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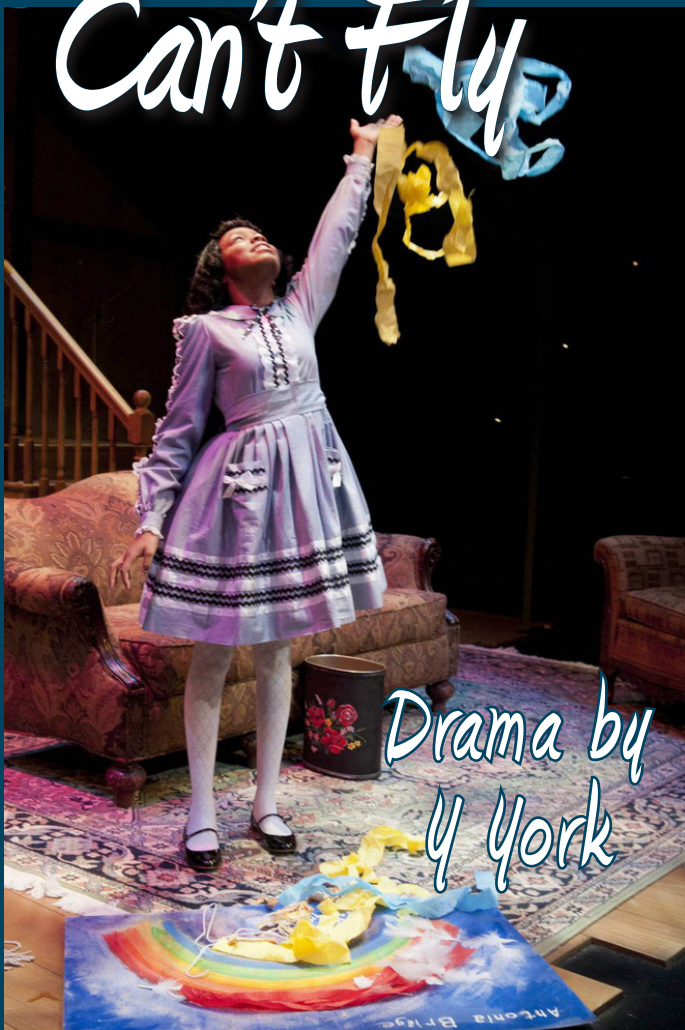
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*Dramatic Publishing*

*"Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly soars."*

*—Milwaukee Journal/Sentinel*

# Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly



*Drama by  
Y York*

“Discover with Tonia and her family that the best you can be is to be yourself. An inspiring, engaging and delightful look at family life.”  
—*broadwayworld.com*.

“York creates a marvelous scenario for overcoming adversity while also discovering one’s unique soul.”  
—*Postscript Performing Arts, Milwaukee*.

***Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly – Drama. By Y York. Inspired by the life and art of Della Wells. Cast: 2m., 3w. Nine-year-old Tonia Bridge is growing up in a working-class, African-American home in Milwaukee in 1964. Young Tonia’s artistic soul is at odds with her parents’ fears and pragmatism. Her efforts to please and appease them are in conflict with her own needs and desires. Complicating Tonia’s world is her mother’s mental illness and her father’s anger at the insidious racism of the times, which hampers his own ambitions to pursue a career in science. Tonia tries to please her mother by wearing safe, but drab, clothing; she follows the rules in a famous etiquette book on hair and deportment and manners. She tries to please her father by making a beautiful science project which she thinks will make him proud. A different Tonia takes the stage when she is guiding her friend Theo into the world of her imagination, or finding a thrill in her secret games with her dolls. Tonia finds her way, the only way possible, by allowing her parents to see her true self with all its flaws, beauty and possibilities. Single set. Approximate running time: 70 minutes. Code: DE9.***

LaNae Ramey as Tonia in First Stage Milwaukee’s world premier production.  
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# Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly

By  
Y YORK

Inspired by the life and art of  
DELLA WELLS



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For Rob Goodman

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“Inspired by the life and art of Della Wells”

*Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly* was premiered by First Stage Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wis., October 2011. The production was directed by Mark Lutwak, SDC, with the following artists:

## **CAST**

Alma Bridge . . . . . Tiffany Yvonne Cox  
Leon Bridge . . . . . Chauncey Thomas, AEA  
Aunt Franny . . . . . Chinai J. Hardy, AEA

Young performers were double cast:

Tonia Bridge . . . . . Ashley Nord & LaNae Ramey  
Theo Moore . . . . . Matthew Wade & Dashaun McCray

## **PRODUCTION TEAM**

Scenic Designer . . . . . Collette Pollard, USAA  
Costume Designer . . . . . Daryl Harris  
Lighting Designer . . . . . Dennis Parichy, USAA  
Sound Designer . . . . . Matt Whitmore  
Stage Manager . . . . . Michele Hand, AEA  
Assistant Stage Manager . . . . . Thomas J. Novak





# Don't Tell Me I Can't Fly

## CHARACTERS:

TONIA (from ANTONIA) BRIDGE, age nine

THEO MOORE, age nine

ALMA BRIDGE, early thirties

LEON BRIDGE, late thirties

AUNT FRANNY, forties

The characters are African American.

**THE TIME AND PLACE:** It is Milwaukee, 1964, fall.

The living-dining room of a modest house, in a working class neighborhood.

## NOTES:

An ellipsis “...” indicates a thought, a change, a very brief amount of time has happened but a shift has occurred.

A dash “—” indicates an interruption, usually by the next speaker, but sometimes by the current speaker interrupting him or herself.



# ACT ONE

*(Scene 1. TONIA stands on a stool holding MISS KATIE KEANE, a white, blonde doll; they are dressed alike. ALMA, removes pins from TONIA's dress. Party decorations, sewing items strewn about.)*

TONIA. What if we didn't have a party?

ALMA. Stop squirming.

TONIA. What if nobody comes?

ALMA. Everybody is going to come.

TONIA. What time is it?

ALMA. Plenty of time, if you be still.

TONIA. Aren't your fingers getting poked?

ALMA. The only thing getting poked is my patience.

TONIA. We should call it off.

ALMA. What?!

TONIA. Your fingers are sore and your patience is sore, all those screaming children gonna make your ears sore.

ALMA. Tonia, baby. You been asking for a party for as long as you been talking. We're having it today.

TONIA. I changed my mind—

ALMA. I know what's wrong with you.

TONIA (*guilty*). What—? Nothing's wrong with me—  
What?

ALMA. You got birthday quivers.

TONIA. I don't have those.

ALMA. Birthday quivers, bad as I've ever seen.

TONIA. Do your fingers need the doctor? We can go on the bus.

ALMA. Nobody needs a doctor, I'm not going to a doctor, it's a party, not a doctor, now be still. ...Forty-seven pleats. Those little girls are going to be so jealous.

TONIA. Daddy says don't make people jealous.

ALMA. Just a little bit jealous won't hurt.

TONIA. When's he gonna be home? Shouldn't he be home?

ALMA. He's off getting...well...never mind.

TONIA. Is it for the party?

ALMA (*teasing*). Don't you be pestering him about any package he might be carrying when he gets home. We don't want to spoil the surprise.

TONIA. When he gets home, when Daddy gets home, he might be tired, he might be too tired from his work to have a party. He might go to bed as soon as he gets home.

ALMA. As soon as he gets home he's going to help me with these decorations is what he's going to do.

TONIA. Or we could do science, me and Daddy. I can show him my science project.

ALMA. Did you finish Miss Charlotte's book?

TONIA. Yes, ma'am. I used it for my book report.

ALMA. You study that book. That book's gonna tell you how to get by. Turn, please. Hand me Miss Katie. You are a lovely birthday girl. Look at you two. You look just like Miss Katie Keane, just like I promised. Here, baby. (*She gives TONIA a decorated box.*)

TONIA. What's this?

ALMA. What could it be, a box on a birthday? I wonder.

*(To the doll.)* What do you think it is, Miss Katie?

TONIA *(opening it, getting happy)*. I thought the dress was my present.

ALMA. Miss Katie Keane needs a present, too. *(TONIA removes a doll's long blonde wig.)* That's her "long-hair option." So she can be like the little shampoo girls on TV.

TONIA *(waving the wig, announcer voice)*. "Silky shiny smooth."

ALMA. It's not a flag, Tonia.

TONIA. "Flying behind her as she runs in the wind."

ALMA. Give me that. *(She puts the wig on KATIE KEANE.)* Miss Katie Keane does not run in the wind. She sits quietly with her hands in her lap. She is a good little girl who does not squirm while her mama makes her pleats.

TONIA. Katie squirms worse than me.

ALMA. A little lady who is never late getting up.

TONIA. She's still asleep when I'm already home from school.

ALMA. A lady who eats everything on her plate.

TONIA. She don't eat nothing but sweets—I clean my plate.

ALMA. Her teeth so white. This little lady eats her peas.

TONIA. Then her teeth would be green.

ALMA. She never talks back, never makes a fuss.

TONIA. She's a back-talking fool.

ALMA *(firmly)*. No one would ever take her away.

TONIA. She can't go somewhere without me.

ALMA. Never taken away to live with strangers.

TONIA. What strangers? We're not allowed to talk to strangers.

ALMA. A lady who is quiet. Subdued.

TONIA. I'm subdued... What's subdued?

ALMA. A perfect little eight-year-old girl, just like you.

TONIA. I'm nine.

ALMA. You are eight. You are eight today.

TONIA. I'm nine today. I'm fourth grade. That's nine.

ALMA. Eight. You are eight. If anyone asks, you are eight years old. Do you understand me?

TONIA. I'm nine—

ALMA. Antonia Bridge. (*Fiercely.*) If I have anything left for you, anything at all, it is this: you are eight years old. Today. That is how old you are. If anyone asks, you say, "Eight, I am eight." Tell me how old you are.

TONIA. I'm eight, Mama.

ALMA. Your colors are muted, your legs are covered, your shoes are clean and your stockings are mended—just like Miss Charlotte says in her book.

TONIA. Maybe you should put Katie down—

ALMA. Be sure you follow Miss Charlotte's rules, Tonia.

TONIA. I know the rules.

ALMA. I should have followed the rules.

TONIA. You did, you followed the rules, Mama, you did.

ALMA. I didn't learn the rules.

TONIA. Mama...you want tea? You want me to make your tea?

ALMA (*exiting to kitchen*). I am hollow.

TONIA. You're not hollow.

ALMA. Hollow... (*She exits, letting KATIE KEANE fall; TONIA picks up the doll.*)

TONIA (*to ALMA*). You're not... (*Sigh.*) What are we going to do, Katie?

(*THEO leaps out from hiding.*)

THEO. You can play with me.

TONIA. Hey—!

THEO. Where's the cake? Can I have cake?

TONIA. What are you doing here, Theo? You're going to upset Mama.

THEO. She didn't see me. Can we play "The Adventures of Miss Katie Keane"?

TONIA. Quiet—

THEO (*whispers as he gets TONIA's paintbox*). Paint a picture.

TONIA (*takes the paints from him*). Don't touch my paintbox.

THEO. Paint me with Katie Keane.

TONIA (*puts box back*). I'm not painting a picture—

THEO. But you can. Painting is *quiet*.

TONIA. You have to go—

THEO. I have to stay. (*Lying.*) I have to borrow. My mama sent me.

TONIA. Your mama doesn't send you here.

THEO. She does to borrow.

TONIA. We don't have it.

THEO. I didn't say what it is yet.

TONIA. We're all out.

THEO. You can show me your science project. I like it.

TONIA. No.

THEO. I'm doing bones. A skeleton. Like in Dr. Sorkin's office. I drew like you showed me so the bones stand



out sharp. The library lady got me a book. Bones are very scientific.

TONIA. Mine is scientific.

THEO. Not as scientific as bones.

TONIA. Yes, it is. And it's beautiful and it's accurate and factual. First prize.

THEO. They didn't vote yet—the science fair is *next* week.

Can I stay for the party?

TONIA. No!

THEO. I like your new dress.

TONIA. Why?

THEO. It's new, it's nice, you're pretty.

TONIA. I hate it.

THEO. It's just like Miss Katie Keane.

TONIA. She hates it, too.

THEO. You and Katie Keane are dress-alike twins.

TONIA. We have to wear gray because it's *subdued*!

THEO. What's "subdued"?

TONIA. Subdued is...the opposite of red.

THEO. I like red.

TONIA. We do, too. Inside we're red. Outside we're subdued.

THEO (*barely containing his joy*). I brought you something.

TONIA. You did?

THEO. It's red!

TONIA. What is it?

THEO. Something wonderful.

TONIA. Did you make it?

THEO. No.

TONIA. Did you buy it?

THEO. No.

TONIA. Something you found on the ground?

THEO. Not even close.

TONIA. Where is it?

THEO. My pocket, it's in my pocket, I love it, it's in a box, and it's red! (*Gives her the box, which she opens.*)  
Good, huh?

TONIA. It's a Coca-Cola cap.

THEO (*proudly*). It's lucky for tests. And it's red.

TONIA. A Coca-Cola cap.

THEO (*defensive*). It's my only one.

TONIA. It's a lucky charm *and*...it's a *thumb hat*.

THEO. Yes! For rainy days so your thumb stays dry.

TONIA. It's a thumb hat when it isn't a...*pirate patch*.

THEO (*pirate voice*). Har-de-har-har, me hearties.

TONIA (*pirate voice*). Walk the plank, walk it now.

THEO (*pirate voice*). No, no, do not make me walk the plank.

TONIA (*pirate voice*). Dive down into the deep dark water.

THEO (*pirate voice*). I'm drowning...

TONIA (*hero voice*). You won't drown, this Coca-Cola cap will be your *life preserver*!

THEO (*pirate voice*). I am saved.

TONIA. Wherever did you find this great Coca-Cola cap?

THEO. From the first and only Coca-Cola I ever got to drink. I got a Coca-Cola for my birthday. The cap helps me remember the bubbles. The Birthday Fairy brought it.

TONIA. The who?

THEO. Birthday Fairy. She knows if you've been bad or good?

TONIA. What's she look like?

THEO. She's pretty and she wears lots of colors and flies like Superman.

TONIA. I never heard of a Birthday Fairy.

THEO. She doesn't mind. She'll bring you something anyway. Can I stay and see what it is?

TONIA. You have to go.

THEO. But I always get to come to your party.

TONIA. You don't because I never had one.

THEO. Yes. When you got cake all over yourself, and your daddy yelled at you to use your fork.

TONIA. That was *your* birthday at *your* house.

THEO. The time you didn't bring me a present.

TONIA. That was your birthday, too!

THEO. Well then you owe me. You come to my parties, I get to come to yours.

TONIA. Only girls are allowed.

THEO. Not Sarah.

TONIA. How do you know?

THEO. Not Lydia. Not Marcy. I asked.

TONIA. Why did you do that?!

THEO. Because I did. Who gets to come?

TONIA. It's a secret.

THEO. I won't tell.

TONIA. You can't be here, Mama don't—

*(MR. BRIDGE enters with a bag. THEO hides.)*

MR. BRIDGE. Alma, I brought the— Hey, Birthday Girl.