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Open season for Theatre Aspen in new tent

by **Curtis Wackerle**, Aspen Daily News Staff Writer

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The 2011 Theatre Aspen season opens today in the group's new digs in Rio Grande Park.

"Becky's New Car" starring Sandy Duncan is one of three shows the theater troupe will put on this summer. It's a story about a middle-aged woman whose life is changed when a grief stricken millionaire stumbles into the car dealership where she works.

Theatre Aspen's new tent — known as the Hurst Theatre — is in the same location in-between the big field and the Roaring Fork River. It even has the same footprint as the old tent, give or take a few feet, said architect Charles Cunniffe, who designed the new tent. But, "The new tent is considerably bigger inside because of the shape," Cunniffe said.

"You have the same amount of seats," Cunniffe said, "but it's just a much better experience for theater-goers." The new facility is also much more functional from a production standpoint, he said.

The old tent, with its double camel hump form, ended up wasting a large part of its inside space, he said.

Theatre Aspen and the city's parks department undertook a major overhaul of the tent area this spring, complete with new landscaping, wetlands and ponds. City Council approved the work, and the new tent, last winter. But

the group isn't done yet, Cunniffe said.

While the new tent — which will come down in the winters — presently has a lobby that is also temporary, the group will seek approval this fall for a permanent lobby structure. This would give the theater a permanent presence in the park and remind passersby year round that “this is the home of the theater,” he said.

The permanent structure would also provide convenient storage for the tent, chairs and summer equipment, Cunniffe said.

The entrance of the new tent also faces the John Denver Sanctuary to the east, while the old tent had its entrance to the west. The old layout resulted in “leftover space,” Cunniffe said.

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