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## Backwards in High Heels



Move over Fred Astaire. There's Ginger Rogers and there's Ginger Rogers's mother. International City Theatre's production of "Backwards in High Heels," directed by caryn desai, is a long-awaited tribute to the inspiration for the just-as-important part of that dancing dual. It's the Ginger musical.

Ginger Rogers (Anna Aimee White) began dancing before she could walk. She won the Texas State Charleston Championship and married the chorus boy Jack Briggs before she was ready and against the wishes of her mother Lela (Heather Lee). She divorced him in three weeks out of boredom with married chores and went back to her mom. After appearing in Gershwin's "Girl Crazy," Rogers hit it big with one Fred Astaire (Matt Bauer), with whom she made ten pictures including "Shall We Dance." But then it was time for her to go out in her own terms. She began taking different husbands and different roles, but for the role of the stenographer who has a miscarriage, "Kitty Foyle," she finally earns an Oscar, an award she attributes to the patience of her mother.

Every song in the musical is integrated into the story, including the Irving Berlin classic "Change Partners." The brilliant choreography is accompanied by a succession of ex-husbands and ex-lovers of Rogers, including Lew Ayres (Christopher Carothers), Hermes Pan (Jeff Payton), and the hilariously androgynous European played by (the female) Robin De Lano. With the great lyrics ("ask him to sit this one out and while you're alone, I'll tell the waiter to tell him that he's wanted on the telephone") comes a plot matched to the musical. We see Ginger Rogers changing partners over and over, but at the end, she goes back to her mom.

Certain songs that appear again and again throughout the musical give it a continuity that took Ginger Rogers from her childhood to her stardom in stride. There's Gershwin's "They All Laughed," which appeared in reprised form throughout, all sung by different people, including the crew, mumbling "they all laughed at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round." There's also "Fascinating Rhythm," which appears at the beginning and end, just like in the musical "Shall We Dance," where "They All Laughed" appeared.

With a small cast and a huge number of songs, the Ginger musical makes do with songs sung by some random characters. For example, the mood of impending doom for Ginger as she threatens the studio boss George Schaeffer is given voice by the streetsweeper Joe in the song "Let's Face the Music and Dance." To close out act one, Schaeffer (who hasn't appeared yet and will not appear again) and other random studio execs sing "We're in the Money" in celebrating the success of Ginger. The Ginger musical is really a tribute to musicals of that Rogers-Astaire era, with everyone getting on the act of singing.

Perhaps the greatest musical performance out of many in the work is Lela's "You'll Never Know." Ginger's mom has opened up a school for aspiring young actors and actresses, and has moved out of Ginger's place. Like the earlier "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket," in which Ginger tells her mom how much she loves her, "You'll Never Know" is her mom's reply. When Ginger thanks her mom at the end before walking out

with the Oscar, we bow to Lela, not just Ginger.

Fred and Ginger are known for their dancing, and there's plenty of that in this musical. Most notably, Matt Bauer does a fancy imitation of a few Astaire favorites, such as in "Shall We Dance." Ginger and Ethel Merman do a hilarious dance for couples (of sorts) in "I Got Rhythm," and Ginger and Fred really knocks it off in "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off."

Just as intricate as the dancing are the multi-voiced songs, of which this work had a handful. From the costumes to the accents to the great singing, "Backwards in High Heels" is a genuine look back at a life as well as an era.

"Backwards in High Heels" is performed by International City Theatre (<http://www.ictlongbeach.org/>) Long Beach, California, until 21st of March, 2010.