

Goodspeed's 'Chasing Rainbows' Follows Judy Garland's Road To Oz



Ruby Rakos plays Judy Garland, and Michael Wartella is Mickey Rooney in "Chasing Rainbows." (Brad Horrigan/The Hartford Courant)

"Everybody knows what happens to [Judy Garland](#) after 'The Wizard of Oz.' But nobody knows what happened *before*," says Tina Marie Casamento Libby.

That kind of questioning spirit is right up there with: "If happy little bluebirds fly across the rainbow, why oh why can't I?"

Wanting to share the story of a young, idealistic, supremely talented Judy Garland is what led Libby to create the musical "Chasing Rainbows — The Road to Oz."

The show began preview performances at the Goodspeed Opera House last week and runs through Nov. 27.

The early chapters of Garland's life story may not be as familiar as her untimely end (from what the coroner called an "incautious self-overdosage" of Seconal at the age of 47). But the show's score is more memorable than either. All the songs in "Chasing Rainbows" are revered pop standards from the first few decades of the 20th century. The songs are either a direct part of the Judy Garland legend, like "Zing! Went the Strings of My Heart" or "Dear Mr. Gable," or underscore some of the main themes of Garland's life and work.



Michael Wartella is Mickey Rooney and Ruby Rakos is Judy Garland in "Chasing Rainbows." (Brad Horrigan/The Hartford Courant)

The show's title neatly suggests "Over the Rainbow" but comes from the 1917 show tune "I'm Always Chasing Rainbows," which Judy Garland crooned in her 1941 movie "Ziegfeld Girl." Libby insisted on including the song's verses in the show as well as its memorable choruses. Sung by Kevin Earley, the actor playing Judy's father Frank Gumm, it begins:

At the end of the rainbow there's happiness/And to find it how often I've tried/But my life is a race just a wild goose chase/And my dreams have always been denied

A good part of the show concerns Frank Gumm's thwarted plans for stardom and security for himself, and his desire for his daughters not to be denied their own dreams. "Chasing Rainbows" chronicles young Judy's rise from the vaudeville circuit to Hollywood. As Libby describes the show, "Act One feels like Kansas. Act Two feels like Oz."



Before Judy Garland was "Judy Garland" she was Frances Gumm. Clockwise from bottom: Ruby Rakos as Frances Gumm, Lucy Horton as Mary Jane Gumm and Andrea Laxton as Virginia Gumm. (Brad Horrigan/The Hartford Courant)

Tina Marie Casamento Libby enlisted her husband, composer David Libby, to create special musical arrangements that make the score fluid. She found another ideal collaborator in Marc Acito, an eclectic writer whose previous work includes the comic novel "How I Paid for College," the play "Birds of a Feather" and the musical "Allegiance."

"Even though I'd been working on this for seven years by then," Casamento Libby says, "when Marc joined the team in 2014 everything took off."

"Chasing Rainbows" was staged last year at the Flat Rock Playhouse in North Carolina. Rehearsal time there was limited, so there was no time for extensive rewriting or experimenting. The Goodspeed process has been longer and fuller, with changes still occurring during the preview period.

Playing Judy

Ruby Rakos originated the role of Judy Garland at Flat Rock and plays the starlet again at Goodspeed. Libby says she discovered Rakos at Broadway Artists Alliance, where Casamento Libby has been a teaching artist.



Michael Wartella, playing Mickey Rooney, performs in a dress rehearsal of "Chasing Rainbows." (Brad Horrigan/The Hartford Courant)

"She was still a teenager, and I was a judge," Casamento Libby said. "She just naturally had that feel. She sounded like Judy Garland. She has the same nose, the same mouth. It was uncanny to me. We'd planned to do a national search, and I hadn't even been looking at that moment, but there she was."

Others were auditioned for the role besides Rakos, just to be sure — "tons of other people," Casamento Libby says. "She earned it."

"When I asked Ruby what she knew about Judy Garland," Libby continues, "she said 'I only know about the *old* Judy Garland, and she scares me.'"

Rakos, in a phone interview during a break in rehearsals earlier this month, confirms that fear. "But now, I see this girl who just wants to keep her family together."

"When I was first called in to audition for Tina Marie and Marc Acito, I had about three weeks notice. So I read the biography 'Judy Garland' by Ann Edwards, then watched 'Love Finds Andy Hardy' and 'Everybody Sing.' Oh, and 'Pigskin Parade,' her first film for [20th Century] Fox. Of course I had already seen 'The Wizard of Oz.' Now I have all of John Fricke's books."

Fricke, whom Libby also cites as a major Judy Garland resource, is the author of "Judy Garland: World's Greatest Entertainer," "Judy Garland: A Portrait in Art & Anecdote," "Judy: A Legendary Film Career" and several books about "The Wizard of Oz."

Once she'd gotten the role, Rakos says she "studied the Judy Garland vibrato, her famous cascades, the way she loses consonants in certain phrases but not in others. I was still in high school when I got this, so I listened to her music on the bus."

"Now, I don't have to think about it. It's there. When I'm singing certain notes, certain songs, I'm taken over. It's like a black-out."

"I'm feeling really good about this," Rakos reveals. "It's a similar atmosphere to Little Rock" — both theaters are in rather rural locations — "but I'm way less stressed out than last time. I feel taken care of."

There's no place like Goodspeed.

"CHASING RAINBOWS — THE ROAD TO OZ" is at the Goodspeed Opera House, 6 Main St., East Haddam through Nov. 27. Performances are Wednesday at 2 and 7:30 p.m.; Thursday at 7:30 p.m., with added 2 p.m. matinees after Oct. 20; Friday at 8 p.m.; Saturday at 3 and 8 p.m.; and Sunday at 2 and 6:30 p.m. Tickets cost \$39 to \$84. 860-873-8668, goodspeed.org.