

## 'Backwards in High Heels' review: Too sentimental

[Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic](#)

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Tim Fuller

Anna Aimee White as Ginger Rogers in her Hollywood dressing room, negotiating a better contract.



**Backwards in High Heels:** Musical. By Christopher McGovern. Directed by Scott Schwartz. Through Dec. 19. San Jose Repertory Theatre, 101 Paseo de San Antonio, San Jose. Two hours, 15 minutes. \$21-\$79. (408) 367-7255. [www.sjrep.com](http://www.sjrep.com).

"Fascinating Rhythm," "Embraceable You," "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off" - what's not to like about a score full of classics by George and [Ira Gershwin](#)? Especially when half of the other 10 songs are by [Irving Berlin](#) or [Jerome Kern](#) (with [Dorothy Fields](#)). If only the show were as good as the songs. But that's an awful lot to ask.

There's a built-in problem of meeting expectations for any show about the life of a great performer. Christopher McGovern's "Backwards in High Heels," the holiday offering at San Jose Repertory, doesn't completely avoid that trap but it does pretty well in the song and dance categories. That's essential for a show subtitled "The Ginger Musical," but it's not enough.

Anna Aimee White is a charming, quick-stepping, flexible and tuneful [Ginger Rogers](#) (you were expecting some other Ginger?) and Matthew LaBanca is a smooth, deft-tapping and reasonably debonair facsimile of [Fred Astaire](#). They don't really re-create the magic of

Astaire and Rogers in motion, but they represent some signature moves with apt flair.

Rather, their "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," which opens the second act, is a sweetly comic, smartly danced routine about their first pairing on an RKO set. And their upbeat "Pick Yourself Up" (Kern) is an engaging parting after their landmark film musicals together. That's pretty much it for Fred and Ginger. McGovern's musical (conceived and developed with Lynnette Barkley) is more about Rogers' life before and a little after the period of her most enduring fame.

Which is odd, because it's also essentially about her quest for success. That and her relationship with her mother (a fine, flinty Heather Lee). Except for her first husband (with sweet "Fine Romance" and "Embraceable You" duets with James Patterson), most of her five marriages fly by in one song.

A co-production with Florida's Asolo Repertory - where director Scott Schwartz's production originated - Arizona Theatre Company and the Cleveland Play House (where it goes next), "Backwards" traces Rogers' story from tap-dancing teendom in Texas up through the vaudeville circuit to Broadway and Hollywood, culminating with her move to nonmusical films and Oscar for "Kitty Foyle."

It's a story told in one dynamic - if overmiked - number after another, with energetic period choreography by Patti Colombo (in Alejo Vietti's fine costumes on Walt Spangler's inventive sets). McGovern, who wrote the book and four original songs, has expertly rearranged the classics so that they advance the story, in sharp executions by music director Tim Robertson's five-piece band.

McGovern nicely mimics the period in a "Tame These Feet" nod to the Gershwins. But his farcical "The Domesticity" pushes for laughs it doesn't achieve and "But ... When?" patently strains for effect as a wannabe showstopper. Much of the comedy suffers from the same overstatement. Christianne Tisdale's impossibly long, brassy notes as [Ethel Merman](#) are pretty funny, but other broad celebrity lampoons fall flat.

They also clash with the more serious side, as McGovern seeks to portray Rogers earning her fame, battling for equal pay and seeking respect as an actress. But, having taken them out of context (there was a Depression going on) he hasn't really developed those themes.

At heart, "Backwards" is a celebration of fame as much as of Rogers, and a problematic love story between her and her mother. As stirring as its dance numbers are and as lovely the singing and design, it suffers from hero worship and sentiment.

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