

'Backwards in High Heels' dances through Ginger Rogers' diverse career

By Heather Zimmerman

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Although dancer and movie star Ginger Rogers spent a lot of screen time following the lead of partner Fred Astaire, and thus, dancing backwards in high heels, she was actually a forward-thinking trailblazer. A new musical offers a behind-the-scenes look at Rogers' life.

Backwards in High Heels runs Nov. 24 through Dec. 19 at the San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose.

The show was conceived and developed by Lynette Barkley and Christopher McGovern and had its premiere in 2007. San Jose Rep is presenting this production jointly with Arizona Theatre Company, Florida's Asolo Repertory Theatre and the Cleveland Play House.

Backwards in High Heels follows Rogers' career from her teens to her winning an Oscar for a dramatic turn in *Kitty Foyle*. The show also includes such musical favorites of the time as "Fascinatin' Rhythm" and "A Fine Romance," as well as several original songs.

Rogers grew up around show business, as did Anna Aimee White, who portrays the dance and screen icon in this production.

"I always knew," White says. "I knew at a very young age that this is what I wanted to do." White got her start on stage early, taking up dance when she was 4 years old and landing her first role at age 7, in a community theater production of *The Sound of Music*. She was inspired to audition, she says, because she watched many classic movie musicals on visits to her grandparents' home.

So dedicated was White to pursuing a career in theater and dance that, at the age of 15, she left her native Nebraska and, accompanied by her mother, moved to California to attend a performing arts high school.

Rogers' circumstances were a bit different, with her mother, Lela, establishing herself as a force of her own in Hollywood, writing scripts and later holding several key positions at movie studio RKO. By her late teens, Rogers began to follow in her mother's showbiz footsteps, getting her first break after winning a Charleston dance contest. Rogers' relationship with her mother is, in fact, key to the story in *Backwards in High Heels*.

White's credits include understudying the roles of Sandy, Marty and Patty in the Broadway revival of *Grease*, an opportunity that led her to move to New York and allowed her to portray each of those characters at various times. She has also appeared in musicals at the Kennedy Center and the Encores! New York City Center series (where on a break from *Backwards in High Heels*, she's appearing in *Bells Are Ringing*). White's résumé also includes roles in films such as *Georgia Rule* and *You Again*. Of the characters she's played so far, White says she has particularly enjoyed *Grease*'s Marty, and of course,

her current role as Rogers, which offers the chance to play a range of ages, from 16 to 30, as well as emotions in one show.

"I get to be funny and I get to be dramatic and there's a lot in Ginger, and I will always probably tell people that she's my favorite role," White says, also noting "There's nothing like performing on Broadway every night and singing iconic songs from Grease."

White has played Rogers for nearly a year, first taking on the role in a production of Backwards in High Heels for a Long Beach theater company, and then being cast again as Rogers for this production shared among four regional companies. She notes that significant changes have been made to the joint production, including new choreography and some rewrites by McGovern that further develop the story.

To prepare for playing such an iconic figure, White was able to draw on Rogers' considerable body of work. "I wanted to make sure I was true to the time period and the way people talked. And I read her autobiography and mainly just watched her movies to get a sense of her style and the vocabulary of how she danced with Fred," White says. "But otherwise, we did a lot of research within rehearsals and it was very helpful. I have a wonderful cast that surrounds me that is wonderful to play off of."

Though Rogers is, of course, best known for her flawless dancing and glamorous looks, there was a lot more to her beneath that polished surface, including some surprises.

"She was married five times," White says. "That was a new one that I was not aware of. And what always gets me is that it was such an interesting time for women in the business back then, and she really was a pioneer. She really stood up for equal pay. She did everything Fred Astaire did, but backwards in high heels, but she also got half the money he got, even though she was doing everything he did. Still being ladylike, she really stood up for what she thought she deserved."

Tickets are \$17.50-\$74. For more information, call 408.367.7255 or visit www.sjrep.com.