TAM 2280: DESIGNING WITH GINGER
“My mother said I was dancing before I was born. She could feel my toes tapping wildly inside her for months.”

At five, Ginger Rogers and her mother moved from Kansas City to New York where Rogers had her first professional stage and costume experiences. From New York, Rogers moved to Texas in 1922 with her mother and stepfather John Rogers. In 1925, Rogers became the Texas State Charleston Champion and was awarded the opportunity to perform in a touring vaudeville act titled “Ginger and the Redheads.” The image to the right features Rogers in a vaudeville dress sewn by her mother, Lela Rogers.

At the age of 17, Rogers returned to New York with her mother where Rogers earned several signing jobs on the radio and landed her Broadway theater debut in the musical *Top Speed* (1929). At age 19, Rogers starred in George and Ira Gershwin’s new Broadway musical *Girl Crazy* (1930), an appearance which made her an overnight star. The following year, Rogers made her first film appearances in *Young Man in Manhattan*, *Queen High*, *The Sap from Syracuse*, *Night in a Dormitory*, and *Follow the Leader*.


“My first encounter with ostrich feathers.”

- Ginger Rogers, Vaudeville, 1927.

From *Ginger Rogers: My Story*
In 1933, at the age of 22, Rogers began her legendary partnership with fellow dancer Fred Astaire in the film *Flying Down to Rio*. Among the most famous duos in Hollywood history, Rogers and Astaire are credited with revolutionizing the musical genre with popular films such as *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Top Hat* (1935) and *Swing Time* (1936). Rogers appeared with Astaire for the first time on the cover of Life Magazine in August 22, 1938. Her last two films with Astaire included *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939) and *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949).

In the late 1930s, Rogers branched out into dramatic comedy films. In 1941, Rogers won an Academy Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role for her dramatic performance in *Kitty Foyle*, a film based on the bestselling 1939 book *Kitty Foyle* by Christopher Morley. LIFE Magazine devoted eight pages to fashions of the film in their December 9, 1940 issue. In 1941, Rogers was the highest paid woman in Hollywood.

After her success with *Kitty Foyle*, Rogers maintained an extensive solo career in film, television and radio. After a twenty-year absence from the stage, Rogers appeared in *Love and Let Love* in 1951 in New York. Rogers’ last motion picture was *Harlow* in 1965. From 1965 to 1967, Rogers played the lead role in Broadway’s long-time smash hit *Hello, Dolly!* The national tour of the show stopped in over sixteen cities, with the final curtain call in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1968. At the age of 54, Rogers performed for 1,116 performances as Dolly Levi, all while wearing a corseted satin bodice and skirt heavily weighted by thousands of hand-sewn beads, sequins and fringe for the play’s most memorable scene: an evening at Harmonia Gardens.


From 1969 to 1970, Rogers appeared in the London theatrical production *Mame*. Ginger’s nightclub revue, *The Ginger Rogers Show*, toured internationally from 1975 to 1979. A retrospective of past performances, the stage act featured numerous costumes and dance numbers inspired by her earlier career. In 1980 at the age of 69, Rogers performed with the legendary Rockettes in *Rockette Spectacular* at Radio City Music Hall. Rogers performed for the last time in the play *Charley’s Aunt* in 1984.


Ginger Rogers’ filmography from 1940 to 1984 includes 31 film and radio performances, 19 stage appearances, innumerable magazine features, and a jazz album. Ginger starred in a variety of comedies and dramas with such leading men as Cary Grant, Henry Fonda, shows, appearing with Perry Como, Bob Hope, Pat Boone, Steve Allen, Dean Martin, Lucille Ball, June Allyson, and more. She was a guest on nearly every TV talk show including “The Tonight Show” as well as numerous radio appearances including the 1940 hit “Bachelor Mother.”

The importance of fashion to Ginger Rogers’s success as a performer cannot be denied. In fact, Rogers herself quoted in her autobiography, “I can never emphasize enough how important clothing was to me.” Costume selections for her Hollywood films became legendary. Many of them, and the dance numbers in which they appeared, influenced many of Rogers’ costume and performance choices in her solo career.
