

## **Caroline, or Change @ Fly North Theatricals**

Music by Jeanine Tesori

Lyrics and Book by Tony Kushner

Ran July 28 - August 12, 2023 @ The Marcelle Theatre

**Published August 18, 2023**

*Caroline, or Change* is one of the most brilliant titles I've ever heard for any work of fiction. Let's dissect why. The subject is Caroline Thibodeaux, a 39-year-old African-American woman working as a maid for the Gellman family. The singular word "Change," however, has multiple meanings. It's late November 1963 in Lake Charles, Louisiana; John F. Kennedy is dead, and massive unrest – especially in the American South – has led to a huge "change" in race relations in every facet of American life. "Change" also means the Gellmans, a family of White Jewish-American musicians, having to move from upstate New York to southern Louisiana after being tenured at the local university. Furthermore, "change" means the death of the Gellman's matriarch and her replacement by Rose Stopnik, a woman that the patriarch, Stuart, deeply loves, but that his 8-year-old son, Noah, deeply hates. For Caroline, "change" means being a single mother of four after she cast out her abusive ex-husband. Her oldest son is fighting in Vietnam, and her only daughter, the 18-year-old Emmie is fighting for civil rights. Both Caroline and Noah have been left alone to fill in each other's gaps of familial comfort. But "change" is also meant literally, as Rose gives Caroline permission to take any pocket change that is left in their laundry. Noah decides to leave change in his pockets deliberately to help support Caroline's family, much to Caroline's reluctance. It's at this point the two words come together: "Caroline, or Change," is a monomyth about a woman having to choose between her own self-preservation and following what her conscience tells her to do.

*Caroline, or Change* is a rarely-produced musical: you need a cast of entirely Black and Jewish actors, and you need two actors – one of them a child – who are capable of performing some of the most complicated characterizations and the most demanding vocals of any musical theatre character ever written. Fly North Theatricals had some serious balls to mount this show, and the people they pulled in to make it happen feel like some sort of amazing cosmic convergence that make this show a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for everyone involved, onstage and off.

De-Rance Blaylock and Zoe Klevorn as Caroline and Noah are unbelievable. These are actors who are on completely opposite sides of acting experience, and yet both of their performances are just as good as the other. As I said before, Caroline and Noah are two of the most difficult roles in musical theatre history, but the fact that Blaylock and Klevorn can both make the pain that they are going through so real to the audience is stunning. I have never seen these two actors in a musical theatre role in St. Louis in my twelve years of fandom, but they are clearly names to watch out for from now on. Avery Lux excellently portrays Rose's inner conflict, as does Jordan Wolk in his portrayal of Stuart's grief. Ken Haller and Mara Bollini as Stuart's parents and Kent Coffel as Rose's father achieve a great balance of being comic relief and being a wise sage to the ones who need their advice. Kenya Nash gives a fiery performance as

Emmie, supported by Cameron Hadley and Malachi Borum as her rascally younger brothers Jackie and Joe.

Many moments of the show take place inside Caroline's troubled mind, personified by physical manifestations of the machines that dictate her life, all of whom are played convincingly and with credibility. Kimmie Kidd, Adrienne Spann, and Ebony Easter personify the Radio that blasts through the Gellman basement; Kidd doubles as the Moon that gives Caroline the comfort she needs after a hard day of work. Duane Foster plays the triple roles of the newfangled Dryer that makes the basement insufferably hot, the Bus that becomes the harbinger of bad news for Caroline's future, and Caroline's ex-husband who appears in flashback. Kanisha Kellum plays two conflicting roles. The first is the Washing Machine which acts as a reassuring constant presence for Caroline. The second is Dotty Moffett, Caroline's former best friend who is always shunned in the name of jealousy for the opportunities that were given to Dotty but denied to Caroline.

The score by Jeanine Tesori is a blend of the musical styles that dominated Black and Jewish cultures at that time: Motown, gospel, and traditional klezmer music, each transition between styles handled beautifully by the nine-piece band led by musical director Colin Healy. Healy also collaborated with choreographer Caleb Long to create a minimalist depiction of the Gellman basement; the change between locations is aided by Bradley Rohlf's evocative lights. Director Brian McKinley puts an emphasis on the show's more fantastical elements, putting the audience on three sides of the Marcelle Theatre, and having an outstanding feature of the set be a center platform made to look like a coin with Caroline's face superimposed onto it. All of the actors effectively move in and out of reality thanks to McKinley's staging, Caleb Long's choreography, and Vanessa Tabourne's costumes.

*Caroline, or Change* is one of those shows that you really have to experience for yourself instead of reading some shitty review. *Caroline, or Change* is a profoundly intense piece of musical theatre, one that forces you to carry its weight long after the show is over. Literally, after I left the Marcelle Theatre, I felt a massive weight on my shoulders as I had to put feelings of personal trauma, grief, and fear of change that I carry in my heart and mind into perspective. But I think it's a weight that everyone needs to hold; that's the whole lesson of *Caroline, or Change*. The last song in the show is a call to carry on the memory of Caroline Thibodeaux and everything she's been through. It's a call to action of a power beyond description, but one that I think we need to keep hearing. I sincerely hope in the name of all that is good that *Caroline, or Change* is produced in St. Louis again. In the meantime, to everyone at Fly North Theatricals: thank you for sharing this story with us. We needed this.