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Love, Loss and Redemption

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'Becky's New Car' Kicks Off Theatre Aspen Summer Season

For Theatre Aspen Artistic Director Paige Price, the nonprofit's 2011 summer season was a "go big, or go home" situation.

After the near completion of their \$1.5 million fundraising campaign (they're just \$80,000 away), this year brings the new — and most importantly rain-proof — Hurst Theatre on the banks of the river across from Rio Grande Park. The summer lineup offers the first big Broadway musical to grace the Theatre Aspen stage ("Annie"). And Price had to search far and wide to find the kickoff play, "Becky's New Car," after her first choice, musical "Vices: A Love Story," had to be shifted to the third slot in the lineup due to a scheduling conflict with the director.

But then things fortuitously falling into place at the last minute is nothing new in the world of theater.

"Just like our lobby, theater is never quite finished," Price says. "We didn't even get electricity in the tent until the day of the first preview."

And while "Becky's New Car" might not have been Price's first choice to launch the season, it nonetheless provided a quirky and unexpected start. Starring Sandy Duncan — most famous for her

Tony-nominated performance in "Peter Pan," though perhaps more widely known as the Wheat Thins spokeswoman — brings a decidedly familiar and casual tone to the play from the onset.

The play hits upon many of life's core themes: love, loss, forgiveness and redemption. But it does so in a way that truly resonates with the audience, and particularly those in marriages. The play is a spin-off of the classic mistaken-identity premise, with a few more twists thrown in for good measure. Becky, a loving wife, hardworking assistant at a car dealership and mother of a too-educated-for-his-own-good son that refuses to leave the nest, finds herself in the general malaise of a 50- or 60-something woman feeling invisible in the latter part of her life.

Duncan's Becky breaks the fourth wall nearly from her first words, endearing herself to the audience and making the ensuing heartbreak, betrayal and quasi-redemption all the more palatable.

"It's a subversive technique," Price says. "I think that that comfort pulls you in so that you can feel like you empathize with her story and maybe even relate to it. Audience interaction during a play is something that I don't personally care for, but people here love it. So when I read that I play, I immediately knew that it would fly in Aspen. And it has already."

Though Becky is certainly the main character, her husband Joe (local actor David Ledingham, who plays the working man hubby role to a t) is just as important. And it is perhaps his unwavering devotion to his less-than-faithful wife that helps the audience find their moral compass in this convoluted tale. He also delivers one of the most poignant lines in the play, when he says to his wife, "You don't get to put a marker in your life; you can leave, but you can't come back to the same spot."

Ledingham's appearance in the play also underscores a larger trend with Theatre Aspen, as more locals continue to pop up in productions.

"As I've gotten to know the locals more and gotten to know their strengths," says Price, who's been with Theatre Aspen for four years, "I really see what they're good at and I try to think about plays that have roles for them."

Local Nina Gabianelli will play Miss Hannigan in "Annie," along with several young local actors playing orphans.

"It's nice to be able to use people that are here," Price adds.

The third and final play of the season, "Vices: A Love Story," is one that has been on Price's mind for a few years. And she says it's unlike anything Theatre Aspen has ever done.

"For me, it was the music that grabbed my attention," she says. "I was listening to it while I was running, and I literally stopped it was so different. It's theatrical, exciting, complex, and funny."

She describes it as part "American Idol" and part "So You Think You Can Dance," which should provide an impressive spectacle on the Hurst stage.

"Part of our mission is also to develop new plays," she adds. "And this is a really great start."

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'Becky's New Car'

Runs through July 23

Starring Sandy Duncan, *Becky's New Car* is a perfect blend of hilarious comedy and poignant storytelling, about the choices and consequences that follow for a middle-aged woman at her "fork in the road." Becky is literally handed the keys to a new life, when a grief-stricken millionaire stumbles into the car dealership where Becky works. This thoroughly original play then takes us on a ride of hairpin turns and plot twists that will leave the audience breathless.

'Annie'

July 7 — Aug. 20

Annie is the spunky, Depression-era orphan who believes "the sun'll come out tomorrow," and who melts the heart of millionaire Oliver Warbucks, along with everyone else that she meets. The sharply funny book has tons of laughs and warmth and the score contains some of the most memorable and hummable tunes in Broadway history. Starring Nina Galianelli as the mean Miss Hannigan.

Vices: A Love Story

July 28 — Aug. 20

Unlike anything you've ever seen, "Vices: A Love Story" features explosive choreography by Andrew Palermo. Four singers and a hot dance couple power this brand new musical, featuring original songs that are sophisticated, surprising and simply touching. "Vices" follows the dancers' story from the beginning, and explores the distractions and wrong turns that threaten to destroy their happiness.