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## Play was written as a birthday gift

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WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER



Charles and Benita Staadecker of Seattle. He commissioned the play "Becky's New Car" to be written as a birthday gift for his wife. The Staadeckers will come to Omaha to see the play when it opens here Aug. 19.

Charlie Staadecker was stumped. He wanted to get his wife, Benita, a splashy gift for her 60th birthday. He'd had a good year with his commercial real estate business.

So he asked Benita what she might like.

"I said, 'We're healthy, the kids are healthy, the mortgage is paid off, I already have a new car, and I have all the jewelry I could ever want.'" Benita Staadecker recalled recently. "Of course, that last one was a big lie. But I said, 'Just surprise me.'"

Charlie did. He commissioned a new play. His only instruction to the theater: "Don't make it too dark. It's a birthday present."

"Becky's New Car," a comedy by Steven Dietz, premiered at ACT (A Contemporary Theatre) in 2008, just three blocks from the Staadeckers' downtown Seattle home. Benita serves on the ACT board.

It's the gift that keeps on giving. The Staadeckers were thrilled to see Dietz's play become a hit, produced in regional theaters coast to coast. "Becky's New Car" opens the Omaha Community Playhouse's 2011-12 season on Friday. On Aug. 26, Omaha will become the 19th city the Staadeckers have visited to see Benita's play. They'll do a talkback with the audience, cast members and director after the show.

Everywhere they go, they extol the virtues of commissioning new plays.

"The return on this investment is the best I've ever received," Charlie Staadecker said by phone from his Seattle office. "The first gift was the play to Benita. The second was a gift to actors, a well-crafted play with rich characters. The third was the gift to audiences."

The fourth, he says, was the way "Becky's New Car" has expanded the Staadeckers' lives as they connect with casts and crews, opening doors of friendship as wide as the nation.

For his part, playwright Dietz said the Staadeckers attached far fewer strings to the project than have been on many grants he's applied for.

ACT had produced other Dietz plays before. In fact, Dietz is among the nation's top 10 most-produced playwrights, ranking with Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee.

When Kurt Beattie, ACT's artistic director, came to Dietz with Charlie Staadecker's request, he challenged Dietz to write a comedy.

"The reason they don't write comedies like they used to is that's the hardest thing in the world for a writer to do," Dietz said. "I had told

Kurt I had an idea for a play about a woman who tries to lead a double life. He called my bluff."

In "Becky's New Car," Becky is a middle-age woman with a grad-student son living in the basement and a humdrum life. She shuffles paperwork at a car dealership.

When a wealthy widower meets Becky at work and is smitten, he gets the wrong idea that she's a widow, too. She can't quite manage to tell him her husband's still breathing. The idea of that other life has too much allure.

But it gets harder and harder to keep her two lives from intersecting.

Intersecting lives brought "Becky's New Car" to the Playhouse.

Jim Eisenhardt, retired South High School theater director, is on the play-reading committee that helps the Playhouse select shows each season. His former student, Kimberly King, originated the role of Becky at ACT.

"I've known her since she was a mere child," Eisenhardt said. "When I saw her name on the ACT website, I got a copy of the manuscript."

The play-reading committee loved it.

"It's one of the few scripts absolutely every one of the 14 members loved, regardless of age or background," said Carl Beck, the Playhouse's artistic director. "Becky's life is always on the edge of collapse, yet it keeps weaving along. It's hugely entertaining, and you never know where it's going to take you."

There's a second small-world angle to this story.

Kim Jubenville, cast as Becky in the Playhouse production, has known Dietz for more than 25 years.

"We did summer stock in 1985 at the Paul Bunyan Playhouse in northern Minnesota," Jubenville said. "He's a dear old friend. When I got cast, I e-mailed him and thanked him for writing such a wonderful character."

Director Amy Lane said the Playhouse knew nothing about Jubenville's tie to Dietz when she was cast, and nothing about the play being a birthday gift when it was chosen.

"My little niche is new works," said Lane, who stages public readings of new plays for the Playhouse's 21 & Over program and leads the Playhouse's drama book club in discussions of new plays each month. "And this has such a strong woman character as its lead. That just really spoke to me. Women at a certain age become invisible."

Beck and associate artistic director Susan Baer Collins intend to talk to the Staadeckers about the idea of commissioning new plays at the Playhouse. Beck said Doug Marr's "Starkweather" probably was the last new work premiered at the Playhouse, and that was in 1989.

"It seems really innovative and a clever idea," Beck said. "We're interested to find out what the process is."

Lane said the Staadeckers' idea is intriguing for Omaha, particularly since the annual Great Plains Theatre Conference has fostered an interest in new plays in recent years.

Dietz said the Staadeckers were lucky, since not every new play is as well-received as "Becky's New Car." But he said other theaters since have used the Staadecker model in commissioning new works.

"They didn't invent this kind of patronage, but they may have reinvented it for the contemporary theater," he said.

Charlie Staadecker said it's much more affordable than people think.

"You don't have to be a Vanderbilt or the Medicis to create a legacy work of art," he said. "And it lasts beyond our lifetimes. Compare that to a European trip or buying a new car. If you partner with a friend or family member and spread the payments out, you can do it for less than a car payment each month."

He has just one cardinal rule for commissioning a play:

"Write the check, get out of the way and let the pros do what they do best. That truly is the secret of why we had a wonderful play

delivered."

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