

Boom Times

Caroline, or Change

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Caroline, or Change is a strange bird. With book and lyrics by American theater's most overrated bombast, playwright Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*), and music by Jeanine Tesori, the style is more chamber opera than musical. Every scene is sung-through in ear-rattling, random melodies that must be murder to memorize, much less perform.

With any lesser talent than Liz Mikel in the lead, the show, directed by Jac Alder, might not be as rewarding as it is at Theatre Three. Mikel plays Caroline Thibodeaux, a 39-year-old black maid working for a Jewish family in Louisiana in November 1963. For \$30 a week, she does laundry in a stifling basement where her only companion is 9-year-old Noah Gellman (Chance Jonas-O'Toole), son of the dour musician dad (Stan Graner) whose second wife, Rose (Wendy Welch), is more of a nagging scold than new mom to the boy. To teach Noah a lesson in the value of money, Rose tells Caroline to keep any spare change she finds in the pockets of his dirty dungarees. Soon, the kid is salting the laundry with coins to help Caroline and her three children, a gesture that leads to a blow-up that causes Caroline to quit her job shortly after the assassination of JFK (hey, it's Kushner, who never met a historical theme he didn't exploit).

Mikel works unmiked here, rare for a musical, even in an intimate space. But this woman possesses a soaring, multi-octave voice that plays like a cello. One moment she's roaring down to the low notes, the next she's taking it up to a high soprano whisper. Every syllable is ripe and perfect. And in her strong singing we hear Caroline's weariness and rage. Mikel is giving the performance of her life.

As one of those newfangled shows with a real plot, *Caroline* depends upon whimsical symbols. There's an anthropomorphized singing moon (Vernicia Vernon), washing machine (Chimberly Carter) and dryer (Paul Doucet). When Caroline turns on the radio to relieve her tedium while ironing, three Supremes-like ladies (Feleceia Benton, Alysha Deslorieux, Sherel Riley) appear. Cute, but that's about all.

Details:

Caroline, or Change continues through July 1 at Theatre Three, 214-871-3300.

