

By Iris Wiener

Jessie Mueller

Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical, *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*

“One of the things that attracted me to this role is that it was so intimidating!” says Jessie Mueller, who takes on the title role in the true-life story that just received seven Tony nominations. “There’s a huge expectation attempting something like this and it’s a very hard bar to reach. I also had and have very much respect and admiration for Carole, but I never want people to feel like I’m speaking for her,” she says about the difficulty she faced in bringing the singer/songwriter’s essence to Broadway. “This is simply my version and my interpretation of her.”

Mueller states adamantly that her performance is not an impression of the icon. “She is authentic and is truly herself,” she says. “Carole doesn’t do it like anybody else and that’s why I think she stood the test of time for so many years. I knew not only that I shouldn’t do an impersonation, but that I wasn’t capable of it.”

Anyone who has seen Mueller perform knows that she is quite capable of amazing feats on stage. She received her first Tony nomination in 2012 for her supporting role in *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever* and was lauded for her hysterical turn opposite fellow 2014 Tony nominee Andy Karl (*Rocky*) in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* in 2013. She credits her second nod in part to the lessons she has learned from the actors with whom she has worked in the past.

“I have really learned something from each and every one of the roles I’ve done since I started doing this professionally,” she says. “People like Chita Rivera and Harry Connick, Jr. have taught me how to be gracious, but they know how to stand up for themselves when they need to. That’s something that I certainly watch and admire in other people and I’m still learning how to do. It’s important to me.”

Mueller struggles when it comes to pinpointing her favorite song in *Beautiful*, a show with which she has been more a part of the creative process than she ever has been in the past. “I always loved ‘It’s Too Late’ because I think it’s so brilliant,” she says. “There’s a line I get to say to Gerry Goffin in the play when I first meet him: ‘There’s so much feeling in them, but it’s put so simply.’ Certainly as I grow and I go through things in my life, the meaning of the songs take on different things, but I think anybody who’s experienced heartbreak can listen to a song like that and go, ‘Oh yeah, that’s totally it.’”

That being said, it’s this Tony nod *and* her boyfriend that make the ‘earth move’ under Mueller’s feet. “That song’s about rejoicing and being able to lose control in the right way and just walking down the street and feeling like things are good,” she says happily. “We know what we have with *Beautiful*, and we have a good thing. When other people are measuring it, it’s kind of this, that and the other. But if you take the good with it, which is that you worked hard and somebody recognized it, it’s a wonderful thing.”

