

## Mikel makes 'Caroline' role her own

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By [LAWSON TAITTE](#) / Theater Critic

Liz Mikel gives the performance of a lifetime – her lifetime and ours – in *Caroline, or Change*.



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Liz Mikel (left) and Wendy Welch

Rex C. Curry / Special to DMN

In this musical play based on childhood experiences of writer Tony Kushner, Caroline Thibodeaux is a divorced black woman trying to raise four children on the \$30 a week she earns as a maid. An abusive husband and a hard life have left her angry and bitter and hard as the clothing iron she swings around like a lethal weapon.

Composer Jeanine Tesori gives the character music that's nearly impossible to sing. The furious monologue (a prayer, really) that Caroline flings toward the heavens near the end might strain even the strongest singer. Ms. Mikel, though, doesn't have us worrying about its difficulty, but wondering at its beauty. This performer knows how to fine down her bass tuba of a voice to the sound of the sweetest violin, all the while making each word reach the heart.

**Also Online**

## Liz Mikel brings star power to 'Caroline'

This remarkable tour de force is taking place at Theatre Three, which opened *Caroline, or Change* on Monday. It's not such a great surprise that superb Ms. Mikel is outstanding. The wonder is that the entire production lives up to its star.

The action takes place in the Louisiana of 1963. Change is indeed in the air. Caroline's friend Dotty (Yolanda Williams) and oldest daughter, Emmie (Ashley Duplechain), are looking forward to something better than the segregation they have long endured. Caroline, however, is too heart-sore and inflexible to believe that change can occur either for herself or for the world.

She washes and irons in the Gellman family's basement, where 8-year-old Noah (Chance Jonas-O'Toole) talks with her daily after school is out. Noah's mother has died of cancer, and his remote, still-mourning father (Stan Graner) has married an old friend from the North, Rose (Wendy Welch). Rose wants to ingratiate herself with her new stepson – or at least to teach him the value of money. She also wants to ingratiate herself, however clumsily, with Caroline – so she insists that the maid take for herself any spare change (there's that word again) that the boy leaves in his pockets overnight.

This decision carries the seed of a tiny domestic tragedy. The two scenes in which Noah and Caroline finally say the truth to each other – magically, across time and space – are among the most poignant in American theater.

But there's plenty of sassy humor in this piece, as well. Theatre Three's director, Jac Alder, has gotten that over to his audience much more effectively than the original New York production of the show did. Theatre Three's intimate space helps the humor, helps get the impact of the writing across (because you can hear almost every word clearly) and enables the performers to sing without microphones. (Hallelujah for that, we say.)

Ms. Tesori's score explores every tradition of Southern black music, from field songs and blues to early rock. The composer cheerfully steals from Mozart, Christmas carols, klezmer bands and anything else to hand, as well. She and Mr. Kushner have singers playing the washing machine and dryer, the radio, the bus and the moon; they do the duty of a chorus – and get some of the most distinctive music in the score.

Every note, though, is at the service of Mr. Kushner's story. In this remarkable production, every performer makes both music and words count. Ms. Welch gives a particularly nuanced and serious portrait of Rose. Ms. Duplechain and young Mr. Jonas-O'Toole deserve their final bow with Ms. Mikel. They're genuine stars of the show, too.

As for Ms. Mikel, you could argue that she isn't crazy mad enough to be Caroline. It's true that the performer's own natural warmth seeps into what was designed to be a very cold character. But Ms. Mikel's 6-foot-1 stature – not to speak of that powerhouse voice – make this Caroline formidable enough to scare anybody.

Make a visit to her basement and get a load of her anger yourself. It's an experience you won't forget.

- Through July 1 at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle, 2800 Routh St. Runs 150 mins. \$10 to \$35. 214-871-3300, [www.theatre3dallas.com](http://www.theatre3dallas.com).