UC SANTA BARBARA

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Taking the ‘A’ Train

When Anne Torsiglieri’s twin boys were 15 months old, she noticed something not quite right. While one engaged with the people around him, the other seemed to prefer the company of the ceiling fan and beams of light. As his brother tried to joke with family members, he preferred the isolation of his own inner world.

Torsiglieri and her husband consulted medical professionals and specialists, and a diagnosis soon followed: Their young son had autism.

“Then began the long journey of learning how to help him, how to survive emotionally, and how to find a new way of defining happiness,” said Torsiglieri, an associate professor in UC Santa Barbara’s Department of Theater and Dance, “… a happiness that is actually, now, very rich and true and ‘in the moment.’ ”

“A” Train

A playwright and actor, Torsiglieri has taken her experiences raising an autistic child and woven them into her one-woman show, “ ‘A’ Train.” Under the direction of Risa Brainin, professor and chair of theater and dance at UCSB, “ ‘A’ Train” will make a stop at the 8th annual United Solo Festival. Torsiglieri will give four performances beginning Sep. 30, three of which have already sold out. A newly added fourth is set for Monday, Oct. 30, at 7:30 p.m.

An international theater festival for solo performances, United Solo celebrates the uniqueness of the individual through a variety of one-person shows. Productions are selected from openly solicited submissions and presented at Theatre Row in

the heart of the New York City theater district.

Launched at UCSB

The play was initially developed through LAUNCH PAD, a program that operates as a high-tech lab for playwrights-in-residence at UCSB. Led by Brainin, founding artistic director, a new play is developed each year, and the residency culminates in a fully realized preview production that includes a mix of student and professional actors.In " 'A' Train," Torsiglieri's work is drawn from interviews — often verbatim — from individuals with autism, their families, doctors, and teachers. These are intertwined with pieces of her own family's story and highlighted all around with songs by composer Brad Carroll ("Lend Me a Tenor, The Musical"), plus a healthy dose of irreverent humor.

Embracing all ways of being

"I want to share our story, hopefully illuminate the experience of autism a bit, and also engender understanding and respect for those on the spectrum," she said. "I also am trying to tackle some of the misconceptions about autism, and the issues that are fraught within the community itself. I think the story of searching for a different kind of framework for happiness is a universal one — and is relevant to all of us."

With the latest figures suggesting that one out of every 68 children has an autism diagnosis, Torsiglieri's work is more than just timely. "Autism is a huge phenomenon in our world right now," she noted. "Everyone seems to know someone with autism. We need to figure out is what must be done to support these people, and how we can understand and embrace all 'ways of being'."

The power of experience

According to Brainin, the power of " 'A' Train," comes from Torsiglieri's direct experience with the subject. "She is a mother who's *living* this," she said. "Her work is based on fact. And that combined with the verbatim interviews gives it unquestionable authenticity. Anne is an extraordinary actor and writer. I've had the pleasure of directing her in several new plays including "Appoggiatura" and "Kingdom City." She is a great comedienne, yet always finds the depth and heartbreak in every character. Brad Carroll's music coupled with Annie's book and lyrics makes for a highly entertaining experience."

Those word-for-word interviews, Brainin and Torsiglieri agree, are a crucial element. “The autistic population historically has had people speak for them — especially because so many folks on the spectrum are non-verbal — and often with less than ideal results,” Torsiglieri noted. “By using the actual words of the people I interviewed, I hope to honor who they are and what they have to say.”

The Art of Autism

And she’s taken that even a step farther. At one point in the play Torsiglieri embodies an autistic artist, and she and Brainin have opted to incorporate several pieces of original art by various artists who are themselves autistic. The art for “ ‘A’ Train” is curated by Keri Bowers, a long-time autism advocate, filmmaker, speaker and program designer and facilitator. She is the co-founder of The Art of Autism, an international nonprofit resource for autistic artists, poets, bloggers and other creative individuals.

“I love the moment in the play when we introduce the work of these wonderful artists,” said Brainin. “The pictures so beautifully express the souls of these individuals who are not able to express themselves in words.”

Another production

Brainin is currently directing another play about autism — “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” — at Indiana Repertory Theatre and Syracuse Stage. Featuring Mickey Rowe, it is the first professional production to cast an actor on the autism spectrum to play the starring role of Christopher. The play, by Simon Stephens, is based on Mark Haddon’s novel by the same name.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.