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DALLAS -- Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori's Tony-nominated musical *Caroline, or Change*, having its area premiere at Theatre Three, isn't going to elicit middle-of-the-road opinions from audiences. It's a love-it-or-hate-it show.

Haters will be the folks who prefer their musicals big and splashy, with showstopping numbers that end with performers' arms in the air. None of that here, but there are carefully crafted, internalized songs. If this is your kind of musical, you'll love T3's production, directed by Jac Alder with musical direction by Terry Dobson.

The title character (Liz Mikel) is an always-angry black maid working for the Gellmans, a Jewish family in 1963 Louisiana (mentions of November set up JFK's assassination in the plot). Two major supporting characters are children: Caroline's daughter Emmie (Ashley Duplechain, who will be a name to watch) and Noah (Chance Jonas-O'Toole), the precocious son of the Gellmans. There's also a chorus of singers representing objects in her life: Washing Machine (Chimberly Carter), Bus and Dryer (Paul Doucet as both), Moon (Vernicia Vernon, suspended in a seat that slides across T3's ceiling), and Radio (characterized by three Motown singers, Feleceia Benton, Alysha Deslorieux and Sherel Riley). Kudos to Bruce Coleman for the "specialty" costume design, with the humans' period costumes by Michael Robinson.

The money Noah leaves in the pockets of his pants that Caroline washes (she keeps the cash) accounts for the "change" in the title. That, and the transformation in Caroline and other characters.

It's a unique piece of work, strongly sung and acted at T3. Give it a chance if you're looking for something different but undeniably moving.

'Caroline, or Change'

Through July 1

7:30 p.m. Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays; 2:30 and 8 p.m. Saturdays; 2:30 and 7:30 p.m. Sundays

Theatre Three, 2800 Routh St., Dallas

\$15-\$35

214-871-3300; www.theatre3dallas.com

Be advised: Some adult language

Run time: Two hours, 20 minutes with intermission

Best reason to go: Mikel, who handles Caroline's arc with commanding yet restrained skill and, as always, sings powerfully

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