

TAM 2280: DESIGNING WITH GINGER



GINGER ROGERS: A BRIEF HISTORY

“My mother said I was dancing before I was born. She could feel my toes tapping wildly inside her for months.”

- Ginger Rogers, *Ginger Rogers: My Story*, 1991



An icon of American dance and film, Ginger Rogers (1911-1995) was born in Independence, Missouri as Virginia Katherine McMath. From her place of birth at 100 Moore Street, Rogers moved to her grandparents' home on Bellefontain Street in Kansas City, Missouri, during which time she made her first appearance before a movie camera. Rogers was selected to appear in a local optician's commercial to be shown in theaters prior to a silent film screening. As Rogers wrote in her 1991 autobiography, "As the grandmother fumbled for something in her parlor, a caption at the bottom of the screen said, "Virginia, have you seen Grandmother's reading glasses?" The camera then cut to little Virginia, who tossed her golden curls, flashed a happy smile, and pointed her finger upward. The caption read, "Yes, Grandmother, they're on your head!" Can you imagine how I felt when all my family and friends went to the movie theater and saw me on the screen? I was the talk of Bellefontain Street."

IMAGE: Ginger Rogers (age four) from "Ginger Rogers: My Story"

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*.

IMAGE (right): The 'Valencia' in the vaudeville set "Ginger and the Redheads." Dress sewn by Lena Rogers. 1926.



**"My first encounter
with ostrich feathers."**

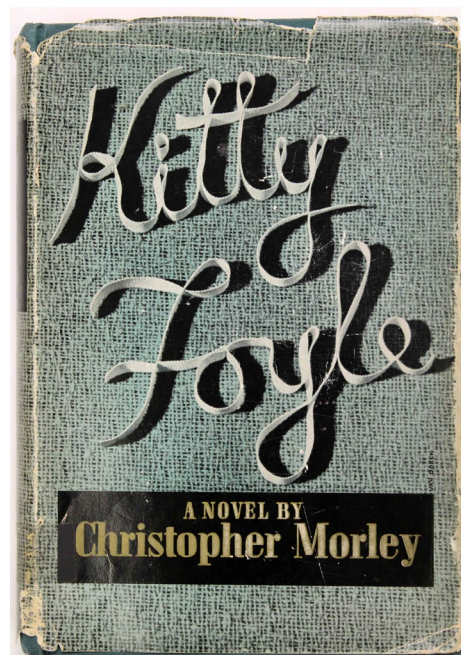
- Ginger Rogers, Vaudeville, 1927.
From *Ginger Rogers: My Story*



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.

Image (left) *LIFE Magazine* Cover, "Astaire and Rogers do the Yam." August 22, 1938. Gift of M. Padgitt.
Image (below left): *LIFE Magazine* Cover, "Ginger Rogers." December 9, 1940. Gift of M. Padgitt.
Image (below center): *Kitty Foyle* Novel by Christopher Morley, First Edition (1939) Gift of N. Johnston.
Image (below right): *LIFE Magazine* Cover, "Back on Broadway Ginger Rogers." November 5, 1951. Gift of N. Johnston.



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.

Image (right): Ginger Rogers as Dolly Levi, "Hello, Dolly!" 1965-67. Gift of R. Olden.

Images (below): "Hello, Dolly!" Playbill Interior Pages. 1965-67. Gift of N. Johnston.



DAVID MERRICK
presents
GINGER ROGERS
in
The N.Y. Critics' Circle Award Musical
HELLO, DOLLY!
Book by MICHAEL STEWART Music and Lyrics by JERRY HERMAN
Based on the Original Play by Thornton Wilder
with
PATTE FINLEY
ISABELLE FARRELL DANNY LOCKIN
MARY JO CATELIT BEVERLEE WEBB ROBERT HOCKNELL
SKEGGE MILLER ROBERT LEON
and
BILL MULLIKIN
Settings Designed by OLIVER SMITH Costumes by FREDDY WITTOP
Lighting by JEAN ROSENTHAL Dance and Musical Arrangements by PETER HOWARD
Musical Direction by SAUL SCHECHTMAN Vocal Arrangements by SHEPARD COLEMAN
Orchestrations by PHILIP J. LANG
Assistant to the Director LUCIA VICTOR
Dance Assistant LOWELL PERVIS
Original cast album by RCA VICTOR
Directed and Choreographed by
GOWER CHAMPION
A DAVID MERRICK and CHAMPION-FIVE INC. PRODUCTION
BEST MUSICAL OF THE YEAR
N.Y. Drama Critics' Prize and Tony Award





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.

Image (left): *LIFE* Magazine Cover, "Ginger Rogers." December 9, 1940. Gift of M. Padgitt.

Images (below): *The Ginger Rogers Show Booklet*; *Ginger Rogers: A Biography in Pictures and Story* by Lela E. Rogers. Gifts of M. Padgitt.

THE GINGER ROGERS SHOW

Starring
GINGER ROGERS

Directed
by
Onna White

Musical Director
Hal Borne

FEATURING
Michael Cody
Jeff Parker
Ron Steinbeck
Jim Taylor
and
Christie Westmoreland



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.

Ginger Rogers published her autobiography, *Ginger Rogers: My Story*, in 1991.

Image (right): *LIFE* Magazine Cover, "Ginger Rogers." December 9, 1940. Gift of M. Padgitt.

