

**Aspen Times**  
**July 3, 2011**

## **Sandy Duncan puts theater before drama**

Actress starring in Theatre Aspen production  
Stewart Oksenhorn  
Aspen Times Weekly  
Aspen, CO Colorado

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Sandy Duncan stars in the title role of the comedy “Becky’s New Car,” playing in Theatre Aspen’s summer season.  
*Patrick Ghidossi / Aspen Times Weekly*

ASPEN — Sandy Duncan knows what it’s like to be stuck in a crummy show, in a nothing theater, surrounded by the sense of failure. In 1969, Duncan co-starred in a two-person play, “Love Is a Time of Day,” that originated in a theater at a mall in Paramus, N.J. By the time the production moved to Broadway, Duncan’s co-star, Michael Douglas — yes, that Michael Douglas — had bailed.

“He had the good sense to get out before it went regional,” Duncan recalled. Douglas didn’t miss much; the show closed after eight performances.

“It was terrible,” Duncan continued. “Not one of my shining moments.”

Duncan’s current gig — starring in the title role of Theatre Aspen’s production of the comedy “Becky’s New Car” — is nothing like the “Love Is a Time of Day” experience. Yes, she has been cutting and bruising herself in a series of minor mishaps as she acclimates from suburban Connecticut, which she calls home, to the trickier mountain

terrain. The rehearsal time is short, and some rehearsals were marred by wind and rain and jackhammers that made it impossible for the actors to hear one another. “It was like we didn’t know how to act; we’re yelling at each other,” she said. The Theatre Aspen tent and grounds are not quite in the shape (yet) she had expected. Finding tube socks in Aspen is impossible, and requires a trip to somewhere called Glenwood Springs. Her allergies are bad. There is the unusual Theatre Aspen schedule of rotating repertory, where “Becky’s New Car” plays for a few days, then gets a few days off during its month-long run.

And there was the one recent evening when Duncan, phoneless and frantic, unable to see out the windshield because of the rain, couldn’t find the Theatre Aspen tent. I refuse to repeat where she told me she drove her car that night, out of fear she will miss a performance while having to answer a lot of questions from the Aspen police and trails department. They would, one hopes, show sympathy when Duncan tells them that, fearing the bears she had heard about, her plan was to simply stop her car, crawl up on the seat and sleep until daylight. She was saved discomfort and embarrassment when some castmates spotted her from a distance.

Still, Duncan has kept her humor and enthusiasm, living up to her reputation for perkiness and spunkiness – even at 65, she can still be described as perky and spunky. Given the circumstances, any diva qualities that Duncan might have picked up over the years would have shown themselves by now. She has, after all, earned nominations for three Tonys, two Emmys and two Golden Globes, enjoyed a memorable Broadway run as Peter Pan, gotten a short-lived TV show that bore her own name, and had a street named after her in Taylorville, Ill. (Sandy Stockton, her fictional character on “The Sandy Duncan Show,” came from Taylorville). But Duncan says she is lacking a sense of diva-esque entitlement.

“Not at all,” said Duncan, who retains her dancer’s legs, one recent afternoon. “I don’t think you can do this, not in this situation, and be a diva. Someone would kill you. They’d take you out in the woods and shoot you and say they thought it was a bear. I’m not a diva because that doesn’t serve you or the project.”

And because Duncan is finding little worth throwing a tantrum over. Her trailer behind the Theatre Aspen tent is air-conditioned, powerfully so. More significant, she’s enjoying the work: “Becky’s New Car,” a comedy by Steven Dietz that gives Duncan a big, fun role as a woman willingly turning her comfortable life upside down, is, after a few early performances, rounding into shape, she believes.

“Last night, we finally found a play,” Duncan said.

Duncan is likewise pleased with the people she is working with, from the “strong set of actors” (including Aspenite David Ledingham as her ordinary-Joe husband, Joe), to the Theatre Aspen crew, to the theatergoers, who have eagerly gone along with the actor-audience interplay written into the show. “The people have been so nice, and that makes all the difference,” she said. “You put in a jerk or two, that might tilt it

the other way. But you start getting grumpy and you think, ‘well, nobody else is bitchy.’”

While Duncan is happy with the energy surrounding her, her co-stars are impressed with what Duncan has brought to the stage. Ledingham, praising her overall demeanor – “down to Earth, humble, fun and charming” – added that Duncan has also exhibited vast professionalism.

“The fact that she hadn't done this play before, and came in with 80 percent of her lines memorized – that's hard, and a lot of work,” he said. “The fact that she was willing to come to Aspen, do a two-week rehearsal, and do the preparation beforehand without getting paid – that says a lot.”

Duncan's reasons for coming to Aspen – and in the process, becoming the biggest name to appear at Theatre Aspen – are admirable ones. For starters, it afforded the opportunity to work with her son, Jeffrey Correia, after the two had previously appeared together in a production of “The Glass Menagerie.” Correia is featured as Becky's son, Chris, a stressed, indolent grad student, still living with his parents, who falls for the daughter of a well-to-do gentleman. Bringing Correia into the cast was a mother's way of protecting her son.

“He was coming back from Japan” – where he'd spent a year teaching English – “and he could come here, make an easy re-entry into America, before getting body-slammed in New York,” she said.

Aspen also offered a reconnection with Theatre Aspen artistic director Paige Price. The two acted as Broadway ambassadors on a post-9/11 trip across the country, inviting theater-goers back to New York City: “The bonding that happens in that kind of thing lasts a lifetime,” Duncan said. There is also the desire to do something good for theater generally. “I've done several regional theater things because I believe in it. You know you're not going to have the creature comforts you're accustomed to, but it's a good thing to do.”

Duncan, who started dancing at 5 in Tyler, Texas, developed her love of the stage at 12, when she landed a job as one of the little princesses in a Dallas production of “The King and I.” One job led to another and another and another, till she found herself, at 19, in New York, getting roles in “Carousel” and “The Music Man.” The course of her career meant she rarely had to audition, for which Duncan is enormously grateful.

“I stink,” she said, noting that she has done eight auditions in more than 40 years. “I go into a room and turn into a 14-year-old amateur. A line of people sitting in a room at a table with all these lights – it's painful. It's false. There's nothing to hold onto. It's like dancing for grandma. A story, the circumstances of the characters – in a play, that becomes my reality.”

Actual performance provides live fellow actors, and a breathing audience, for Duncan to connect with. “Becky’s New Car” provides plenty of both: the story has Becky, who works at a car dealership, at the center of a whirling circle of relationships: with her husband Joe; with her son Chris, with her co-worker Steve, with the wealthy, highbrow Walter, with whom she strikes up an affair. And the show exposes Duncan fully, a technique that plays to her strength. For Duncan, the fun of theater is the interplay between actor and audience.

“There’s this community of people, sitting together, having individual reactions,” she said. “But from the stage, you can see it start to come together as a collective. There’s agreement and they’re accepting of the material. It’s like church or sports. It’s communal, and there’s not much of that anymore. We’re isolated. So people are excited to share something. We’ve been sitting around the campfire telling stories since the beginning of time. It’s essential to the human spirit.”

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

*“Becky’s New Car” plays Friday through Sunday, July 8-10, with additional dates through July 23 at Theatre Aspen.*