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File photo

Donna McKechnie will play the mother of Ginger Rogers in *Ginger* at Otterbein College.

Otterbein musical taps into career of Ginger Rogers

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

Otterbein College Theatre will end its season with *Ginger*, a Broadway-bound musical about the life of Hollywood star Ginger Rogers.

Tony winner Donna McKechnie (*A Chorus Line*) will play Rogers' mother in the workshop production, which will have its world premiere in late May on the Westerville campus.

Choreographer-director Randy Skinner, a Columbus native and Tony nominee (*Ain't Broadway Grand*), will choreograph the show and play Fred Astaire, Rogers' debonair dancing partner in a string of romantic movie musicals. Skinner, an Ohio State University graduate, assisted Gower Champion with the dances for *42nd Street* and choreographed and directed the stage premiere of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *State Fair*.

Broadway veteran Marshall Mason (*Redwood Curtain*, *The Seagull*, *As Is*, *Fifth of July*) will direct the new musical, which will receive its first production at Otterbein. Mason's Broadway shows have won five Tony awards and 24 nominations, including five for best director.

Mason has described *Ginger* as a re-creation of "the glamour of Ginger Rogers" using the songs and dances that "she made famous during her legendary career." Rogers and Astaire introduced some of the most important songs of the 1930s. The show includes music by Irving Berlin, Vernon Duke, George and Ira Gershwin, Harry Warren, Sammy Fain, Mack Gordon and Vincent Youmans as well as songs that Rogers wrote.

After parting ways with Astaire, she won the best-actress Oscar in 1940 for *Kitty Foyle* and appeared regularly in films through the late 1950s, usually non-musicals. She returned to the spotlight in 1965 as a replacement star in the title role of *Hello, Dolly!* and later starred in *Mame* for a year in London.

Based on Rogers' autobiography, *My Story*, the musical is adapted for the stage by Paul Becker, Rogers' close friend, and Robert Kennedy, Rogers' personal manager for the last 15 years of her life. Becker and Kennedy are the producers of the show under the commercial banner of Tremont Productions. The executive producer is James Cardwell, associate producer for the original production of *Nunsense* and deputy director for the National Jazz Museum in Harlem.

The production is being billed as "developmental," with minimal scenery but full choreography and music. Audiences will be

invited to give feedback to the creative team.

Otterbein was selected as the site for the project, said artistic director Dennis Romer, because of its extensive experience in producing new plays and its national reputation for training outstanding musical-theater performers such as Dee Hoty, a frequent Tony awards nominee.

Ginger will be performed May 25-27 and June 1, 2 and 4 at Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Otterbein's seventh commissioned play, Carter Lewis' *Longevity Abbreviated: for those who don't have time*, was originally announced for those dates but has been postponed to June 22 as the first play of the summer season.

Tickets to *Ginger* can be reserved by calling the Otterbein box office at 614-823-1109 beginning May 15. For more information, call 614-823-1209.

Otterbein to stage world debut of 'Ginger'

By TONY GOINS

389

News & Public Opinion Reporter

Otterbein College Theatre is reshuffling its summer lineup to accommodate a brand-new musical.

The developmental musical *Ginger* will make its world debut Friday evening on an Otterbein stage.

The play is still in development, but Dennis Romer, artistic director of the Otterbein Department of Theatre and Dance, said it is Broadway-bound.

Ginger tells the life story of Ginger Rogers, said co-writer and producer Robert Kennedy. Kennedy was Rogers' manager and friend for the last 15 years of her life, and said Rogers gave the go-ahead for the biographical play before her death in 1995.

"She looked at me and said, 'Well, write it, darling,'" Kennedy said. He said Rogers originally planned to direct it.

The play came to Otterbein because of Romer's conversations with Randy Skinner, who choreographed the show and portrays Fred Astaire. Romer said Otterbein was interested in bringing Skinner, an award-winning director and choreographer, and *Ginger* was the project he was associated with.

Adding *Ginger* to the schedule means *Longevity* *Abbreviated: for those who don't have the time will be pushed back until June 22,* Romer said.

Staff was concerned about adding the new play, he said, but the presence of nationally-known, award-winning talent on the project helped allay fears.

Both Kennedy and co-writer Paul Becker are nationally known, Romer said, and director Marshall Mason has won multiple Obie Awards and his plays have won several Tony Awards.

Donna McKechnie, who plays Rogers' mother Lela, also is a Tony Award winner and is "regarded internationally as one of Broadway's foremost dancing stars," according to release on the play from the college.

Rogers' relationship with her mother is a major theme in

■ *Ginger* will be staged through June 4 in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., at Otterbein College. Call 823-1109 for ticket information.

the production, Mason said. Unlike many showbiz moms, Lela was a stabilizing force and voice of reason during Rogers' career.

Rogers began her showbiz career when she was 14, and Mason said Lela helped guide her ambition, and did not impose her own ambition on her daughter.

Ginger skips around Rogers' life, much as memory does, Mason said, with no stops for scenery changes.

The show begins with an interview with between Lela and gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, Kennedy said, and portrays many of her screen accomplishments as well as two failed marriages.

Rogers had many talents, Kennedy said. While best-known for her dancing collaborations with Astaire, she was also a songwriter, author, director, tennis ace and a good cook.

"There wasn't much she couldn't do," Kennedy said.

Rogers' many talents made casting her a challenge, Mason said. Rogers will be played by Nili Bassman.

"You're going to see someone who can really act, can really dance and can really

sing," Mason said of Bassman.

The rest of the parts will be portrayed by Otterbein College students. Romer said helping develop the play has been a learning experience for his students, and the students got good reviews from the outside people.

"I'll tell you, some of the kids you see here are more talented than the kids we see in New York," Kennedy said.

After Otterbein, the next step is England, where Kennedy hopes to get the play

produced on London's West Side. Broadway theaters are booked more than a year in advance, he said, and it's important to keep a show moving to build up a buzz.

Ginger will be performed at 8 p.m. Friday, Saturday and June 4; at 7:30 p.m. Sunday and June 1; Matinee shows at 2 p.m. also will be staged Sunday and June 4. All performances will be in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St. at Otterbein College in Westerville.

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Otterbein postpones 'Longevity' for world debut of 'Ginger'

By TONY GOINS

Gahanna News Reporter

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The show begins with an interview with between Lela and gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, Kennedy said, and portrays many of her screen accomplishments as well as two failed marriages.

The show also is a musical, Mason said, with some songs arising from the dialogue while others are reenactments of Rogers' performances.

The show uses many well-known songs by Gershwin and Berlin, Mason said, as well as *The Boy Who Used To Be You*, a song written by Rogers herself.

Rogers had many talents, Kennedy said. While best-known for her dancing collaborations with Astaire, she was also a songwriter, author,

director, tennis ace and a good cook.

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Ticket information is available at the Otterbein ticket office, 823-1109.

'Ginger' tale

By Michael Grossberg
Dispatch Theater Critic

*With an Otterbein production,
Broadway veterans hone musical
about Hollywood star*

Ginger Rogers struggled to become one of the most versatile and durable Hollywood stars of the 1930s and '40s. Best-remembered for her dancing with Fred Astaire in 10 movie musicals, she didn't receive respect as a dramatic actress until she won an Oscar in 1940 for *Kitty Foyle*.

Writers and producers Robert Kennedy and Paul Becker, who worked with Rogers toward the end of her life, have spent much of the past decade adapting her autobiography into a musical — called *Ginger*.

Broadway director Marshall Mason, Tony-winning actress Donna McKechnie and choreographer-dancer Randy Skinner are impressed enough with the potential to assume leading creative roles.

And producer James Cardwell, who has collected millions of dollars for a Harlem performing-arts center in New York and other projects, is hard at work raising \$12 million for a London run — the last major step before Broadway.

First, however, the team hopes to test and refine the script at Otterbein College, where a workshop production will open Friday.

"We needed a protective place that could allow a show to make mistakes," Cardwell said, "and see the mistakes corrected the next night."

Skinner, a Columbus native who has forged close ties with Otterbein through master classes, suggested the college setting.

"With so many youthful parts, the show could use the college students and be more cost-effective for the producers," he said. "And it gives us an opportunity to concentrate on how the musical numbers fit into the story."

After a "backers' audition" several years ago in Palm Springs, Calif., and a staged reading last year in New York, "We needed to do a workshop," Cardwell said.

"This allows us to see it in front of an audience, get a sense of pacing and timing, without the cost of the sets, costumes and full orchestrations."

Therefore, *Ginger* will be staged with minimal scenery but without any constraints on the singing, acting and dancing.

Skinner, a Tony-nominated choreographer (*Ain't Broadway Grand*), aims to conjure up the Astaire-Rogers dances, without copying them, in the five numbers he is choreographing for the two-act show.

He also plays Astaire, opposite Nili Bassman as the young Ginger.

"If you're smart, you try to capture the essence of



Randy Skinner
plays Fred Astaire



Donna McKechnie who plays the mother of Ginger Rogers,
in rehearsal with director Marshall Mason

**"We needed a protective place
that could allow a show to make mistakes, and
see the mistakes corrected the next night."**

JAMES CARDWELL
producer

■ Otterbein College Theatre will present a workshop production of *Ginger* at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 2 and 7:30 p.m. next Sunday — and 7:30 p.m. June 1, 8 p.m. June 2 and 2 p.m. June 4 — in Cowan Hall, 30 S. Grove St., Westerville. Tickets cost \$15 and \$18. For more information, call 614-823-1109.

GINGER from C1

the personality but you don't try to imitate," he said.

Although he never met Astaire, Skinner worked with other MGM stars, including Cyd Charisse, Ann Miller, Mickey Rooney — and Rogers. In 1985 he choreographed a Rogers-directed revival of *Babes in Arms* in Tarrytown, N.Y.

"She was gracious, fun and an icon with enormous star quality," he said.

Becker, executor of the Rogers estate, met the actress two decades ago, when he produced a National Public Radio show on her career. He traveled with her while she starred in *Anything Goes* and encouraged her to write an autobiography; he served as historical consultant to the book, which became the basis for *Ginger*.

"On her book tour," he said, "I joined her in D.C. and said, 'You know, if there's anyone's life who should be made into a musical, it's yours.' She said, 'Write it, darling.'"

Becker and Kennedy, her manager for the last 15 years of her life, began developing a script in 1994.

"We wanted to put in the conversations, the arguments, the good times, the bad times to make them real," Kennedy said. "Ginger often

was infuriated by the way some journalists would misquote her, so to read the first draft to her at her ranch in Oregon was quite a challenge. But afterward she simply said, 'Well, darling, I guess it's a go.'"

In 1995, Rogers agreed to direct but died a month later.

"Ginger was a total taskmaster and a great friend," Kennedy said, "a person who believed that anything she did had to entertain and a person who didn't believe in anything with nudity, foul language or violence."

In condensing her life into two acts, Becker and Kennedy focus on her joys and sorrows.

"No one can have everything," Becker said, "and Ginger's career cost her two marriages."

Not a linear biography, the *Ginger* script dwells on two turning points: the day Rogers was nominated for an Academy Award and the day she won.

Cardwell, like the other members of the creative team, was excited by the well-known score.

"Ginger, the major female star of her day, introduced songs that have become standards in the musical-theater genre," he said.

Among them: *But Not for Me*, *Cheek to Cheek*, *The Continental*, *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking*, *Embraceable You* and *They Can't Take That Away From Me*.

The show includes music by Rog-

ers, Irving Berlin, Vernon Duke, Sammy Fain, George and Ira Gershwin, Mack Gordon, Harry Warren and Vincent Youmans.

Still, Cardwell had to overcome initial doubts.

"My first gut reaction was 'Why am I going to come see this?' An 18- to 45-year-old audience may not have heard about Ginger."

In exploring her life, however, he found elements with contemporary appeal: the female struggle to survive in "a very male-dominated movie world" and an unusually congenial mother-daughter relationship.

The latter attracted McKechnie to the role of mother Leila.

"I've never seen this kind of relationship dramatized in quite this way in a musical," she said. "It was a lifetime love relationship, very symbiotic but not dysfunctional in the way of *Gypsy's* Mama Rose."

"Leila, a writer and journalist, who wrote film scripts before Ginger went to Hollywood, had tenacity and independence that she gave to Ginger. She was always there as a mother to pick Ginger up and protect her, but when Ginger put her foot down and said, 'I want this,' Leila would step back and give her confidence and support."

McKechnie — who in the 1960s,

at age 15, performed in summer stock with the "glamorous, statuesque" Rogers — made an unusual commitment: While appearing in *A Little Night Music* in Cincinnati, she traveled every Monday to the Columbus area to work on *Ginger*.

"It's so rare these days to be in on the ground floor of a new musical and to work with creative talents of such ability," she said.

The producers asked Mason to direct *Ginger* based on his expertise with serious drama, especially the Tony-winning plays of Lanford Wilson.

Despite having staged only two musicals, including an unlikely London version of *The Elephant Man*, he relished the prospect.

"With plays, the playwright is primary," he said. "With musicals, the director has to have the overall concept because it's not just the book, the music or the dance but how it all comes together."

Musicals, however, typically take longer to develop. "We've been working on this one for three years," he said. "It's taken us all this time to get the script into position."

Mason and the rest of the team, who expected to make changes after the workshop, have already begun revising.

On the first day of rehearsal, May 3, the director moved *Let Yourself Go*, a McKechnie song, from the second act to the first.

"It was my new idea to have Ginger sing it as the movie *Follow the Fleet* (1936) is being shot," he said. "It's hot and sexy, and it gets people involved in the show right at the top."

McKechnie will sing four songs, then, instead of five.

"She feels very good about it," Mason said, "because she had an intuition that it was not right for her to sing that song in the second act. And that's what made me start thinking that it shouldn't be hers; it should be Ginger's."

After the Otterbein run, *Ginger* will be rewritten and restaged further for a full workshop production in London.

Later, the producers hope to mount *Ginger* as a British touring show before opening in London by next spring.

"Ginger was truly loved in England," Cardwell said, "and Donna McKechnie is a major London star."

Meanwhile, McKechnie, who won a Tony for *A Chorus Line*, is enjoying her first experience working closely with college students.

"Everybody is coming from a different point of view and bringing their own energy," she said. "The eagerness of the kids is contagious; they're not jaded yet."

"For people who want to develop musicals or plays, I think this is the future."

General Cinema

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 FREQUENCY 1:55 4:35 7:20 9:50 PG-13 STEREO
 I DREAMED OF AFRICA 1:45 4:25 7:00 9:30 PG-13 DOLBY
 LOVE AND BASKETBALL 1:45 4:30 7:10 9:45 PG-13 DIGITAL
 READY TO RUMBLE 2:00 4:50 7:15 9:40 PG-13 DOLBY
 FINAL DESTINATION 2:10 4:50 7:05 9:30 R DOLBY
 NEXT FRIDAY 2:00 4:55 7:25 9:50 R STEREO

NORTHLAND 8 447-0066

DINOSAUR 11:00 1:00 3:05 5:10 7:15 9:20 PG DOLBY
 ROAD TRIP 1:40 4:40 7:10 9:25 R STEREO
 BATTLEFIELD EARTH 1:30 4:15 7:00 9:40 PG-13 THX DIGITAL
 FREQUENCY 7:05 9:45 PG-13 DOLBY
 GLADIATOR 1:30 4:45 8:10 R STEREO
 LOVE AND BASKETBALL 1:20 4:20 7:00 9:40 PG-13 DOLBY
 THE ROAD TO EL DORADO 1:45 4:35 P.M. PG DOLBY
 ROMEO MUST DIE 1:35 4:25 7:05 9:35 R STEREO
 FINAL DESTINATION 7:20 9:30 R STEREO

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 VIRGIN SUICIDES (R) 11:45-5:30 7:30-9:30
 MY DOG SKIP (PG) 1:35-3:50
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