

Putting a spotlight on Ginger Rogers

By [Charlie McCollum](#)

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For most people, there is just one Ginger Rogers: a glamorous image in black and white, sweeping across a dance floor with Fred Astaire to the music of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern and the Gershwins.

But there was much more to Rogers than those dazzling duets with Astaire.

"She worked with Fred for a period of time in her career, but she had a career both before and after Fred. Quite major events in her career happened before and after Fred," says Scott Schwartz, the director of "Backwards in High Heels," a musical about Rogers now in previews at the San Jose Repertory Theatre. (The official opening is Wednesday night.)

"She was a fascinating woman and remains a major figure in Hollywood history. And she really changed the way that women and female stars were treated in Hollywood. For someone who is remembered as a dancer and as an entertainer, she really made a difference in the way women were viewed in Hollywood's golden age."

However, much of Rogers' career and contributions have been forgotten -- or perhaps obscured by those nine Fred and Ginger films that the team made at RKO from 1933 to 1939.

Born in 1911, Rogers was a teenager when she joined the vaudeville act of Eddie Foy after she won a Charleston contest before one of Foy's shows in her hometown of Fort Worth, Texas. She became a Broadway star at 19 in "Girl Crazy," a Gershwin musical that also made a star of Ethel Merman. (Astaire was hired at one point to help with the choreography.)

That success attracted the attention of Hollywood, and in 1933, she had another breakout role, playing Anytime Annie in "42nd Street." She followed that with star roles in "Gold Diggers of 1933" and her first film with Astaire, "Flying Down to Rio."

Astaire once said that when they filmed "Flying Down to Rio," "Ginger had never danced with a partner before. She faked it an awful lot. She couldn't tap, and she couldn't do this and that "... but Ginger had style and talent and improved as she went along. She got so that after a while everyone else who danced with me looked wrong."

For the next decade, Astaire and Rogers were the "It" couple of film with such movies as "Top Hat," "Swing Time" and "Shall We Dance." But by 1939 and "The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle," they both wanted to expand their careers beyond the partnership. Rogers was also tired of being paid less than



Backwards in High Heels: (l to r) Benjie Randall, Matthew LaBanca, Anna Aimee White and James Patterson, in San Jose Repertory Theatre's Co-Production of Backwards in High Heels. Photo by Tim Fuller.

Astaire and her other male co-stars and not being able to choose the films in which she starred -- battles she fought for much of her career.

Rogers made some good films on her own ("Stage Door," "Roxie Hart") and won an Oscar in 1941 for her performance in "Kitty Foyle," beating out such nominees as Bette Davis. But by the 1950s, the roles became fewer and fewer, and Rogers settled into a career of occasional stage and television roles until her death in 1995.

"What fascinates me most about her was that she was gifted in so many ways, and she was able to roll all those things up into a package that became a fantasy for all of these people," says Christopher McGovern, who wrote the book and some of the music for "Backwards in High Heels."

"Not only was she famous in the Depression, but she was famous playing those amazingly glamorous people. Her stock in trade was fantasy -- and that to me is the definition of Hollywood. When everyone was living in black and white, she took them into color."

McGovern was working at the Florida Stage in West Palm Beach, Fla., with director-choreographer Lynette Barkley when they began discussing a possible Rogers musical.

"We were working together on a show about another '40s icon -- the Andrews Sisters -- and that's when we started talking about the nature of celebrity as a concept. Why are we attracted to celebrities? What kind are we attracted to?" McGovern recalls. "And Ginger was part of the 1930s, a wonderful era. It has a mystique to it. It's just more glamorous. There was a more mysterious air about being celebrity and, I think, you really had to do something to be a celebrity."

McGovern took the title of the show from the famous quote, often incorrectly attributed to Rogers herself, that "Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did -- except backwards and in high heels." (It actually came from a 1982 "Frank & Ernest" comic strip, done by Bob Thaves.)

In 2007, Florida Stage first produced "Backwards" -- which covers the period from that Charleston competition to Rogers' Oscar and mixes McGovern's original songs with standards of the period. It was a box office success, and the show was periodically staged by regional theater companies, although McGovern says, "We really had nothing to do with those productions."

Then late last year, the Asolo Repertory Theatre in Sarasota, Fla., and Phoenix's Arizona Theatre Company decided to revive "Backwards" as a coproduction. (Eventually, the Rep and the Cleveland Playhouse would also sign on as co-producers.) They asked Schwartz -- who has directed off-Broadway and at regional theater companies and is the son of composer Stephen Schwartz -- if he was interested.

"I liked it very, very much. But I had some thoughts about the book," Schwartz says. "I looked at it as a new musical. It had had a couple of productions, but one of the first things I asked those involved was: 'Is this a finished show?' And they said, 'No, no, no. It's new.'"

"So Christopher (McGovern) and I sat down in New York, and he was willing to dive back in and revisit it."

Anna Aimee White, who will play Rogers in this production, first took on the role earlier this year at the International City Theatre in Long Beach. "Because of that production, I auditioned for the version that is coming to San Jose," White says. "It is really a different show, and there have been a lot of rewrites, a different cast and different choreography."

"So it's a whole new ballgame for me. I had a lot to work with, a lot of new material, so that Long Beach really became more of a jumping-off point."

One of the key changes was new choreography by Patti Colombo, a veteran choreographer who has worked on the national touring companies of such shows as "Peter Pan" and "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers."

"One of the things that Patti Colombo did not do was try to exactly re-create any of those routines" made famous by Astaire and Rogers, McGovern says. "It would be a big mistake. To create dances that are evocative of some of those dances, fine. But to try to imitate those dances would be unwise."

White adds that "it's really a case of being in-the-style-of. There are some signature moves that we wanted to get in there, but we didn't take the choreography exactly as it is on film. Many people who come to see the show think they've seen what they saw on screen even though they haven't."

In fact, the central relationship in "Backwards" -- the one that drives the show -- is not the one between Fred and Ginger. Instead, the show focuses on the one between Ginger and her mother, Lela.

"While Fred's the man and the partner she's most identified with, she really did have this relationship with her mother which was quite complicated. That's what makes this very much a mother-daughter story," Schwartz says.

Rogers, adds Schwartz, was "a woman who has to balance her desires for her career with her needs for family and love and a woman who never quite worked it out, quite frankly. She struggled with these issues her whole life, including having five marriages and having a wonderful but tempestuous relationship with her mother and with some of her co-stars. I think that's something we all can relate to."

Those involved in the show are quick to point out that "Backwards in High Heels" is meant to be, as McGovern puts it, "an entertainment, something like the kind of movie RKO would have made in the '30s.

"I feel like we're in really scary times, in really sad times, not unlike when Ginger was getting famous," he says. "People went to her movies for relief. The plot of 'Swing Time'? -- we're not talking 'Hedda Gabler.' People flocked to those movies because they took them away from their problems for a little bit.

"I can rest easy if I've helped the audience to do that."

'Backwards in High Heels'
By Christopher McGovern

When: In previews through Tuesday; opens Wednesday and continues through Dec. 19.

Where: San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio

Tickets: \$35-\$73, www.sjrep.com