

## A few dents aside, 'Becky's New Car' a smooth ride

If you're in the audience of the Dragon Theatre production of "Becky's New Car," be prepared to be asked to take a roll of toilet paper to the restroom at intermission, collate some sheets of paper for Becky, or carry a bucket to catch a small leak coming from the roof. Or, you might be offered a beer.

Despite those kitschy moments, "Becky's New Car" has a lot going for it, from a superlative cast of well-chosen actors to some of the snappiest, funniest dialogue around. Not bad for a little play (by noted contemporary playwright Steven Dietz) commissioned by Seattle's A Contemporary Theatre and produced there in 2008.

A relative Bay Area newcomer, director James Nelson took on this fascinating tale of a woman who undergoes huge midlife crises, all of which compound and unravel at lightning speed. As Becky Foster (Mary Lou Torre) explains to the audience in one of her many directspeeches:

"When a woman says she needs new shoes, what she really wants is a new job. When she says she needs a new house, she wants a new husband. And when she says she wants a new car, she wants a new life."

In Becky's case, that's almost an understatement. Torre is a talented actress, and she carries the brunt of the dialogue and action in this production. Yet for all her gifts, she exhibits a couple of unfortunate physical traits that are off-putting. For one, she frequently stares upward -- somewhere toward the balcony or the ceiling. Torre has

very large, expressive eyes -- a plus whenever she's apprehensive or concerned about how upside-down her life has become. But no one should look that uneasy all the time. At least when she talks with affection to her son, Chris (Sam Bertkan), or husband Joe (Ben Ortega), her expression seems genuine and she no longer appears so rattled.

The other perplexing part of Torre's performance is that this is a woman who throws away her 28-year marriage as if she's tossing out yesterday's garbage. The script has her doing some soul searching, but Torre shows scant emotion as she blithely lies to her husband about getting a promotion and deciding to spend her weekdays out of town

near her new job (instead, she hops into the life and bed of her new guy).

Fortunately, the acting of every member in the cast is so strong that the production as a whole is terrific. Bertken and Ortega are both captivating in their challenging roles. Bertken brings a freshness and devilishly good knowledge of psychological gobbledygook as the 26-year-old college boy so smitten by a girl that he finally rousts himself out of his bedroom and begins a regime of early morning runs.

Ortega is a revelation. His earnest compassion, coupled with a large dose of level-headed reality, make him the perfect foil for his philandering wife. As the play progresses, he adds depth and a heartrending tenderness to Joe.

Then there's Kevin Cops as "the other man," Walter Flood. Cops manages to make Walter sympathetic simply with a cock of his head and a puppy-dog look of love in his eyes. A multi-millionaire, Walter walks into Becky's life to buy nine cars for his nine employees because he can't think what gift to give them. Becky's unpretentious manner bowls him over and he finds himself enraptured for the first time since his wife passed away. He thinks Becky's husband has died as well, so he tells her sweetly, "You surprised me, Rebecca" (meaning he's surprised he finally has feelings for another woman).

The real sleeper in the cast is Jim Johnson as the put-upon car salesman, Steve. Johnson personifies the milquetoast, sympathy-seeking man who seems most concerned about how he never completed a long hike because his wife had the temerity to die along the way. When he crawls under a desk and whimpers, it's priceless.

The play's other two characters, Walter's daughter Kensington (Kenni) and his longtime friend Ginger, who's hoping to spark a romantic flame between herself and the widowed Walter, are played with zest and credibility by Roneet Aliza Rahamim as Kenni and Helena G. Clarkson as Ginger (in a not-too-realistic reddish-blond wig).

Julia Sussner does a fine job of compiling the furnishings of a middle-income living room, a tiny office for when Becky is at work and a deck to one side that represents far, far away at Walter's posh home. Lighting is tricky (and on opening night not always on cue), but Will Poulin's design is an essential part of the storyline.

Because the story takes place in the present day (in a city much like Seattle, according to

the program), clothing is current (one of Chris' many T-shirts says "The Awesome Meter Never Lies"). It likely was a bit of a challenge to figure out a way to let Becky change from casual clothes to a fancy dress onstage.

But it's Dietz's dialogue that brings out unexpected laughter, time and again.

As wimpy Steve tries to ingratiate himself to Ginger, he yaps on and on. Finally realizing he's talking too much, he says "I don't make my small talk small enough." And when Becky returns to Ben after everyone thinks she has died, he asks her "So, how was being dead? Around here, it didn't go so well."

This is a play to savor the words. The exceptional acting only adds to a terrific night of theater.

Email Joanne Engelhardt at [joanneengelhardt@comcast.net](mailto:joanneengelhardt@comcast.net).

## Theater

**What: "Becky's New Car"**

**Where: Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway, Redwood City**

**When: 8 p.m. Thursdays-  
Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays**

**Through: Aug. 4**

**Tickets: \$15 - \$30;**

**650-493-2006 or**

**[www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net)**