

NEW HEIGHTS

With award-winning new productions, nationally recognized actors and a high-tech new home, Theatre Aspen enters a new era of artistic excellence.

By Sue Hostetler

It's been said that industrialist and well-known Aspen developer Walter Paepcke and his wife, Elizabeth, envisioned our little mountain town as a latter-day Athens; a cultural and intellectual mecca for the smart set in the early 1950s. In addition to creating the Aspen Ski Company, the couple founded the venerable Aspen Institute, The International Design Conference and The Aspen Music Festival, bringing world-class art, architecture and music to town. But, oddly, it has taken another half century to establish exceptional local theater.

A tiny grassroots company was started in 1983—in the basement disco called Theatre Under the (Hotel) Jerome, where founder and local actor Kent Reed paid \$100 a month rent. In 1985, when the Environmental Protection Agency took issue with the city using the field that is now the Rio Grande Park as a snow-dump, Reed was (unbelievably) given the space for nothing and allowed to set up a second-hand yellow-and-white circus tent to perform his plays. Every fall, he would store the tent in the barn of Grace Huffman, mother of *Desperate Housewives* star Felicity Huffman, both of whom performed for Reed in the early days of the troupe. But the fledgling group did not take its place among the town's other internationally recognized cultural institutions until 2005, when it was officially renamed Theatre Aspen.

Enter Paige Price, who first stepped onto the Theatre Aspen stage as an actress in 2007, when the organization's leadership was in transition. "I was enlisted to take on the reins [as executive artistic director] in a new model of management," Price says. The focus of the theater shifted to creating

IN LIVING COLOR From top: The beautiful Hurst Theatre, surrounded by lush gardens and ponds, shines at dusk; actors in a performance of *Les Misérables*.





THE SHOW MUST GO ON Clockwise from top: David Ledingham and Sandy Duncan in *Becky's New Car*; directors Mark Martino and Paige Price; and Price, the woman with a plan.



spectacularly elevated, professional-level productions; upgrading the performance venue; and attracting the highest caliber actors to come work in Aspen. Soon after, the “perfect storm of city planning” transpired when the City of Aspen and the Parks Department partnered up (and worked in tandem with Theatre Aspen) to create the Hurst Theatre in the idyllic John Denver Sanctuary, surrounded by lush gardens and ponds. Immense audience growth, technically complex shows and a list of globally renowned actors, designers and directors followed.

“No doubt, *Les Miserables* [in 2013] changed the conversation about Theatre Aspen,” Price says. “That production defined how we refined our mission—to create big theater in a small space. And I think Sandy Duncan also brought us attention,” with her star-turn in 2011’s *Becky’s New Car*, which also featured

the actress’s son, Jeffrey Correia, and was directed by Fulbright Scholar Kate Powers. “After that,” Price continues, “the solid parade of Broadway talent has created an ensemble feeling that comes through in each show, whether it be *The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee*, *The Full Monty* or *Little Women*, which all received multiple award nominations on a state level.”

Theatre Aspen board President Lisa Baker feels that it’s only natural that Aspen would be home to some of the nation’s best theater and, “in Paige, we have someone with the vision, passion and leadership skills to make that happen,” Baker says. “Since Paige’s arrival, our productions and our organization have become much more dynamic and ambitious, all while maintaining the accessibility and intimate theater experience that our patrons expect. Our reputation among both audiences and the country’s best actors continues to grow. And, our casts have so much fun that, despite most taking pay cuts to make the summer move from Broadway to Aspen, they are begging to come back.”

Last summer the board took another step toward national prominence in creating an incubator of sorts called Aspen Theatre Festival, which provides the opportunity for up-and-coming writers and composers to showcase new works. Its inaugural workshop saw the exciting young writing team of Andrew Farmer and Andrew Butler at work on a draft of their new show *Finn the Fearless*. They continued with workshops of the production this winter in New York, when Butler said, “Theatre Aspen’s incredible staff, facilities, resources and community helped us accomplish in two weeks what we’ve been working toward for years. The focused time not only allowed us to create a better show, it provided the intentional working environment that made us better artists. Theatre Aspen has no doubt set a bar against which we’ll measure future development of our work, both in terms of what an institution brings to the table [and] what it inspires us to bring.”

Another show—*Alice by Heart*, written by powerhouse musician/composer Duncan Sheik and playwright Steven Sater (the creative team behind Broadway’s smash hit *Spring*

Awakening)—was also developed with Theatre Aspen in 2014 (the year before the Festival was formalized). “Local audiences got to see a presentation at the Wheeler Opera House, featuring a cast of young Broadway actors, as well as two of our Theatre Aspen apprentices,” Price recalls. Another way in which the organization is seeking to be part of the national theatrical conversation is through a partnership with the Wheeler. “Gena Buhler, executive director of the Wheeler, reached out to explore working together,” Price says, “and in less than an hour we made an offer to Susan Egan—who starred in the Broadway productions of *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cabaret* and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*—to come to Aspen. The summer season is so full; partnerships like this will allow Theatre Aspen to have a presence the rest of the year.”

And, prepare to don your sequins; the upcoming 2016 summer season may hold the biggest blockbuster crowd favorite yet. Theatre Aspen was among one of the very few companies granted the rights to produce the mega-hit musical *Mamma Mia!* And with a whopping 20 cast members, they will be stretching themselves like never before. “I’m frankly not sure where they all will fit, but suffice it to say that the music of ABBA is likely to blow the seams off the tent this summer,” Price says, laughing. “And, the timing seems good, seeing how jumpsuits have come back into fashion.” *Ticket prices available early April, theatreaspen.org* ■



BECKY'S NEW CAR PHOTO BY JEREMY SWANSON; PAIGE PRICE PHOTO BY DIRTY SUGAR PHOTOGRAPHY.COM