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Review: 'Becky's New Car' ponders cars, roads and life

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Sandy Duncan, right, and Ted Pejovich in “Becky's New Car,” playing in the Theatre Aspen summer season.
Patrick Ghidossi The Aspen Times

ASPEN — I remember an observation made by my old friend Hal K.: “You know how you put on a brand-new pair of socks, and you feel like Superman?” I knew exactly what he meant: a fresh pair of socks right out of the bag made you feel 2 inches taller, made you feel like you were jumping higher and running faster. How much did that observation click in my brain? Hal said that some 30 years ago, and I still remember it perfectly.

So let's up the ante a whole lot. If slipping on a pair of \$4 sweat socks makes you feel like Superman, what does taking ownership of a new car, slipping behind the wheel and taking account of the cutting-edge features, hearing the purr of that fresh engine, knowing you can head anywhere in comfort and luxury — what does that do for you? Like Superman — with touches of Batman (all the cool toys), the Flash (speed) and Invisible Woman from the Fantastic Four (she could not only turn invisible, but also create an impenetrable force field) thrown in.

This is the metaphor on which “Becky's New Car,” a comedy by Steven Dietz that is currently playing at Theater Aspen, is built. Get a new car, and watch what happens to you and your life. You feel invincible. You feel like your existence has started anew

— or gives you reason to shift into reverse, back over your old life till it's ground into the pavement, then slip into forward and drive into the future that's waiting for you, just about visible on the horizon. And all that shiny steel and glass is a cocoon that will protect you from all road hazards — even those of your own making.

Becky, played with great accessibility by Sandy Duncan, works at — what else? — a car dealership. At the play's beginning, Becky tells of a middle-aged customer, Mrs. Tipton, who, cruelly insulted by her husband, buys a car and promptly drives it off a cliff. Not exactly what Becky has in mind, but it plants the seed: new car, new life. Or new something.

Becky's life is OK, no more, no less. Her husband (played by Aspenite David Ledingham) is an ordinary Joe — his name is Joe; he's an amiable if none too exciting roofer. Their son, Chris (played by Duncan's real-life son, Jeffrey Correia), is a stressed-out grad student none too eager to move out or help out. Her job is your standard job — it takes too much of her time, has become a routine, but she likes her co-workers alright.

The routine is broken one evening when the well-heeled Walter (Ted Pejovich) enters the dealership. He's wealthy, recently widowed, socially lost — and interested in the petite, perky Becky. (Yes, at 65, Duncan still pulls off perky with no strain.) Becky tries mightily to say sorry, I'm unavailable — but with Mrs. Tipton in mind, knowing that predictable Joe and moody Chris await at home, and surrounded by a showroom of cars, those emblems of possibility, she never quite makes that clear. Walter pursues her, and eventually Becky succumbs.

As Becky tries living dual lives — solid wife and mother in middle-class home; kept woman in Walter's fancy Cedar Cove home — the lies and close calls tighten around her like a noose. “Becky's New Car” has something to say — about mid-life crises, the balance between fantasy and ordinary, cars and what they mean to us. But the fast pace, the coincidences, and some good one-liners keep the atmosphere fizzy. (Best line: When Becky and Joe consider moving, she raises the issue of what will happen to Chris: “He'll think he won — we moved out before he did,” Joe quips.)

Duncan is a memorable presence; when she's offstage — which is rare — you find yourself awaiting her return. The structure, with the action constantly moving between apartment, dealership and Cedar Cove, is effective. The automobile metaphor, while slightly forced, gives the audience a prism through which to look at things. The dialogue is funny, the characters sympathetic, the story arc satisfying.

But don't expect “Becky's New Car” to change your life. This is, after all, just a play — not a fully loaded, convertible, sea-green BMW 300 series with that new car smell.

“Becky's New Car” plays Friday and Saturday, July 2, with additional dates through July 23.

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