

Back-story, vulnerability, and The Great American Songbook featured in "Ella: The Musical"

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Michael J. Solender has written over 100 feature articles for regional and national publications. His weekly Neighborhoods column for The Charlotte Observer's Sunday edition has run since 2008. Solender's work has appeared in *SouthPark* magazine, *Richmond Style Weekly*, Charlotte ViewPoint, and the Charlotte Jewish News. An avid blogger, his commentary has been showcased at CLT Blog, Like The Dew, Journal of Southern Culture and Politics and his own blog, Not From Here, Are You? You can find more of his work at michaelljwrites.com.

Ella: The Musical

February 11-13

\$39.50 - \$69.50 at the Blumenthal's Knight Theater February 11-13.

Information and tickets available [here](#).

Tina Fabrique paused, and then reflected about the responsibility she felt portraying the iconic American singer and heralded "First lady of song," Ella Fitzgerald, in the critically trumpeted *Ella: The Musical*. "It's important for me to capture her spirit and soul," noted Fabrique in a silken and throaty voice, warm and rich like a creamy cup of hot chocolate. "I've approached the role as an actress rather than a singer because I want to show the vulnerable and often hidden, personal side of this great lady."

Fabrique was holed up in her home in New York City after one of the city's latest snowstorms. She chatted with me recently about launching the national tour of the musical drama in Charlotte after it played regionally off and on for the past several years. "We haven't played extensively in the south," said



Fabrique. "Our producer Eva Price has a relationship with the Blumenthal and thought Charlotte would be a great place to launch our tour, as North Carolina has such a rich musical history."

The show weaves myth, memory, and music as it tells the uplifting and poignant story of one of the greatest jazz/pop vocalists of 20th-century music. Set in 1966 in Nice, France, the play follows Fitzgerald and her accompanying musicians and manager over a rehearsal and performance of one of the most important concerts of her career. As she jams with the musicians (including famed trumpeter Louis Armstrong) and gets ready to meet the audience, Fitzgerald reflects on her life, her secrets, and the love of music that made her soar.

More than one dozen of Fitzgerald's most famous hits, including "A Tisket, A Tasket," "How High the Moon," "That Old Black Magic," and "They Can't Take that Away from Me," are showcased in a tour-de-force that has left many who knew Fitzgerald personally overwhelmed. "When we performed in San Diego, [the jazz saxophonist] James Moody, who knew Ella and recorded and performed with her, told me [that] I didn't play Ella – I *was* her.' It was very inspiring to hear. After a performance he had some of the cast to his home, where he played unreleased recordings of Ella with Dizzy Gillespie for us and reminisced about her. He gave the show his personal blessing. That gesture meant a great deal."

When the show was initially conceived by Rob Ruggiero in 2005, it carried the subtitle *Off the Record*, both a play on words and the hint that theatergoers would discover little-known glimpses into Fitzgerald's story and a personal look into what made her tick. "That is still the case," said Fabrique. "The audience will learn things that may surprise them about Fitzgerald." For example, when Fitzgerald debuted on the stage at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, she was initially slated to appear as a dancer. Fitzgerald, according to Fabrique, was establishing herself as a Lindy Hopper in dance halls across Harlem. When the dance duo that preceded her on stage that evening brought down the house with their act, Fitzgerald didn't want to follow them as a dancer, so she sang instead. "She was an incredible talent," said Fabrique who also sang on the Apollo Stage at a fabled amateur night and captured the evening's crown. "I had the chance to see her perform live when I was 12 years old. I remember going with my mother and being absolutely captivated. We are telling the story of a magnificent artist with this show. People will also see the girlish and more personal, caring side to this legendary woman. It is really a show that touches established and emerging fans of her music. It is a special evening of theater and song."

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Photo: Tina Fabrique as Ella Fitzgerald

Photo Credit: Ed Krieger, the Laguna Playhouse

Arts editor: Jeff Jackson