

Park Cities People

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Keep the Change

Racial politics and grudging love mark *Caroline* at Theatre Three

By Glenn Arbery

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Senior Editor

In *Caroline, or Change*, at Theater Three, there are two distinct things to enjoy. One is the performance itself, which is wonderful as a whole and in all its parts. The second, though more puzzling, is Tony Kushner's vision in the play, which comes to center on a single question: what does the word "change" mean?

In the fall of 1963, Caroline Thibodeaux (Liz Mikel) is the black maid for the Jewish Gellman family in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Caroline supports her four children on \$30 a week by working in the only basement in Louisiana, 16 feet below sea level, where she does laundry and listens to the radio, resenting everything. Out in the larger world, social change has begun to loosen racial and political patterns, but not in the Gellmans' basement.

The only one she talks to is 8-year-old Noah Gellman (Chance Jonas-O'Toole), who has just lost his mother. Noah's new stepmother Rose (Wendy Welch) wants to teach the boy to respect money, so she tells Caroline to keep the change she repeatedly finds in Noah's pockets in the laundry. That small supplement to her income means that she can begin to indulge her own children a little, but it also sets up a new, potentially explosive economy of secret gift-giving, and it drives a wedge between Caroline and Noah.

Noah deliberately leaves change in his pants for her. But once, after his new step-grandfather Stopnick (Don Alan Croll) gives him a \$20 bill as his Chanukah gift, Noah accidentally (and it's really an accident this time) leaves it in his pants and claims it back from Caroline.

CAROLINE, OR CHANGE

Theatre Three

Director: Jac Alder

Musical Director: Terry Dobson

Starring: Liz Mikel, Chance Jonas-O'Toole, Yolonda Williams, Ashley Duplechain, Wendy Welch, and Don Alan Croll

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When she uses his stepmother's new rule against him and he attacks her, the understanding between them suddenly vanishes, she leaves the house, and the real complexities of the play break open.

Kushner's skillful deployment of archetypal themes gives the plot resonance, but simply as a play, the action could be compressed into an hour at most. In imagining it as a musical, Kushner seizes on the great social drama of the '60s and gives each dimension of it a musical amplification. Every character is good, but Liz Mikel as Caroline is monumental.

She works through the anger of Caroline's dilemmas unforgettably. Various characters — the old 1930s communist Stopnick (Don Alan Croll), Caroline's sassy friend Dotty (Yolonda Williams), and Caroline's daughter Emmie (Ashley Duplechain) — argue strongly for revolution of one kind or another, but Caroline ("It's too late!") rejects them all.



Photo: Linda Harrison
Caroline Thibodeaux (Liz Mikel) works as a maid for the Gellman family to support her four children in Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*, now playing at Theatre Three in the Quadrangle.

For them, change comes out of participating in the great historical currents of their time. What's more important happens with Caroline, who makes change possible by sacrificing herself out of love, however grudgingly she seems to do it. She's not just concerned about her own children either, but about Noah and the way she has acted toward a grieving child.

Liz Mikel's performance shakes you, disturbs you, in what it brings to awareness, like the first faint tremor announcing a seismic shift. It is moral power like this — an extraordinary, painful overcoming of self — that ultimately moves both hearts and mountains.