

AISLE SAY San Francisco

ELLA

Book by Jeffrey Hatcher
Conceived by Rob Ruggiero & Dyke Garrison
Presented by San Jose Repertory Theatre
Directed by Rob Ruggiero
At San Jose Repertory Theatre
101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose, CA / (408) 367-7255

Reviewed by [Judy Richter](#)

It's for good reason that the late **Ella Fitzgerald** is still known as "the first lady of song." Even though she died in 1996 at the age of 78, her recordings of standards like "**Our Love Is Here to Stay**" and dozens more remain classics. Her voice is instantly recognizable. **Misha Berson**, Seattle Times theater critic and author of program notes for the **San Jose Repertory Theatre** production of "**Ella**," describes it as being "like the smoothest five-star French cognac, which caressed ballads by the **Gershwins, Cole Porter, Harold Arlen, Duke Ellington** and other songsmiths, in a series of classic 'songbook' albums." Fitzgerald also was noted for her scat singing and jazzy improvisations.

Conceived by **Rob Ruggiero**, who also directs, and **Dyke Garrison** with a book by **Jeffrey Hatcher**, "**Ella**" tells the story of the woman behind the music and presents much of that music in some 25 songs. Fitzgerald is played and channeled by **Tina Fabrique**, who captures much of the singer's style and vocal qualities without truly imitating her.

The action is set on a concert stage in Nice, France, in July 1966, where Fitzgerald is rehearsing for a concert that is to be taped. Dressed in a simple black dress and wearing practical shoes and glasses, the singer is heavy-hearted because of a funeral she had attended that week. We don't learn until much later in the show that the funeral was for her beloved younger half-sister, Frances, who was the person closest to her throughout her life. Urged by her manager, Norman Granz (**Harold Dixon**), to add more patter to her show, she relates the story of her life, which wasn't always happy offstage, and sings songs appropriate to the time or mood. After intermission she returns to the stage in an elegant turquoise gown (costumes by **Alejo Vietti**) for the concert itself.

Fabrique is backed by a four-man band led by pianist **George Caldwell** with **Rodney Harper** on drums, **Clifton Kelleem** on bass and **Brian Sledge** on trumpet. These musicians also give voice to some of the people in Fitzgerald's life. Sledge, doing a credible imitation of **Louis Armstrong's** singing and playing (complete with white handkerchief), joins her on "**Cheek to Cheek**" and "**Let's Call the Whole Thing Off**." A sampling of other highlights includes "**Something to Live For**," which she sings mostly without a microphone (a welcome respite from **Michael Miceli's** overamplified sound design); "**The Nearness of You**"; "**They Can't Take That Away From Me**"; "**A-Tisket, A-Tasket**"; "**Night and Day**"; "**That Old Black Magic**" and "**Blue Skies**."

Michael Schweikardt's uncluttered set places the band on an upstage platform and features several arches that change colors in **John Lasiter's** creative lighting design. Fabrique's understudy, **Joilet F. Harris**, is scheduled for several performances on some days when there

are two shows. Given the show's vocal demands, that's not surprising. Like Fitzgerald, Fabrique often transitions from singing soft and slow to letting all the stops out for a bravura performance and a fitting tribute to one of the greats of American music.