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For many kids with autism, theatre offers customized rehearsals for real life



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Michael Paul Levin, left, and Amy McDonald in Stacey Dinner-Levin's *Autistic License*, at Minneapolis's Illusion Theater in 2007.

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A CHILD LAUGHS INSTEAD OF CRIES. HE WALKS at eight months. His first words are “Bob Barker!” He echoes words instead of answering questions. Mom and Dad have their suspicions that he might be different, but he makes eye contact and is affectionate. Nevertheless, by the time he is three years old he is diagnosed with autism.

What follows in Stacey Dinner-Levin's autobiographical play *Autistic License* is a plotline all too familiar for parents of children with autism—and that's not a small group. In 1980, one in every 10,000 children in the U.S. was diagnosed with autism. By 2009, that number rose to one in 100. The scientific community cannot yet explain whether this represents an enormous surge in cases, a broader diagnosis or simply an expanding awareness of the autism spectrum. The American Psychiatric Association defines the various manifestations of Autism Spectrum Disorder through a combination of symptoms: lack of eye contact, facial expression, gestures, spontaneous sharing and emotional reciprocity; delay or lack of speech, repetitive use of language and mannerisms; preoccupation with a particular interest, inflexibility in routine.

“You get the diagnosis and the information and the book and you talk to the other parents,” says Minneapolis-based Dinner-Levin, remembering the therapy-packed early years of her son Geordy's life. As a former case manager for children with special needs, Dinner-Levin found no shortage of failed treatments.

In *Autistic License*, the characters live through the telltale

signs of autism, the crushing diagnosis and the struggle toward acceptance. They seek support groups, occupational and speech therapy and educational assistance. In real life, Dinner-Levin's breakthrough was surprisingly linked to her own theatrical background. When Geordy was a third grader, she enrolled him in theatre classes. At his first rehearsals, he stood in a taped-off square to keep from wandering around the stage. Now, at 19, he's performing in community theatre productions. It turns out Geordy shares a passion with his professional-actor father, Michael Paul Levin—a passion that became the only effective therapy for him.

THE PRACTICE OF USING THEATRE TO OVERCOME the communication and social barriers inherent in autism has been gaining popularity within the last decade. Traditional therapies—speech, behavioral, physical and occupational—conducted in a “pull out” (i.e., one-on-one) manner can teach valuable skills, but don't advance socialization the way contextualized group therapy can. And what better way to naturally transition into real-life social situations than through simulated ones in the safe environment of theatre?

That approach made a lot of sense to Andrew Nelson, a special education consultant in applied theatre. “What does it take to be an actor?” asks Nelson. “You have non-verbal expression, gestures, empathy, being part of a large group, and fitting socially in that group. All those things we learned as actors are what these kids with autism need