had explained for him "Dad was Sunday morning". She means that his father would no longer be the one taking him on the weekend for a burger or a trip to the store. But with her full grief she is proud of her son, adding Andy is "doing great" because now he is in his early 20s, he's living with two roommates who are also on the spectrum, in a residential arrangement that grew out of a day program founded by two behavioral analysts whom Jent describes as "his angels" (Ibid. 3).

Falling is a story of a family that tries to take care of their severely disturbed autistic son under the pressure of spending efforts with him. The mother, Tami all the time is blaming herself and thinking if she just takes care enough or she can keep everybody safe, as Jent

justifies the mother's worries, she said "But she can't. She says, 'I am always going to be afraid, whether he's here or somewhere else. I choose this fear (of living with her son.)' There's not a happy ending". The fact is that Jent makes the parents deal with the same issue that she does. They also fight tantalizing questions of how their son will live and where, and how he will spend his time when he grows older. (Newmark; Writer, 2).

The play takes place in the home of Tami and Bill, who have a 16-year-old daughter Lisa and 18-year-old Josh an autistic son, who has discomfiting habits, as Jent describes him, such as pulling up his shirt or putting his hand into his pants. The most difficult behaviour is that he is annoyed by loud noises and harsh arguments, Tami "Lisa is going to use the blender. We'll do 'cover our ears" (Jent, Scene 1, 12). Although he lives with his parents he has to go to a day program that works on skills for daily living. He is in a difficult period, because he had impacted wisdom teeth that were giving him pain but he doesn't have the language to express it. So Josh's fixation on routine and his language difficulties make his behaviour more anxious and more aggressive. Judith Newmark declares that "Many people with autism are not nearly so disabled as Josh; on the other hand, some theatergoers with experience in this area may find him too communicative. But *Falling* is a play, not a case history, and the details of his circumstances have been shaped to suit the stage" (Newmark; St. Louis, 2). Jent wants to say that he needs more than his parents can give him but it is not a problem of Josh only, it is so heavy on parents, the adults are very confusing, moreover, the play gives the outside look at how autism can affect a family.

Working as a well-coordinated team, *Falling* shows us how parents and the sister Lisa do their best work ever to keep their family from collapsing, Grammy "I know you're a big help for your mom. And I'm sure that Josh, well, he does what he can, to be, helpful" (Jent, Scene , 30). Bill, all the time suffers to keep his marriage safe or he is actually trying to keep his emotional distance, is no longer wishing to sacrifice their marriage to keep Josh safe inside an institution; the thing that torments the father between keeping their marriage or leaving their son in danger outside an institution. Unlike Tami, she is continuing for asking the therapists and caretakers to keep Josh out of their daycare centers or not. She really can't see what a danger he presents for others, because she is a mother. But without the help of her husband She couldn't control Josh, for example when the school bus came, Josh refused going, as it appears in scene one, he cries "No bus" so they try to calm him down "Do you want to do London Bridge" or " Big Bad wolf"? That makes him excited "And blow the house down"! Bill plays wolf's role" Then I'll huff, and I'll puff..."(Jent, Sce.1, 12) . Jent presents an actual woman "She's exhausted, and she's not a saint", Newmark describes Tami as physically enclosed on herself as if she thinks an attack come from behind, she hunches her shoulders when Bill tries to embrace her, she almost shudders; when she's at the computer,. Nevertheless Bill loves Josh to the degree that placing him in specialized care. (Ibid)

Concerning marriage and family's relationship, in an essay "extreme parenting" Jent wrote that: "they belong to a "tribe" whose members recognize each other on special-school parking lots, in support groups, sometimes in public places".

Sensitively a family love is presented at the center of *Falling* which offers an honest and realistic look at a struggling but loving family. They believe that what autistic persons need is love and it must be felt through the heart, even if those who struggle and care deeply to embrace Josh's autism and its effect on all of their lives. They discover that the length, width, and depth of parent's love for their child, is a great therapy for Josh. Jent had declared that "But this is not about sympathy or solutions, or more programs for autistic adults, or anything like that, there is no panacea, and there is no happy ending. This play is about loving somebody who's hard to love. It's about questions, not answers" (Newmark; Writer, 2).

Falling addresses family's challenges, Grammy "I know Josh is a challenge" (Jent, Scene 3,30), sensitively it tested families love toward persons with autism in their real lives as this case is familiar to them especially when they try to do their best to accept the condition and everything that comes with it. The play depicts the challenges of a family, and documents the struggles and humble victories of a family employed by a teen-age son named Josh, who is profoundly autistic. It opens as Jent establishes the strain of daily life of a family ready to break the routine by Josh's unpredictable behavior and lack of language. The matter that threatens husband and wife relationship, Judith comments "They both worry that the strain of daily life is eroding their relationship. But even when he reaches for her and she backs away, exhausted, they know each other's rhythms and respect each other's feelings. It's one of the best examples of a strong marriage in any recent drama" (Newmark; Black Rep,1).

The main theme in the play is love which is the secret that can keep family's life going on. Love keeps Josh's parents especially his mother fighting to achieve existence for him in the family. She succeeds in making her family members love him and have devised various ways to help him though they have no idea how to deal with him or make him engaged with the wide world, Tami "we just love our kids, no matter what" (Jent, Scene 3,35). But Jent's aim by *Falling* has hidden behind the question posed by Helmi Yusof which is "How do you love a child that's hard to love" (Yusof 2). Jent's message is to know how much parents suffer, sacrifice, give up of daily activities as usual persons.

Helmi Yusof in his essay informs the readers about the cast of the play how they got lessons from the play:

"Tan, who plays the long-suffering mother Tami, doesn't have an autistic child. She says: I am accessing the character of Tami first and foremost as a parent -- the length, width and depth of a parent's love for her child; the sort of strength you access as a parent that you never knew you had; the choking obsession a great love

for your child can sometimes compel you towards, and how this tips the balance with regard to other members of the family who need your love and support too" (Yusof 2).

Practically, according to Josh's age 18 and physically hulking, can make both him and his family in danger.

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

Lisa: He could have killed Grammy...You don't know what he will do...He's a freak and he should be locked up!

Grammy: Isn't there a safe place that Josh could live? I thought now that he's 18 he could go to one of those group houses.

Tami: They are not always "safe" places (Jent, Sce.3,37)

They employ certain plans and code words to keep him in peace while his sister mostly stays away out of the house. So the problem is with communication. Jent said that "I realized something was different about Andy when he was about 18 months old and started to lose words instead of increasing his vocabulary. Josh: Pockorn. Bill: you want popcorn? Then he began to engage in repetitive behavior, drawing into himself instead of exploring his world".

Bill: Do you want some water?

Josh: water.

Bill: Water yes or water no?

Josh: water yes (Jent, Sce.3,34)

James Hebert poses a question "How such realities of life with autism are (or are not) communicated to the outside world is a subject that was much in Jent's mind when she wrote *Falling*". She remarks that autistics may not communicate easily, she makes use of her own experience with her autistic son Andy who kept urging her to put on pajamas. "He doesn't say 'I miss you' or 'I want you to stay.' But in pajamas, Mom doesn't leave home."

The idea of nonverbal communication is fitting for *Falling* because it is an important tool to help those with the autism spectrum. James Herbert, in his essay "Autism Taking Center Stage as *Falling*" says "in my own family home, we use extensive visual supports --including white boards, an iPad and picture-enhanced 'social stories' -- to help interact with our autistic teen-age son, who is partially verbal but has difficulty with complex sentences and conversations" (Herbert; Autism,2).

Also Helmi Yusof, in his essay "The weight of parenthood" refers to Marko's view of autistic persons. Marko who plays the autistic son, Josh. Marko says:

An autistic person thinks so incredibly differently from the way a normal person thinks. An autistic person thinks in images, not in words. Also, because a person with autism is so sensitive to all kinds of stimuli, there is this constant need to distract themselves from the sometimes jarring sensory effects of the world around them It's been a challenge having to drop everything you know of yourself, go against your instincts and mould your thought process into that of an autistic person. (Yusof 3)

Dealing with Josh, this type of thinking can go so far and influence the behavior such as the random barking of a neighbor's dog which creates panic for Josh. Also, the sound of the school bus plus the blender may cause him a nervous. Trouble increased when unaware grandma, Grammy Sue, Bill's mother, a very religious woman, comes to stay for a few days. She is heavily blaming family's routines and disdaining Josh's behavior, as she examines josh's behavior, she drives the family to collapse. These growing tensions are increased when she is unaccustomed to such kind of routine and spent more efforts to help the family by urging Lisa to come and live with her and urging Tami and Bill to put their trust in God. (Newmark; St. Louis,3). She insists on prying "we can pray with more power", but Bill says "pray for programs and housing options and staff for people like Josh" (Jent, Scene 3,37)

All these challenges led the parents to find modification with their life. They have worked hard as a well-coordinated team, to create a safe and happy life for josh and his younger sister Lisa to keep his aggressive behavior under control. They follow an intricate system of code words, solid child psychology and game playing. They have devised to keep josh happy, delighted and calm, so they created a box of feathers that Josh releases it from a high shelf and lets the feathers rain on him and when he is upset, Tami encourages him to dance out his confusion and fears and rocking from place to place under its gentle fall. Toys and games also would mentally transform his aggressive behavior to calm but when he was a little boy (Stasio 1).

It's worthy to refer to the title of *Falling*, which has the meaning of struggle or distress; or which may refer to the delicate feathers that give Josh pure, endless delight as he spills them from a box and watches them waft toward the floor. The falling feathers help Josh to remain safe and his family shares in that joy. Tami: "everything is falling apart" (Jent, Scene 4, 47). And it's a reminder that sometimes the most unlikely gifts can also be the most profound (Hebert; Autism,3).

Conclusion

The study discusses sensitivity and specifically autism spectrum disorder. It shows how *Falling* depicts the parent's difficulties with their teenage son, Josh, with sever autism .Josh who struggles with aggressive behavior and makes family struggles along with him . The study declares how autistic children who have troubles must be accepted by their society and most people have no awareness of this type of children, so they neglect and refuse them which makes

their parents ashamed of them. Most people have no idea how they behave? People don't know that autistic children don't have a language to express their pains, they are more anxious and aggressive, they need more than their parents can give them, they are annoyed by loud noises and harsh arguments. Actually, not all autistic children are disabled and not all of them are the same or in the same level of autism. Jent tries to prove that using theater to overcome the communication in autism has been gaining popularity, she believes that theater is a suitable method for a lot of autism's inhibitions. The majority of theater classes for autism are spread and gained more developments which helps autistic teens understand how actions and words can influence in different social situations, because they think in images not in words. So, children can laugh in the theater instead of crying.

Jent didn't produce *Falling* as a play therapy or follow approaches in theater to handle the case of autism, it addresses a current issue and encourages people to embrace the condition and everything that comes with autism. Its goal is to create a space for children who are different, Furthermore it is suitable for older children and adults with disabilities. Though there some harrowing scenes of violence, the play is both educational and honest in its employment of a family dealing with severe autism.

Finally, *Falling* strongly encourages us to accept autistic children and learn to love them instead of sympathizing with them. It teaches us how to treat autistic persons. Briefly, she means the length, width, and depth of parent's love for children is a great therapy.

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