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## Musical an impressive emotional success

*By Jerry Stein**Post staff reporter*

The experience of Jason Robert Brown's "The Last Five Years" is like drinking a mixed brew of champagne and castor oil.

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The two-character musical, which opened Thursday night and closes the 2004-2005 at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, is a rather ordinary look at a bittersweet five-year relationship between a writer Jamie (D.B. Bonds) and Cathy (Heather Ayers).

But Brown's music, some zesty performances and the concept of telling the story make production notable.

There's no book.

The entire musical story is told in a series of songs or what the theater calls a "song cycle" with no intermission.

The songs rise to promontories of exaltation to pits of pain.

"The Last Five Years," smoothly directed by Cincinnati-born Dennis Courtney, uses the traditionally unwieldy convention of time manipulation to present its story.

It's a difficult concept that frequently goes awry as it does in Stephen Sondheim-George Furth's "Merrily We Roll Along."

Sondheim's 1981 musical tells a show biz story beginning at the end and ending at the beginning.

The technique serves to sabotage itself of dramatic interest.

Brown's time manipulation is more successful in "The Last Five Years."

Certainly, emotional effects are achieved.

But tricks with time probably are not absolutely necessary here as a way to involve the audience in Jamie and Cathy's relationship.

Brown initially shows Cathy's romance at its sorrowful ending, then she moves back toward its beginning.

Jamie's version starts with him in an elated mood and glorifying Cathy.

Through Betsy Adams' careful lighting, we realize the only time the two meets is when their experiences bisect at their wedding.

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We know that they are actually conscious of each other because director Courtney has them touch and kiss each other here.

At all other times, the player who is in shadow represents the memory of the other actor found in full light.

This presence of the "memory figure" gives a certain joyousness or poignancy to the singer's moods depending on the tone of the song she/he is singing.

The problem between Jamie and Cathy comes down to one of the most common bogeymen to haunt a marriage - career conflict.

Jamie's a successful writer, almost too successful as he sings "Moving Too Fast."

Conversely, Cathy, an actress, is struggling.

She's not a star on Broadway but is relegated performing in stock.

She comically sings of the horrors of being "40 miles east of Cincinnati" in "A Summer in Ohio."

As a result of their unequal status on the success scale, Cathy becomes more demanding on Jamie's time.

And she ultimately doesn't accept his faith in her when he sings the affecting ballad, "If I Didn't Believe in You."

Their break-up occurs when Jamie realizes Cathy can't be reached. Failure has made her insular to his proffered love.

Ayers and Bonds have forceful voices that splendidly reflect the intense moods from jubilation to agony in this relationship such as Cathy's "Still Hurting."

But the pair also shade their voices for tender, sensitive ranges reflected with considerable loveliness in Jamie's "The Schmueel Song."

Further underscoring the romantic and depressive side of this fateful relationship/marriage is how Brown orchestrates the play.

The music, composed for a small orchestra, achieves aching emotional depth in wrenching passages for Mari Thomas' violin.

There, too, are the dark, melancholic colors from Isaac Watras Mark Cosmala's sonorous cellos.

"Five Years Later" shows limitations in its anatomy of a marriage-gone south.

But the passion this couple expends, in at least trying to love, endows this musical with impressive emotional success.

**THE LAST FIVE YEARS**, *Thursday night at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, Eden Park, Mount Adams, performances Tuesdays-Sundays through June 19; tickets, \$44-\$52; call (513) 421-3888 for information or reservations..*

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