Resisting Change

Caroline, or Change
A Play by Tony Kushner
Directed by Terrence J. Nolen
Arden Theatre Company, 2007

Reviewed by Elizabeth Slavitt

In Tony Kushner's musical *Caroline, or Change*, showing at the Arden Theater in Philadelphia until April 8, three bedazzled, glittering women personify the role of the radio, playing music in the stuffy basement of a Louisiana house. While the radio's songs and the costumes overflow with pizzazz, the performance's subject is slightly less glamorous. The radio actresses sing about the wonders and frustrations of the washing machine and electric dryer that Caroline, the black, middle-aged maid, uses to do laundry for the Gellmans, the Jewish family that employs her. The set is stark and understated. Caroline wears a plain white maid's dress, but the radio girls dazzle in silky, shimmering dresses. The songs might be upbeat, but the title character is not. Caroline feels plagued and dissatisfied by her humdrum existence and the fact that she's "39 and still a maid," as she sings while introducing herself to the audience in the beginning of the first act.

Much of the first act proceeds in this fashion. Characters come on stage, sing a monologue detailing their name, age, and chief complaints in life. Most of the dialogue occurs through song, with Caroline's powerful voice dominating and dramatizing the musical. Somewhere along the way, Caroline tells us that we're in Lake Charles, Louisiana, in 1963. We find out that Caroline has four children, is divorced, is "mean and tough"—but her weekly salary of "thirty dollars ain't enough." We meet Noah Gellman, the young son of Caroline's employers. His father spends much of the day playing the clarinet, considers himself to be a scientific person, and doesn't believe in God. After Noah's mom

died of cancer (too many cigarettes), his dad married a friend named Rose, who moved to Louisiana from New York to live with her new husband and son.

In a slight departure from much of the first act—in which characters simply talk about themselves through song—Rose calls her father, who is still in New York, to tell him about her life in the South. While this is a fairly transparent means of transmitting necessary information to the audience, it actually reveals quite a bit about the tensions that will run throughout the play. And though the phone conversation seems somewhat contrived, it is one of the most believable scenes thus far; several minutes of characters coming onstage and singing self-descriptions to the audience is likely what motivated the six people seated behind me to bail during intermission.

During the phone call, Rose decries Southern Jewry: "the temple has Sunday night bingo, just like the *goyim*!" But she also has more serious issues to discuss with her father. Noah, despite Rose's constant reminders, often leaves spare change in his pants' pockets. Rose thinks it must look awful to the "Negro maid" to see how cavalier Noah is about money when Caroline is so poor. Her father suggests that the Gellmans simply pay Caroline more, but Rose reproaches him, reminding him that they are not wealthy. To remedy her own guilty feelings (and ostensibly to teach Noah a lesson), Rose devises a plan. Every time Noah leaves change in his pockets, Caroline can keep it. As the play progresses, Caroline struggles with this new policy. At first, she rejects it outright and continues to place the change she finds in a bleach cup in the laundry room. But then, as her children beg her for candy, a TV, and other presents, when one of her kids needs a dentist appointment, when her rent is overdue, Caroline is tempted to pocket the extra dimes and quarters.

Noah, eager for Caroline's affection and attention, starts purposefully leaving change in his pants in the hope that Caroline will take his money home, give it to her children, and tell them it comes from

her beloved Noah. In reality, however, these thoughts of Caroline's praise are mere illusions in Noah's head, as Caroline seems annoyed by Noah for much of the play. Yet Noah is willing to sacrifice spare change for the imagined benefit of being a celebrity in the eyes of Caroline's family. And though Rose claims she has created this plan in order to teach Noah about the value of money, she has really done so primarily to help Caroline, who she knows is struggling to pay the bills. While Rose's insecure laughter and constant nagging of the endearing Noah vex the audience, she is still the most complex character, chastising herself, wondering whether Caroline is offended or embarrassed about keeping the change. In effect, Rose's struggle embodies the Jewish dilemma of how to best give and distribute *tzedakah*, or charity.

According to Maimonides, not all charity is equal. The best type of *tzedakah* is when the poor person and the benefactor enter into a business partnership, because in this situation, the poor person becomes self-dependent and faces no shame. Other top forms of charity include interest-free loans and anonymous giving, in which both the donator and the beneficiary are unknown to each other. *Tzedakah* in which the giver and/or recipient know each other, as is the case between Caroline and the Gellmans, is of a lower caliber because the poor person might feel ashamed. Though Rose does not explicitly consider the various types of *tzedakah* as articulated by Maimonides, her struggle to help Caroline without embarrassing her demonstrates that she is dealing with the Jewish principles at least in the abstract.

These tensions, arising from issues of wealth and poverty, race and religion, and feelings of guilt, run throughout the play. During Hanukkah, the Gellmans host a party for their parents; Caroline prepares the food and cleans the dishes with the help of her friend and daughter. Even as this wealth and power dynamic exists within their house, the Gellmans discuss civil rights, poverty, money, and freedom at their dinner table. Though perhaps a Passover *seder* would have more

accurately captured the similarities and tensions between blacks and Jews Kushner aims to portray on the stage, Hanukkah adds a distinctly American flair to the setting. The Gellmans even admit that the Festival of Lights has special importance in America, where it competes with Christmas. During the Hanukkah celebration, the Gellmans alternate between singing "Oh Hanukkah, Oh Hannukah" and "America the Beautiful." Clearly, Kushner is toying with American-Jewish identity, with questions of freedom and rights within the context of the civil rights movement.

The paradox is evident: their consideration of civil rights notwithstanding, the self-defined socially-conscious Jews still underpay their black maid. Caroline's daughter participates in daring protests, collaborating in the destruction of a statue of a Confederate soldier and arguing that she "ain't waiting no more" because "you just wait forever if you don't say 'what more?'" Yet, even as Caroline's daughter urges progress to come faster, Caroline resists change, both in the form of resisting the spare dimes and quarters left in Noah's pockets and in the less literal form of social change. While her daughter actively pushes for true racial equality, Caroline resigns herself to the role of a second-class citizen, forever a maid, working in Louisiana. As Caroline begins to take more of the change from the Gellman's laundry room, she also becomes somewhat more accepting of societal change.

The most dramatic moment of the play occurs when Noah accidentally leaves a twenty-dollar bill—his Hanukkah present from his grandfather—in his pants pocket, and Caroline takes it. When Noah confronts her, he begs her to give it back. Twenty dollars is not mere pocket change, he argues. Caroline responds that she needs to feed her family and buy them Christmas presents. In the heat of the argument, Noah tells Caroline that President Johnson is building a bomb to kill all the Negroes; Caroline retorts that hell is so hot, even hotter than the basement, and hell is where Jews go when they die. She then storms out of the house, leaving the twenty-dollar

bill for Noah. Days later, as the play closes, Caroline returns to work at the Gellmans' house. The audience is left with hope that Caroline and Noah will someday speak to each other peacefully again, but the awful truth is that their differences in age, rank in the social order, race, and religion may leave them, at least to some extent, forever strangers to one another.

Caroline, or Change deals with complex social and religious issues. It examines the civil rights movement through the lens of black-Jewish relations and considers the difficulties of charity and the challenges of change. Though the constant repetition of certain themes indicates a lack of faith in the audience, it also forces those who see the play to rethink their views on these topics. It refuses easy answers while still maintaining the importance of confronting such challenges. When Caroline's activist daughter sings lines like "I hate the bus, I want my own car with a heater," the audience cannot help but feel the condescension; such language is not even poetic, and who doesn't want a car with a heater? And yet, the sheer simplicity of such requests reminds us of the complexity of Caroline's situation and makes us reflect on what we would do in Rose's situation. Would we risk humiliating Caroline by offering her spare change, or would we preserve her dignity yet know she cannot pay her rent? Should Rose increase Caroline's salary even though she and her husband cannot afford it? How can we ensure that interracial and interfaith dialogue exist at a level more sophisticated than Rose and Noah's heated argument? While the play itself is certainly contrived and patronizing at times, it brings up issues that were critical in the civil rights movement and that remain relevant today. And, on the whole, if you're going to think through these crucial topics, it would be hard to find a more engaging and entertaining way than through watching two hours of singing, dancing, and drama unfold before you on stage.

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