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In Opposite Directions

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Playhouse's *The Last Five Years* a worthy addition to modern musical canon

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The best moments of modern musical theater -- and truly theater itself -- are those that are the most difficult to watch. The moments of broken hearts. Of dreams dashed. Of promises failed. Of love lost.



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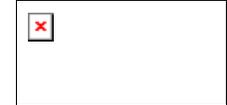
Never is this more obvious than in the new Cincinnati Playhouse production *The Last Five Years*, the gimmick of which is watching the same couple relive their relationship in different sequences. His is chronological, from beginning to end. Hers is in reverse order.

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So is it any wonder that his best moments are at show's end and hers in the beginning, when the relationship is all but dead and the only thing the characters can do is recall -- if only rhetorically -- why it came to this? Mining those life-moments and emotions on stage are the most challenging and therefore make the best theater.

Photo By Sandy Underwood

Jamie (D.B. Bonds, left) and Catherine (Heather Ayers) prove there really are two sides to every love story in *The Last Five Years*.



Written and composed by Jason Robert Brown, *The Last Five Years* is a two-person song cycle that follows the love life of Jamie (played by D.B. Bonds) and Catherine (Heather Ayers). The defining moments of every relationship are there: their first date, the moment they know it's love, making a commitment, dealing with time apart, making compromises, breaking away and finally the bitter denouement. Brown, who previously forged new ground in musical theater with *Songs for a New World*, decided to shake up the traditional telling by fracturing the narrative line, starting her at the end and him at the beginning and seeing them intersect only on their wedding day.

On face, it looks like a contrived device. But doing so gives the piece a fresh energy it wouldn't have had otherwise. After all, it's the contrast of her heart-wrenching opening songs with his cheerfully optimistic start that keeps the audience guessing, song to song, what truly brought this once-happy couple to this place.

Presented fairly simply on the small Shelterhouse stage and ably directed by Dennis

Courtney, the show succeeds based almost entirely on its performances. Rather than getting in the way of the beautiful music (from the small but tight full orchestra) and the poetry of Brown's lyrics with massive tech and an unwieldy set, this production instead gives the performers and musicians just enough of what they need to tell the story. The turntable stage -- while it created a few interesting staging moments -- was a notable exception and seemed ultimately unnecessary.

Bonds and Ayers buoy the show with their performances, albeit through two distinct strengths. Ayers has the harder road to hoe, by far, starting the show in Catherine's darkest emotional place and then working backward through her motivations and natural energies. As such, she's at her best when she lets the audience into her sadness and confusion, notably in the opener "Still Hurting" and more so in the desperate plea "See I'm Smiling," as she tries in vain to hang on to something she knows isn't there. Her strong voice and ability to convey Catherine's anguish through music serve the show well.

Bonds' strength is his ability to tell a story through song. His voice is crisp and pleasant but perhaps not as strong as Ayers'. No matter. He uses what he has very well, especially in lighter numbers like "The Schmueel Song" and "A Miracle Would Happen," when he riffs on the temptations that immediately follow wedding vows.

Both actors handle the comedic moments in the show well, which is welcome given the less-than-cheerful overall direction of the piece. In particular, Ayers' "Summer in Ohio" and "Climbing Uphill" are laugh-out-loud funny and set the audience up perfectly for the dramatic turn around the corner.

It could be easy to write off the character of Jamie as unsympathetic, until Bonds' earnest performance during "If I Didn't Believe in You." At once, Jamie is redeemed, and you realize that the show isn't interested in who's the good guy or bad guy when a relationship fails. In the end, it really doesn't matter.

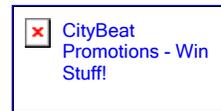
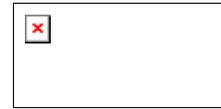
Bonds continues his strong finish with "Nobody Needs to Know," as the audience discovers he has given up on his marriage. The stream-of-consciousness song is that perfect peek into what someone is thinking when they're doing something else. In this case, as Jamie dresses after an extramarital tryst, he reminds himself what led him there yet he can't wholly forgive himself for it.

The perfect moment of juxtaposition, arguably why the show was written as it was, occurs in the final scene. Jamie concludes, with heavy heart, "All I could do was love you hard, and let you go," as Catherine -- awaiting their first date -- gazes through a nearby window, smiling and hopeful. Ready to fall in love.

The Last Five Years is raw musical theater. Emotionally naked. Introspective. Soul-searching through song.

This isn't "we are in love and we're going to sing about it, throw a bail of hay on the stage and call it *Oklahoma*" musical theater. The golden age of musicals was, at its best, about finding love. Inspiring, uplifting, love-conquers-all euphoria.

The modern musical, at its best, is about love lost. And it has the guts to end on a sour note. Or an ambiguous note. Or, in *The Last Five Years*, on no note at all. Just a quick, telling glance between two people who were once hopelessly in love but who now are headed in opposite directions. **Grade: A**



THE LAST FIVE YEARS is performed at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park through June 19.

E-mail [Rodger Pille](#)

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