

## Q&A with composer Christopher McGovern

[Robert Hurwitz, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

Wednesday, November 24, 2010



Tim Fuller

Anna Aimee White as Ginger Rogers and Matthew LaBanca as Fred Astaire re-create a classic RKO musical moment in "Backwards in High Heels."

She's indelibly stamped in most memories as [Fred Astaire](#)'s perfect dance partner - and for the quote, about him, "Don't forget that [Ginger Rogers](#) did everything he did ... backwards and in high heels." But Rogers had a pretty notable stage and film career before she and Astaire redefined the movie musical in the 1930s. She also achieved fame as a comic and serious actress in the '40s, winning an Oscar for "Kitty Foyle" and becoming one of Hollywood's most bankable stars.

That's the subject of a musical called, natch, "Backwards in High Heels" by Christopher McGovern (book, original songs and arrangements of songs Rogers made famous), conceived and developed with Lynette Barkley.

"Backwards" premiered at Florida Stage in West Palm Beach three years ago. It's been remounted by director Scott Schwartz for a four-theater co-production that opened last spring at Asolo [Theatre](#) in Sarasota, Fla., played Arizona Theatre in Phoenix this fall and is now in previews at San Jose Repertory (it moves to the Cleveland Play House in January).

We reached McGovern at his home in New York. The interview has been edited for space and continuity.

**Q: You came into theater as a songwriter and arranger?**

**A:** I certainly came into it from the music and lyrics end. I started as a pianist, which is how most people do on the composing end. When I was a kid I wanted to go to school for journalism, so the writing itch has been pretty strong for a long time. But I got a music scholarship for college, so what are you gonna do?

**Q: Ginger's mom was a writer, right?**

**A:** Yeah, she was a screenwriter. She was quite a pistol. It's interesting because this is sort of the opposite of "Gypsy." It's a mother-daughter. That's the center of the show, as it was of Ginger's life. But "Gypsy" was the mother shoving the daughter onstage. This, if anything, is the opposite. She wanted to shield her daughter from that stuff.

**Q: How'd the show come about?**

**A:** I'd been working at Florida Stage and we were sitting around - the best and worst things happen sitting around with drinks - talking about the nature of celebrity. As a culture we're fascinated with celebrity, but I'm in love with the '30s and '40s and that idea of glamour. When Ginger and a lot of her colleagues were coming up you had to be famous for doing something. You had to have talent. Now it's people pointing cameras at their tonsillectomy and that gets them their own miniseries with three book deals.

And Ginger wanted to be known for something other than what she was known for. She wanted to be taken seriously as an actress. I think it comes as a surprise to many in the audience when she wins for "Kitty Foyle" in the end.

**Q: That's where the show ends?**

**A:** We flirt past it. We have to, because she was married five times, but we literally dispatch those in one number. They never worked out.

**Q: How much dance is there?**

**A:** A ton. My poor little Anna (Anna Aimee White plays Rogers). Thank god she's young. And she's terrific. Dance is used to propel the story in places and you want to have some real hoofing in a show about Ginger. I am not above playing to someone's expectations, believe me. If you're doing a musical about a dancer it would sure be a bummer if there isn't a whole lot of great dancing in it.

Ginger was wonderfully skilled. As an actress she was a kind of chameleon. As a dancer she had that elegance but she was also a real old-style hooper. Ginger, [Eleanor Powell](#), those ladies hoofed.

**Q: You're using some of the songs she originated?**

**A:** I'm attempting to use the standards as book songs as much as possible. So, "Embraceable You," which she originated on Broadway - I didn't want to just stop the show to do a standard. There are a couple of instances, where I couldn't find the right song, where I wrote one - like, shows like this have to have an I'm-the-greatest-star moment. But most of the time it's trying to take standards that we all love - talk about expectations - and have you hear the lyrics differently. Hopefully, they've been used in a fresh way, to move the story forward.

**Q: The title, when did she say that?**

**A:** You know, she didn't - although I make her say it in the show. It was a cartoon. I can't remember the actual source ("Frank and Ernest" by Bob Thaves, 1982). It's a fantastic quote. We were about to open somewhere when Hillary used it and I said, "Wow. Let's get that clip in a commercial." I first heard it when Ann Richards said it when she was running for governor of Texas.

I hope it helps set the right expectations for the show. We just got done with a very demoralizing period, for me, in our country. I think a lot of people are scared and worried about losing their homes. It's not like the Great Depression, when Ginger got famous, but there is a corollary to that period. So I would be happy if people could forget about that for a couple of hours. And if some super regional theaters did well with the show, that would be a great ancillary benefit.

**Backwards in High Heels:** Book, original songs and arrangements by Christopher McGovern. Previews at 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 2 and 7 p.m. Sun. Runs Wed.-Dec. 19. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio. \$10-\$79. (408) 367-7255. [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com).

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This article appeared on page **F - 2** of the San Francisco Chronicle