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Sandy Duncan is already on a wild ride in Aspen

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Theatre Aspen puts Sandy Duncan's trademark pluck to the test by casting her in the lead role in the road-trip play "Becky's New Car."

When Theatre Aspen announced Sandy Duncan would be gracing its stage this summer in the road-trip play "Becky's New Car," it seemed unlikely the wholesome star might soon be occupying the town's Charlie Sheen Memorial Jail Cell.

Then came Sunday, when Duncan found herself going on a wild ride of her own.

Duncan, new to Aspen, was driving a borrowed car in a driving thunderstorm, heading back toward the new Hurst Theatre that's smack-dab in the middle of Rio Grande Park, to give stranded castmates, including her own son, a ride back to their quarters in the village. That's what America's sweethearts do.

But it was late, the park was dark, "and I didn't know where the hell I was," said Duncan. "I started to panic.

"I'm out driving on the footpaths — and I'm sure that's against the law — and next thing I know, I'm in the John Denver Sanctuary," she said of the memorial walkway that features many of the singer's lyrics carved onto large granite stones.

Duncan blinked and was into the woods. "I really thought at one point, 'This is it. I am going to pull over and just go to sleep until daybreak,' " she said. "It was frightening."

But Duncan eluded the Aspen police blotter, rescued instead by the sound of friends yelling her name and waving her down in the pouring rain.

"God knows what tomorrow brings," said the exasperated star who, God and nature willing, will christen Theatre Aspen's new tented-theater jewel tonight in the opening performance of Denver native Steven Dietz 's new comedy.

And that's the last time you'll hear Duncan compared with Sheen, who dominated headlines last summer when it was proposed that Sheen, sentenced to 30 nights in jail for allegedly assaulting his wife, do his daytime community service leading "master classes" for Theatre Aspen. (Its summer repertory season ran out before that terrible plan had a chance to hatch.)

No, when Duncan says she's busy doing lines and laundry, be assured that the pixie-cut Texan means she's memorizing words and cleaning clothes.

But it has already been quite an eventful visit for Duncan, who was asked by her friend, Theatre Aspen artistic director Paige Price, to summer in the Rio Grande Park.

Duncan has been labeled perpetually perky since her Tony Award-nominated run as Broadway's "Peter Pan ," through stints on TV's "The Hogan Family," her own show and various commercials.

But Aspen is putting her trademark pluck to the test. She's been warned about bears. Her eyes are swollen shut by allergies. ("I look like some alcoholic woman.") And a week of rehearsal for "Becky's New Car" was cut.

"This is not your ordinary theater event," she said. "Oh, no, the experience keeps topping itself."

"Becky's New Car" appealed to Duncan, 65, because it was an opportunity for her to perform again with 23-year-old son Jeffrey Correia, with whom she appeared in "The Glass Menagerie" in Pittsburgh last summer. She didn't know at the time that Theatre Aspen meant theater in a park — or that its new \$1 million facility wasn't done yet.

"I love Aspen, and I love this cast, but so far, I am having a run of . . . well, let's just say I'm in for a heavy ride in terms of new experience here," she said.

In the play, a middle-aged woman is handed the keys to a new life when a grief-stricken, Prince Charming millionaire stumbles into the car dealership where she works.

"It's about a woman who comes to a point in her life and goes, 'Is that all there is?' " Duncan said. "And through a series of events, she decides to take a chance on something totally different in her life."

Duncan can relate. "Becky is in the age range I am, where your life starts to narrow," she said. "There are all kinds of emotions you get as you get older. You go, 'Yes, I am happy. I am content. My life is complete. So ... is that it?' It's a question we all deal with at some point."

Duncan's son plays her son. He is troubled by his mother's choices . . . "and for good reason," she said.

"I like performing with Jeffrey. We are entirely different in the way that we perform. He is very exact and precise, and I am very loose and not so precise — and that drives him crazy. It's a learning experience for me to work with him because he doesn't put up with any of my crap."

Dietz, who graduated from Kennedy High School and has written more than 40 plays ("Yankee Tavern"), says, "I'm thrilled about having Sandy behind the wheel of 'Becky's New Car.' " Theatre Company of Lafayette is also now staging the story, through July 2.

Though the subject sounds serious, Duncan calls it a quirky, audience-friendly comedy, and Becky spends much of it speaking directly to them.

What will audiences get for going along for the ride?

"That depends on if I make it through any of my lines," Duncan said with a laugh. "I've seriously never learned anything this hard, this quickly, in my

life. Becky never shuts up. It's just a lot to learn in a short period of time. It's been a challenge, I have to say that."

So strap on your seat belts. It could be a bumpy, funny ride.

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"Becky's New Car" ticket information

Comedy. Presented by Theatre Aspen at the Hurst Theatre in Rio Grande Park. Written by Steven Dietz. Directed by Kate Powers. Starring Sandy Duncan. Through July 23. 7:30 daily (except Monday) tonight (Friday, June 24) through Thursday (June 30); dates then variable. \$25-\$50. 970-925-9313

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