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High Heels, the New Ginger Rogers Musical, is Sold Out at Florida Stage

By *Kenneth Jones*
17 Mar 2007

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Amber Stone stars as Ginger Rogers.

This is a fine romance: Sight unseen, an audience has taken a new show to its heart.

It hasn't even begun to dance yet, but *Backwards in High Heels* — the world premiere musical about actress Ginger Rogers — has sold out its entire run at Florida Stage.

The fourth production in Florida Stage's 20th anniversary season begins previews March 17 and opens March 23 at the resident theatre in Manalapan, FL, near West Palm Beach. Amber Stone (Broadway's *The Pajama Game*) plays blonde Academy Award-winner Rogers, a groundbreaking actress who famously danced with Fred Astaire.

Co-created and developed by Carbonell Award winner Lynnette Barkley (who directs and choreographs) and Christopher McGovern (who is music director, book writer and arranger), the musical continues to April 29.

According to Florida Stage, "The remarkable life and times of the multi-talented entertainment powerhouse, Ginger Rogers is brought to life in this world premiere production, *Backwards in High Heels*. Full of memorable music and glorious dancing, this backstage look at the private life of this timeless beauty is a celebration of her extraordinary talent. Perhaps best known as Fred Astaire's dance partner, Ginger Rogers was also an acclaimed actress and singer, a woman who had a profound effect on the recognition of female performers. It was her seeming effortless approach to her performance that prompted critics to observe 'she does everything that Fred Astaire does, but backwards and in high heels.'"

Amber Stone's Off-Broadway credits include *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (NYSF, Public Theater), *Babes in Arms* (City Center Encores!) and *The A Train Plays*, as well as the national tours of *The Boyfriend* and *Beauty and the Beast*.

The cast also includes Jeremy Benton (Broadway's *42nd Street*) as Fred Astaire and others; Dirk Lumbard (Broadway's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, *Imaginary Friends*) as Jack Culpepper and others; Erin Maguire (Off-Broadway's *Forbidden Broadway SVU*) as The Impersonator; Brendt Reil as Joe and others; Carbonell Award nominee Lourelene Snedeker (who appeared in the first production at Florida Stage, then called The Theatre Club of the Palm Beaches) as Lela.

The musicians for *Backwards in High Heels* include Glen Rovinelli (woodwinds), Neel Shukla (drums), Madalina Macovei (cello) and Rupert Ziawinski (bass).

The creative team includes scenic designer Jeremy C. Doucette, lighting designer Jim Fulton, costume designer Suzette Pare and sound designer Matt Kelly.

The development of *Backwards in High Heels* was partially funded by the National Alliance for Musical Theatre Producer-Writer Initiative.

For more more information call (561) 585-3433 or (800) 514-3837 or visit www.floridastage.org.

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In 2005, the resident theatre company devoted to contemporary plays and musicals had success with *Sisters of Swing*, helmed by Lynnette Barkley and

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Christopher McGovern, so the writers were invited to create a new musical for audiences in the West Palm Beach area.

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Backwards in High Heels uses original songs by composer McGovern, as well vintage movie musical numbers.

Although billed as "based on the life of Ginger Rogers," the work is a fictionalized account that will be somewhat non-linear, McGovern previously told Playbill.com.

"We want to give the essence of her life — we're not there to recreate old Fred and Ginger routines," said co-creator Lynnette Barkley, a three-time Carbonell Award winner for her direction and choreography of such Florida shows as *Beguiled Again* and *Puttin' on the Ritz*.

McGovern co-wrote the musical *Lizzie Borden*, seen in regional productions around the country.

McGovern admits that the challenge of writing about the late Rogers is that the Academy Award winner ("Kitty Foyle") was notoriously "tight-lipped."

"You have to dig with her," McGovern said. "She was not terribly scandalous..."

Despite five marriages, the juicier conflicts in her life had to do with her relationships with Hollywood producers and how she challenged movie studios to pay women stars fairly.

"I'm attracted to stories about strong women who stand up for what they want," McGovern said. "She was one of the first women to put her foot down and demand equal pay. She stood up to RKO."

"A strong woman in the industry at that time is part of what appealed to me," Barkley echoed, adding that Rogers' relationship with her mother is also central to the show.

McGovern said the musical will use dance to tell the story, and the creators will borrow from the catalog of Kern, Berlin and other songwriters to tell her story. Barkley and McGovern examined lyrics to the famous movie tunes to determine what would best suit the real-life story and move the plot along. This is *not* a concert musical, McGovern said.

Rogers and Astaire were major international stars in the 1930s, lifting Depression weary audiences into a world of impossibly stylish musical fantasy. Their films for the RKO studio included "Flying Down to Rio" (1933), "The Gay Divorcee," "Roberta," "Top Hat," "Follow the Fleet," "Swing Time," "Shall We Dance," "Carefree" and "The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle" (1939). They were reunited for the 1949 M-G-M picture "The Barkleys of Broadway" (their only picture in color). She is also remembered for turns in "42nd Street," "Gold Diggers of 1933," "Roxie Hart" and "Kitty Foyle," for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role.

Ginger Rogers was born Virginia Katherine McMath in Independence, MO, in 1911 and died of congestive heart failure in Rancho Mirage, CA., in 1995.

In addition to her film career, Rogers appeared on Broadway in the Gershwins' *Girl Crazy* in 1930, as well as *Top Speed* (her Broadway debut in 1929), *Love and Let Love* (a play in 1951) and as replacement Dolly Levi in the original run of *Hello, Dolly!* She was also seen in summer stock and on tour, and directed musicals.

In addition to directing and choreographing for resident theatres, Barkley is a partner in the production events company Barkley/Kalpak.

McGovern produced solo CDs featuring Rebecca Luker ("Leaving Home" on the PS Classics label) and Susan Egan ("Coffee House" and "Winter Tracks" on the LML label).

Florida Stage is run by Louis Tyrrell (producing director) and Nancy Barnett (managing director).

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