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'Becky's New Car' offers plenty of smiles per gallon

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I like "Becky's New Car" — the new play by Steven Dietz now onstage at Park Square Theatre — quite a bit. But I love, love, love Virginia Burke's performance in the title role.

Dietz, who used to call the Twin Cities home, deftly assembles a contemporary farce about a middle-class, middle-aged, cheerily put-upon employee, wife and mom who more-or-less accidentally finds herself drawn into an illicit affair. On the route, she steers her way around her salt-of-the-earth husband, her psychology-spouting grad student of a son, her morose, widowed co-worker and even a handful of audience members.

A word about that last bit: The script is loaded with meta-theatrical goofiness: Not only is Becky forever addressing the audience directly, she enlists them with little tasks. And when she's sitting at home and discovers she forgot her Sprite at the office, she casts a glance outward and asks if she can go back to work for a second. Voila: The stage lights that illuminate her desk a couple dozen feet to her right pop up, she crosses the stage, grabs her pop and then returns "home," flashing a thumbs up to the light-board operator.

There's a lot happening here, and Dietz keeps all the cylinders firing smoothly through the first act, with glib humor, snappy one-liners and little

morsels of insight. There are one or two backfires after intermission, as the playwright attempts to navigate his way through the giddily preposterous traffic jam of characters and situations he's concocted. Those ultimately are forgivable, both because of the amiable daffiness of the story and the tremendous performances in director Peter Moore's staging, which purrs like a kitten.

Burke is a perennially solid performer, but her expressive, heartfelt and hilarious turn as Becky represents some of her best work. Her face has a thousand expressions — eyes bugged out in horror or squeezed shut in frustration; lips pursed in thinning patience or gnawed at in moral quandary; chin dipped in guilt or riding high with the excitement of new adventure. Burke gives us a comic tour de force, leavened, enlivened and enriched by an Everywoman humanity.

And Burke is blessed with a top-notch pit crew: As Becky's husband, Bob Davis is super-solid and slyly funny: True-blue describes both his character's collar and his affection for his wife. Christopher Denton is adorably hapless, guile-less and clueless as Becky's would-be lover. You can't get much deadpan-ier than John Middleton's kicked-puppy performance as Becky's work friend, Steve. Sid Solomon, Emily Eve Shain and Sally Ann Wright all bring the gas in their smaller roles.

Deep and thought-provoking? Nope, and it makes no effort to be. Just slip into the passenger's seat, buckle up and settle back for the joyride.

Theater critic Dominic P. Papatola can be reached at 651-228-2165.

What: "Becky's New Car" When: Through Oct. 4
Where: Park Square Theatre, 20 W. Seventh Place, St. Paul
Tickets: \$40-\$15 Information: 651-291-7005 or parksquaretheatre.org
Capsule: Don't you

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