

## Liz Mikel brings star power to 'Caroline'

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By [LAWSON TAITTE](#) / Theater Critic

Liz Mikel is having one heck of a year.



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Ben Sklar / DMN

Liz Mikel, star of *Caroline, or Change* at Theatre Three, has reason to smile. She's in big demand for roles in theater, TV and movies.

Long a star on the Dallas theater and cabaret circuit, the 43-year-old performer broke into network television last fall with a prominent continuing role on NBC's *Friday Night Lights*.

She returns to the stage in perhaps the most challenging role in contemporary musical theater, the title part in *Caroline, or Change*, which opens tonight at Theatre Three. But Ms. Mikel unexpectedly had to miss much of the rehearsal process for the Tony Kushner-Jeanine Tesori musical because the writers kept adding to her role in the movie she was shooting in Shreveport, La.

Malcolm D. Lee (Spike's cousin) has an all-star cast for *The Better Man*, including James Earl Jones, Martin Lawrence, Cedric the Entertainer and Mo'Nique, but he couldn't find anyone to play the supporting role of Ruthie until Ms. Mikel's agent sent her over to audition.

"If you had asked me about all this at this time last year, I would have laughed in your face," Ms. Mikel says. "I had a kid graduating high school. My mother had a triple bypass. There was no way."

The ebullient, 6-foot-1 Ms. Mikel has been one of the few local performers seen regularly at the Dallas Theater Center since her 1991 debut. She played the festive Ghost of Christmas Present in the company's annual *A Christmas Carol* for 13 years running, and won a Dallas Fort Worth Theater Critics Forum award for 2004's *Ain't Misbehavin'*. She has a number of credits at Theatre Three, as well, and even worked at the box office there during a couple of lean years.

Ms. Mikel has also appeared in three national tours and went to Europe in the first round of overseas performances of *Blind Lemon Blues* (co-written by her Dallas mentor, Akin Babatunde). Her majestic singing voice has gotten her regular work at area jazz and cabaret clubs.

Now, however, the whole country, or at least the portion of it that watches the engaging *Friday Night Lights*, knows her as Corrina, the proud, demanding mother of running back Smash Williams.

When she went to Austin to audition for the role, she figured it would be an on-off thing even if she got it. The writers would establish the young character's family and then move on to other things.

It wasn't until she read the script for the episode called "Full Hearts" that she realized how much potential the role had.

"I literally sat and wept when I watched that episode," Ms. Mikel says. "God has given me this gift, I thought – the scene when I sit down and pour out my heart to my kids. And later, I'm the one who discovers that Smash is on steroids and goes into Kyle Chandler's office to confront him."

The character proved so powerful, and Ms. Mikel's performance so strong and warm, that the writers kept giving her more to do. She eventually appeared in 12 of the first 22 episodes and is delighted to

be going back to work in the second season, probably within a couple of weeks after *Caroline, or Change* closes on July 1.

The role of Caroline has some similarities to the character Ms. Mikel plays on *Friday Night Lights*: Both women are single mothers responsible for raising a bunch of children, for instance. But Caroline's strength is rock-hard and often grim, rather than warm and nourishing.

"I have to find out what made her so hard," Ms. Mikel says of her preparation for the stage role. "She lashes out at a lot of people because of the situation she is in – her abusive husband has abandoned her with four kids, and she works as a domestic in a basement. She feels like her life is sand slipping through her fingers."

*Caroline, or Change* is based on actual events in Pulitzer Prize-winner Tony Kushner's Louisiana childhood. A boy whose mother has died spends much of his time hanging out with the family's housekeeper. The new stepmother unwittingly sets the two against each other by asking Caroline, the housekeeper, to keep any change she finds in the boy's pants when she launders them.

"This show is hugely meaningful to me. I first read it as a piece without the music," director Jac Alder says. "I wasn't sure that it would work as well when it was sung, but then I heard the score and saw what the composer was doing. One song dovetails into another – you don't stop. And all the fablelike elements – the singing washing machine and moon and bus – add a spiritual, fantastical dimension."

The show is a demanding one for all its sizable cast, but especially for the actress playing Caroline. Dallas probably has only a couple of performers who could do it justice.

"I held out for one of them," Mr. Alder says, and indeed, he structured the season that ends with this show so that Ms. Mikel could perform in it.

No one could have foretold, however, that his star would miss so many rehearsals because of a movie being made in Shreveport. Ms. Mikel's shooting time for *The Better Man* ran more than seven weeks, which she spent in a suite in the Eldorado Resort Casino. She found herself so exhausted when she came in from the set that she would order room service so she could eat her chicken and salad in peace.

It was exciting to work with such big stars, though. In one scene, she was supposed to be appearing on a Jerry Springer-like show with many of the big names in the cast.

"My whole motivation was supposed to be that I was giddy with excitement at being there on TV," Ms. Mikel says, shaking her hands with gleeful agitation. "But I really was that excited. Here were Martin Lawrence and Margaret Avery – Shug from *The Color Purple* – and they were my family!"

In fact, Ms. Mikel got to be so close to her stage and screen families from *Friday Night Lights*, *The Better Man* and *Caroline, or Change* that her own three daughters, ages 12 to 23, were expressing a certain jealousy.

Like her TV character but unlike Caroline, this strong, vibrant mother has a soft side. If you look carefully at one of the football games that end most episodes of *Friday Night Lights*, you can see Ms. Mikel's real-life daughters on both sides of her.

Her youngest, 12-year-old Vershea, was so excited when she got her extra's paycheck that she wanted to go right out and get a headshot so she could do auditions.

"I told her, 'How about getting some training, first?' " Ms. Mikel says.

Ms. Mikel says that she has made more money in the last year than at any time in her life. "Which is not to say that it is movie-star money, by any means," she explains. "But to get more money in one day in a movie than in a full week for a leading role in the theater – that has made a difference."

### **Plan your life**

*Caroline, or Change* opens tonight at 7:30 and runs through July 1 at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St.. \$10 to \$35. 214-871-3300, [www.theatre3dallas.com](http://www.theatre3dallas.com).