



Susan Nussbaum and her father and director, Mike, at work on a scene from her one-woman show, "Mishuganismo." Tribune photo by Chris Walker

Real-life drama

A hard-won father-daughter collaboration finally comes to fruition onstage

By Jessica Seigel

Under the bright lights on center stage, Susan Nussbaum is rehearsing the section of her one-woman show where she compares the absurdity of a "Star Trek" convention to the failures of the socialist Left in conservative times.

"You have to energize," director Mike Nussbaum, who is also her father, shouts from the dimness of the theater hall.

"Energize? I can understand that from the 'Star Trek' show," Susan wisecracks back from the stage. "It's frightening how you use that word."

Chuckles all around. She repeats the scene.

Silence.

Things are beginning to look iffy for this passage of her monologue show, "Mishuganismo," which opens Sunday at the Remains Theatre.

Her 68-year-old father, a veteran actor and director, stands up and walks to the

table that is the sole piece of scenery. He moves in close to talk to his 38-year-old daughter, an actress and playwright.

His manner is diplomatic: "I have a feeling the whole Capt. Picard thing is a

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—Mike Nussbaum on directing
Susan Nussbaum

sidetrack that isn't working."

"I hate to say it, but you're right, Dad," Susan says. "Ow. Pain."

This is their first collaboration. When they began working together in the fall, she might have put up more of a fight. But now father and daughter have a smooth working relationship.

"I'm going to cut it right now," she says. "I'm cutting it. I'm cutting it."

She takes out a pencil and draws a big

"X" across the passage.

"You're a courageous person," her dad tells her, with some good-natured teasing.

"I know," she says.

And she is.

Their collaboration was supposed to have happened 14 years ago. But a freak auto accident interrupted that opportunity.

Susan was walking on the sidewalk to acting class at the Goodman Theatre school when a car hit her after jumping the curb. The impact severed her spinal chord, leaving her quadriplegic with no use of her legs and partial use of her hands.

Just weeks before, her father had cast her in "Uncommon Women" at the now-defunct St. Nicholas Theater. Despite his mixed feelings at the appearance of nepotism, he felt she was clearly the best actress for the part of Rita.

"Rita is a foul-mouthed independent rebel," he said. "She wouldn't have had to

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stretch to play the character."

Susan would never take that role. The show went on without her.

Those were tough times for the close-knit Nussbaum family, which includes brother Jack, a social worker, and sister Karen, who founded 9 to 5, the national working women's organization. Their mother, Annette, is a public-relations specialist and emotional center of the family.

After her accident, Susan contemplated suicide. She moved back home and learned to use an electric wheelchair. Life did not resemble "The Waltons."

"There just wasn't room enough in the world for a person as angry as I was and as angry as [my father] was," she said. "It took a while. I got over it. It was a question of getting my life back together. He pushed me to see that I had to get the hell out of there."

Wild days

Finding her way into the disabled-rights movement was an important step. The activists proved to her that stereotypes about the helplessness of people with disabilities were all wrong.

Before that, Susan says, "I thought I was doomed. . . . Then I learned it was a lie. You can have your own apartment, you can have sex."

Susan began to take back her independence. She got her own place and became active in the leftist and disabled-rights movements. She was arrested in protest marches and traveled to Cuba. Those experiences would all become grist for the humor mill in "Mishuganismo."

She began writing and acting in her own plays, such as the acclaimed "Staring Back" at Second City E.T.C. in 1984 and "The Plucky and Spunky Show" at the Remains last season.

The wheelchair has limited her choice of traditional theatrical roles, but she has had opportunities. Chicago Tribune critic Richard Christiansen called her "exquisite delivery" as Gertrude Stein in "She Always Said, Pablo" a highlight of the 1987 Goodman Theatre show, directed by Frank Galati. More recent parts have been in "Reckless" at the Steppenwolf and "Enemy of the People" at the Northlight.

Susan wanted to be an actress since she was a little girl who spent a lot of time in dressing rooms, waiting for her father. Those were wild days in the early 1960s, when her father exchanged his exterminating business for the stage life, embarking on a prolific 30-year acting and directing career.

His 15-year association with David Mamet has included roles in such plays as "Glengarry Glen Ross" in Chicago and New York, and film parts in "House of Games" and "Things Change." His long list of directing credits includes the hit "American Buffalo" at the Remains last season.

Spiritual father

In the course of his career, Mike Nussbaum has been called a spiritual father to a generation of local actors. But the spiritual fatherhood that matters most is fathering along "Mishuganismo" with his daughter.

"I'm more than just happy," Mike said. "I've had an opportunity to do this with and for Susan.



Susan Nussbaum (center) as Gertrude Stein in the Goodman Theatre's 1987 production of "She Always Said, Pablo." Critic Richard Christiansen praised her "exquisite delivery" of Stein's words.

I'm no spring chicken, and who knows how long I'll be able to do it. This is very important in my stage of life."

During a lunch break, father and daughter sat at the table at center stage discussing their work together. For the first time, Susan says, she has developed a truly professional relationship with her father.

"I learn every day. It's a real rich experience to be working with a great director," she said, pausing. The experience goes beyond that. "I mean, he's my father."

Mike tended to stay out of Susan's work with other directors. Yet all the time, he searched for a play they could do together.

Last summer, he began encouraging Susan to put together a monologue from the long letters she has written over the years. Family members found the letters so entertaining that they have frequently read aloud her tales about navigating protest marches and love affairs in a wheelchair.

Mike began selecting material from 200 pages of letters, using a short story she wrote as the dramatic theme. In the short story and the monologue, Susan identifies a phenomenon she calls

"When I see her work in the rehearsal process, I'm looking at an actress who's unrelated to me. On the other hand, when she's good, I get tears in my eyes."

—Mike Nussbaum

"Mishuganismo" (combining the Yiddish word for nutty with a Spanish suffix). The syndrome describes what happens when a Jewish woman falls hopelessly in love with a Latin man.

In that sense, her one-woman show is a love story.

"Mishuganismo" spoke to Susan in a way her activism did not," her father said. "It was humorous and vulnerable."

Women easily recognize the syndrome. "Everybody comes up to me and says, 'I didn't know there was a name for it.' It's a very serious widespread disease," Susan said. "It will be really bad if Latin men figure it out. They're already impossible."

Over the summer and through the fall, father and daughter labored to weave together the monologue. They began rehearsing two or three hours a week in her North Side apartment. In September they held a private reading at the Remains Theatre to attract a producer.

Fair game

Larry Sloan, the theater's artistic director, said he took on the play because it was funny and multi-leveled. The first one person show at the Remains, "Mishuganismo," Sloan said, follows in the tradition of autobiographical monologues by playwright-actors like Spalding Gray.

Watching the Nussbaums work together has its amusements, Sloan said. He recalled one rehearsal in which Mike began eating a cookie. Susan stopped acting to ask him why he hadn't brought her one too. He said that she hadn't brought him any of her food the other day. She shrugged and continued.

It was almost a moment of sthick. There are so many. All is fair game for humor in the Nussbaum family.

Father and daughter said they were not squeamish about sections of the monologue that make light of personal aspects of her sex life. Most daughters would not like to discuss such details with their fathers. But Mike said he'd heard it all before, since it came from her letters.

"Susan has always been very verbal from infancy. Her private life was less private than most. It did not come as news to me," he said. "I have no problem dealing with women about sensitive sexual matters—on stage."

Susan adds her own view on this sensitive material: "I think the history of sex abuse in the family really helped us with that. It's just great when it's out in the open like this."

The two manage to keep straight faces just long enough to make you wonder. Then they giggle, knowing the joke worked.

Such irreverence underlies much of Susan's work. She calls her approach to disabilities "crip humor." It's a kind of inside humor that makes fun of subjects others might feel are out of bounds.

But her monologue is not exactly one long guffaw. Along with the funny passages come many

that are poignant.

In rehearsal, Mike asks for a more somber interpretation in a scene about unrequited love.

"Remember, Sue, this is a moment of heartbreak," he tells her.

"Well, yes and no," she responds. Then she thinks about it. "OK, I guess I owe it to admit that."

No sentimentality

The "heartbreak" is a subject Susan will discuss only on her own terms, when she has to discuss it at all. Sitting at the table during the interview, she doesn't hold back as she emphasizes how much she hates sentimentalizing.

Phrases like "shattered dreams," "struggling back" or "confined to a wheelchair" infuriate her, she said, insisting that this story avoid such clichés.

Later her father is asked was she always so, well, um. . . .

"Abrasive?" Mike says.

Yes.

"She's very sensitive that her life not be only about the wheelchair," he says.

In rehearsal, she repeatedly runs through the scene about "heartbreak" each time with new direction from her father.

"You're rushing," he tells her.

She looks momentarily doubtful.

"Trust me. Trust me. We can always speed it up later."

"OK, OK, OK."

Finally Mike looks pleased.

"I try to be as objective as I can be," he said later. "How objective can a father be with a daughter? But I try. When I see her work in the rehearsal process, I'm looking at an actress who's unrelated to me. On the other hand, when she's good, I get tears in my eyes."

Their collaboration has been deeply gratifying to both.

"At the beginning," said mom Annette, "we didn't know how it would work out, and it's worked out better than we ever imagined."

These are good days.

"This is a yardstick. It's remarkable how far we've come—" Susan said, cutting herself off in mid-sentence, refusing to broach that boring old "heartbreak" stuff. "This is just what I wanted to do," she continued, now upbeat and earnest. "I'm a one-woman show. My dad is directing me. You can't believe . . . I'm savoring every moment."