

t h e a t e r

Tonya meets Tony



With fiery Tonya Pinkins in the lead, Tony Kushner's tough musical *Caroline, or Change* takes aim at Broadway
By Michael Giltz



Fierce. That's how people describe Tonya Pinkins in Tony Kushner and Jeanine Tesori's bold musical *Caroline, Or Change*. Drawing on Kushner's childhood memories of Louisiana, the show tells the simple story of the emotionally needy son of a white Jewish family and the emotionally shut-down African-American maid he tries to befriend. In some ways it's the anti-*Driving Miss Daisy* because it offers no false moment when Caroline lets the boy think of himself as her friend rather than her boss.

"I'm so glad they didn't do that," Pinkins says, "because it's such a myth. I know for Jeanine [the show's composer], there was a moment when her babysitter—who she thinks of as a member of her family—took Jeanine up to Harlem to meet her own family and introduced her as her boss. Jeanine was devastated. She told Tony about it, and he said, 'Well, you're her boss.'"

Nevertheless, *Caroline* is bursting with passion when all alone—she's serenaded at times by the washer and dryer, not to mention the moon—and

Pinkins's performance has theatergoers clamoring to get in: After an extended run at the Joseph Papp Public Theater, *Caroline* moves to Broadway for a May 2 opening at the O'Neill Theater.

"One of the hardest things for me is, What is this woman's arc?" says Pinkins. "Is it a tragedy, or is it hopeful? [Director] George [Wolfe] helped me really understand what that arc was and why she was not defeated at the end."

For playwright Kushner, *Caroline* began as an even more radical departure: an opera. "I wrote it for Bobby McFerrin [to compose the music]," he says. "But he didn't like it. I'd shown it to George Wolfe, and he said he wanted to do it with theater people, that it needed to be acted...to be understood."

The actor Wolfe had in mind was Pinkins, who won a Tony under his direction in *Jelly's Last Jam* only to have her life unravel over a bitter, protracted custody battle. As her own lawyer she developed a defense that inspired articles in law journals, eventually regaining custody of her children. Along the way, she founded Operation Z, an orga-

nization promoting zero tolerance of violence against women and children.

Pinkins has also just re-signed with ABC's *All My Children*, where she plays lawyer Olivia Frye. But she couldn't ignore a call from Wolfe. "I've known [George] for a really long time, so he and I have a kind of wordless communication," says Pinkins. "He is a master psychologist. He knows how to speak to each actor according to their temperament."

Audiences get to witness Pinkins's singing her heart out on "Lot's Wife," a second-act tour de force so powerful that it had to be modulated so that the rest of the musical wouldn't seem like a letdown. "I love that song, and it took us a really long time to create it," Pinkins comments. "In fact, we went into previews at the Public with it unorchestrated because it was that new."

It's an indelible moment—a cry from the heart of a woman who would never let anyone see her tears over her decision to remain "merely" a maid so that her sometimes ungrateful children can get ahead. "For *Caroline*," says Pinkins, "it is a heroic choice." ■