UC SANTA BARBARA

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Rolling to Victory

What a ride for the “ ‘A’ Train.”

The play written, performed, produced and directed by UC Santa Barbara scholars — a work that first debuted on campus — has taken the top prize in the 2017 United Solo Awards. United Solo, the world’s largest solo theater festival, named “‘A’ Train” Best Production of the year.

The piece by playwright and actor Anne Torsiglieri, an associate professor in the Department of Theater and Dance, and directed by Risa Brainin, professor and chair of theater and dance, rose above 120 solo stage productions to take the win. It was also the top-selling show of the festival’s recent 10-week run at Theatre Row on 42nd Street in New York.

Drawn from Torsiglieri’s own experiences raising an autistic child, “ ‘A’ Train” shines a light on the complexities of autism and explores new ways of defining happiness.

“I am so thrilled to be able to share this story, which is not only our experience in the world of autism, but also the very universal journey of how to reframe and embrace happiness, and how to find it all around us,” Torsiglieri said after winning Best Production. “I am so grateful to my amazing collaborators Risa Brainin and composer Brad Carroll, Keri Bowers from The Art of Autism and Suzy Faye from The Lark, and especially to all the individuals who so generously shared their stories with me.”

Added Brainin, “Annie, our composer Brad Carroll and I are so thrilled to be recognized in this way by the United Solo Festival. We are so proud that ‘ “A” ’ Train began its journey at UCSB in our LAUNCH PAD program. Many faculty and students were involved in its evolution over the past three years — we are so grateful to everyone who contributed. It is the very essence of what LAUNCH PAD is all about: going from first page to production! We also want to thank John Eisner at the Lark Play Development Center in New York and Liz Engelman at the Tofte Lake Center in Minnesota, who helped develop ‘ “A” ’ Train.’ ”

Torsiglieri first developed the one-woman work on campus, by way of LAUNCH PAD, a program that operates as a high-tech lab for playwrights-in-residence at UCSB. Led by Brainin, founding artistic director, one 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 — of 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 Carroll (“Lend Me a Tenor, The Musical”), plus a healthy dose of irreverent humor.

“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,” Torsiglieri 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.”

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. In its 8th annual offering, nearly 60 shows sold out and were presented several times due to popular demand. “ ‘A’ Train” was among them.

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.