

Review: 'Backwards in High Heels' at San Jose Rep

By Charlie McCollum

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Back in the 1930s, Hollywood cranked out an endless stream of musicals whose sole purpose -- beyond making money for the studios -- was to be simple entertainment, movies with paper-thin plots and little character development but big production numbers that could divert Americans for a couple of hours from the economic travails of the time.

Some, of course, transcended those humble aspirations, most gloriously the films made by Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire for RKO. The plots were just as thin as in the others, and the characters weren't any better developed. But oh, those production numbers, with Rogers and Astaire dancing to and singing the music of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern and the Gershwins. Rogers and Astaire didn't just divert the audience; they transported it to a truly wonderful place.

Which brings us to "Backwards in High Heels," the musical based on Rogers' life, which opened Wednesday at San Jose Repertory Theatre for a holiday run.

What the show's creators clearly had in mind was something that reflected the glories of the Astaire-Rogers movies. But "Backwards" is far closer to the more run-of-the-mill studio musicals: a pleasant enough way to kill a couple of hours and, at times, quite entertaining. Despite the considerable efforts of a very appealing cast, it just doesn't achieve the sort of magic that made "Swing Time" and "Shall We Dance" so unforgettable.

Most of the problem lies with the play itself, which follows

Rogers' career from her first vaudeville work at age 16 to her 1941 Oscar for the nonmusical drama "Kitty Foyle."

Rogers -- who had five husbands, an affair with Howard Hughes, tumultuous relationships with her male co-stars (including Astaire) and constant battles with studio bosses over control of her career -- is a truly fascinating figure but one who has proved quite elusive over the years for film historians.

"Backwards" writer Christopher McGovern is no more successful in capturing the essence of his subject. He has chosen to focus much of the show on Rogers' relationship with her mother, Lela, but without



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

capturing any sort of believable human drama in what was a decidedly complex mother-daughter dynamic.

The result: "Gypsy" lite, with Lela coming off as a road company Mama Rose.

Nor does it help that "Backwards" skips past notable parts of Rogers' life and gets other parts wrong. One example: In "Backwards," it appears that, when Ethel Merman and Rogers did the Gershwin's "Girl Crazy" on Broadway, Merman was already an established star trying to keep the spotlight off the younger Rogers. In fact, "Girl Crazy" made stars of both Merman and Rogers, who were about the same age; while they may have battled for the spotlight, it certainly wasn't an "All About Eve" thing.

McGovern does manage to successfully mix such classics as "I Got Rhythm," "Embraceable You" and "A Fine Romance" with his own very serviceable songs, including "But ... When?" -- the musical's showstopping number (think "Rose's Turn" from "Gypsy"). And with the help of some crisp staging from director Scott Schwartz and really smart choreography by Patti Colombo, the cast members manage to create some very strong moments minus much to work with beyond their own talents.

Anna Aimee White is thoroughly engaging as Rogers. She has a nice way with a wisecrack and a song, and is just a terrific dancer, whether tapping her heart out or gliding across the floor in those Rogers-Astaire numbers. Heather Lee -- a veteran of both the New York and Los Angeles musical theater scenes -- succeeds in bringing some snap and nuance to the underwritten and monotone role of Lela.

The ensemble -- which takes on multiple roles throughout the evening -- is also strong. Christianne Tisdale was a clear crowd favorite on opening night with her impersonations of Merman, Bette Davis and Katharine Hepburn. (Sometimes she strays a little too close to "Forbidden Broadway" broadness, but she's still very funny.) And in a role that most sane actors wouldn't touch, Matthew LaBanca summons up considerable appeal as Astaire -- if not the icon's exquisite style as a dancer and singer.

This version of "Backwards" -- first written by McGovern in 2007 and staged only sporadically since then -- is, in a sense, the first full-blown production of the work, with stops at top regional theaters in Florida, Arizona and Ohio in addition to the Rep. So perhaps, over time, its flaws will be eliminated or at least camouflaged.

But for now, if you are expecting the magic of Rogers and Astaire, or a reasonable facsimile, you won't find in it in "Backwards in High Heels."

'Backwards in High Heels'

By Christopher McGovern

Through: Dec. 19

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

Running time: 2 hours, 20 minutes (one intermission)

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