

**The Aspen Times**  
**June 5, 2011**

## **Theatre Aspen rolls out new tent, bigger shows**

Stewart Oksenhorn  
Aspen Times Weekly  
Aspen, CO Colorado

Copyright 2011 The Aspen Times. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.



Theatre Aspen artistic director Paige Price, at the site of the organization's new performance tent in Rio Grande Park. Theatre Aspen's season opens June 24 and runs through Aug. 20.

*Stewart Oksenhorn / Aspen Times Weekly*

ASPEN – Theatre Aspen's new tent is sturdier, cleaner, more beautifully landscaped, better integrated into the park and river surroundings – and no bigger than the old tent, at least not in the size of the audience area or in the seating capacity. The new facility, for all the upgrades being installed and those still to come, retains the intimacy and small scale it has always had.

“Same vibe. It's still a tent,” said Paige Price, Theatre Aspen's artistic director.

Which doesn't mean that Price and the rest of the 28-year-old organization can't play big. These are actors, after all. So theatergoers entering the tent this summer might have the illusion of grandness, that they have entered a bigger space.

“This is the no guts, no glory year,” Price said. “We're going big. All those crazy dreams, we're reaching for them.”

The biggest thing about the upcoming season is the productions. The musical “Annie” will feature the biggest cast Theatre Aspen has ever worked with – 16 people and one dog – and, thanks to a larger and more flexible backstage space, the show will have two separate sets, a first for the organization. “Becky's New Car” sports a big star in Sandy Duncan, who had a

career-defining role as Peter in a Broadway production of “Peter Pan,” and has followed with a busy stage career.

And Theatre Aspen is taking on a big responsibility with its version of “Vices: A Love Story.” The show, an innovative mix of music and dance, has only been presented at a regional theater in South Florida. A team of writers and producers will be in Aspen for an extended period to work on the show with the intention of preparing it for a workshopping run in the fall, in New York.

“It’s like producing two seasons in one,” Price said, referring to the opening of the tent, the productions, and the fact that “Vices” will likely undergo significant changes from the beginning of rehearsals to the end of the season.

Last summer, then, was a bit like producing half a season. The season featured a two-person comedy, a four-person jukebox musical, a kids show, and a short run of a musical revue featuring an all-local cast.

“Last year we had small shows. Not this year,” said Price, who is entering her fourth season with the company. “Last year was the year of trying to be fiscally conservative, to recover from the previous fiscal state. We were in debt and we were going to get out.”

Actually, Theatre Aspen was not initially considering going quite as big as it has. The original plan for the tent was a simple replacement of the old structure. But the city of Aspen had been thinking about giving the entire area around the John Denver Sanctuary a makeover, including a fix of the stormwater drainage system. When Theatre Aspen began rolling out the plan to replace the tent, the city responded with a proposal to expand the vision. When the organization began looking at its tent platform, they were convinced that major alterations might be in order. The platform had been seriously eroded, thanks to the critters who had taken up residence there.

“It wasn’t quite the Snowmass dig. But we did find some relics of wildlife that had made their homes under there,” Price said. (She added that, in the process, Theatre Aspen and the city formalized their lease arrangement, after existing on a handshake deal for years.)

\*\*\*\*

Theatre Aspen’s season opens June 24 with “Becky’s New Car,” Steven Dietz’s twisting, fast-moving comedy that Price promises has “a big emotional wallop” at the end. The big attraction is Duncan, as big a name as Theatre Aspen has had. Price worked with the three-time Tony nominee in a post-9/11 tour designed to lure audiences back to Broadway, and became interested in bringing her to Aspen. Last fall, Price saw Duncan in a New Jersey production of a new play, “Circle Mirror Transformation.”

“The thing I found so striking was the depth Sandy has,” she said. “I think people are going to be really surprised by the stunning depth of her work.”

“Becky’s New Car” features Duncan’s son, Jeffrey Correia, as her on-stage son, with Aspenite David Ledingham and former Aspen High School graduate Heather Lee in featured roles.

Theatre Aspen could have saved a bit of money by canceling the Los Angeles auditions for

“Annie” (opening July 7). It found the actor for the title role in Aspenite Julia Foran, whose father, Ed, appeared in last summer’s “Defying Gravity.” “We saw all these shiny Broadway-type kids. And our director just loved Julia, said she’s a real kid with the voice of an angel,” Price said. Another local actor, Nina Gabianelli, was picked for the role of the not-so-angelic orphanage head, Miss Hannigan.

“Vices,” with six performers, is the smallest show of the season by number of cast members. But with an innovative use of dance and music to tell the story of the distractions and wrong choices that threaten happiness, there is a big vision behind it.

“It’s a new kind of show, all music and dance,” Price said. “It’s not really a revue – or it better not be a revue. Meaning it’s about something – a couple, these two dancers, and their relationship. We’ve never had this kind of dancing on the stage before.”

Nor have they had this kind of venue before. The new tent, designed by local architect Charles Cunniffe, may not have a bigger seating space or increased stage dimensions, but it acts bigger, thanks to better design, stronger materials and a slightly larger backstage.

“We’ll be able to do more technically advanced shows,” Price said. “No hydraulics – no ‘Spider-Man’ or ‘Wicked’ anytime soon. But it will be a noticeable upgrade – new lighting equipment, new sound. It may be subtle to theatergoers, but it will add up to a more polished, smooth product.”

Part of the overall product is the grounds outside the tent. “The main goal was to integrate all the park features, so our lobby overlooks the John Denver Sanctuary, and all the features complement each other,” Price said, adding that the entrance has been relocated to the opposite side from where it was in the past.

The new lobby, alas, won’t be ready until next summer. But Price believes that the shows, together with the new tent, will give audiences plenty to behold.

“It’s our brand new, white, shining tent, an A-frame tent instead of ... I don’t know what you call the last tent,” she said. “It was a little saggy looking.”

*Box: Theatre Aspen’s 2011 season, featuring three productions – “Becky’s New Car,” “Annie” and “Vices: A Love Story” – runs July 23-Aug. 20. For further information, go to [theatraspen.org](http://theatraspen.org).*

[stewart@aspentimes.com](mailto:stewart@aspentimes.com)