



'Ella' at The Meadow Brook portrays the gifted and victimized icon of music

[REVIEW](#) June 07, 2024 David Kiley

ROCHESTER HILLS, MI—"Ella: First Lady of Song" is a theatrical tribute to the legendary jazz vocalist Ella Fitzgerald, a production playing now at The Meadow Brook Theatre here that tries to capture the essence of her life and music. This show, set against the backdrop of the 1960s, and specifically returns to a performance she gave in 1966, takes the audience on an intimate journey through Fitzgerald's career, personal and tragic struggles, and triumphs.

From the moment the curtain rises, the production tries to immerse the audience in the vibrant world of jazz. The set design, by Kirk A. Domer, featuring a classic jazz club ambiance with dim lighting and a live band, creates an authentic and atmosphere. The band comprised of top-notch musicians provides a rich musical backdrop that enhances the storytelling.

The actress portraying Ella Fitzgerald, Detroit-native Freda Payne, has been performing the role since it opened in 2012. Her ability to channel Fitzgerald's music endeavors to create a warmth, charm, and complexity of Ella's personality, bringing to life not just the legend but the woman behind the music. Her renditions of classics like "Summertime," "A-Tisket, A-Tasket," and "Mack the Knife" are very well done, filled with the same emotional depth that characterized Fitzgerald's recordings. Dionne Hendricks is Music Director.

The narrative of the show intertwines Fitzgerald's musical achievements with her sometimes difficult and even tragic personal journey. The script provides a balanced mix of dialogue, monologue, and musical numbers. It touches on key moments in Fitzgerald's life, such as her breakthrough at the Apollo Theater, her struggles with racial discrimination, her enduring passion for music, as well as the sexual abuse she endured as a teenager at the hands of her stepfather after her Mother died.

Coming from a broken family and abusive upbringing, family was extremely important to Fitzgerald, and she kept her chosen relatives close throughout her life. Her cousin Georgiana Henry (Nicole Powell) and her half-sister Frances Da Silva (Debra Walton) are the glue in her life as she tended to fall for the wrong men. She was married to legendary bass player Ray Brown, with whom she adopted a son, the child of her niece. She was married at least one other time, but to a con man; the marriage was annulled. Eric Coles plays her manager Norman Granz, as well as her stepfather Joe Da Silva.

One of the most striking aspects of "Ella: First Lady of Song" is its ability to evoke a sense of nostalgia while remaining relevant to contemporary audiences. The show not only pays homage to Fitzgerald's legacy but also highlights themes of resilience, perseverance, and the transformative power of music. It serves as a poignant reminder of the impact that Ella Fitzgerald had on the world of music and beyond.

Directed by Lee Summers, Ms. Payne has owned the role of *Ella* in this show. An accomplished jazz and cabaret singer since the early 1970s, Ms. Payne is now 81. The structure of the show can feel a bit awkward at times because Ms. Payne plays Ella in flashback episodes of her life in the 30s and 40s when Fitzgerald was in her 20s and 30s. It begs some creative allowances to be granted by the audience.

Ms. Walton, who plays both young Ella and Frances, has a great set of singing pipes for the early scenes. There is a misfire of sorts in the first act, though, as Ms. Walton plays the part a bit over-the-top as if she is in *The Little Rascals*. This awkwardness comes to light especially when Ella's sexual abuse is brought to light.

Ella Fitzgerald is an icon. And perhaps not surprisingly, she was a greatly conflicted person, and frequently did not reveal the difficult details of her life when she was alive—including being jailed in her late teens and serially raped by prison guards during her stay.

While this *Ella show*, around on tour off and on for 12 years, is a good, solid start to telling her story, there is at least one new show in development, by actress/director Anna Deavere Smith, that promise to go deeper with multiple actresses playing Fitzgerald at different stages of her life.

Ella: First Lady of Song plays at The Meadow Brook through June 23.