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CINCINNATI

by Scott Cain

The Last Five Years

This time last year, everyone at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park was celebrating the recent announcement that the respected theater would be receiving the 2004 Regional Theatre Tony Award. Still basking in the glow of this wonderful recognition, Playhouse finishes its first post-Tony season with *The Last Five Years*, Jason Robert Brown's deeply emotional two-person musical chronicling the rise and fall of a relationship. Playhouse's production isn't perfect, but it features two talented performers, worthwhile direction, and a professional rendering.

The Last Five Years tells the story of Jamie, a young writer who becomes a big hit quickly, and Cathy, a struggling actress. These two young adults meet, fall in love, marry, strain to deal with differing levels of career success, and ultimately see their relationship disintegrate.

Jason Robert Brown is one of the most successful of the newer crop of musical theater songwriters heralded as the next generation of Broadway songsmiths. His scores for *Parade* and *Songs For A New World* are greatly respected and his work for *The Last Five Years* may be his strongest to date. Brown displays the ability to write music that is sophisticated and modern, yet also highly accessible and melodic. His lyrics manage to say a lot without excess words, and to resonate with honesty, humor, and pain when appropriate. The songs for Jamie are generally better than those for Cathy, but each role has some great numbers. Jamie's humorous "Shiksa Goddess" and "A Miracle Would Happen," driving "Moving Too Fast," and unique "The Schmueel Song" (which playfully combines traditional Jewish and soulful sounding melodies together) are all brilliant songs. The best pieces for Cathy are her song after the couple's breakup, "I'm Still Hurting," and "Goodbye Until Tomorrow," which shows the exciting possibilities of a new relationship.

This musical is unique in its method of storytelling. Jamie's story is told in normal chronological order, from when they meet until his decision to end the marriage. At the same time, Cathy's tale progresses backwards, starting from her heartbreak in acknowledging their relationship's end, and continuing back in time to the joy and

excitement of discovering new love. The only time the pair sings together is at their wedding, when the two stories intersect. Though some confusion can stem from this format, it also provides opportunities to compare varying perspectives of the same situation, and creates a desire in the audience to know the other side of the story, which they must wait to hear. There is sufficient humor to keep the show from being a downer, and the feelings and emotional roller coaster dramatized here seem fully authentic. This may have to do with the fact that the show is said to be loosely based on the failure of Brown's own first marriage to an actress. Regardless, the material packs an emotional punch that is universal to anyone who has endured the ups and downs of a difficult relationship.

The Last Five Years requires two performers who must invest themselves fully into their roles. As Jamie, B.D. Bonds starts out a little slow, missing some of the necessary humor and manic energy in his first couple of songs. He also displays a tendency to use backphrasing in his vocal delivery of several songs. However, Bonds recovers and supplies impressive renditions of "The Schmuel Song" and "Nobody Needs to Know," and a solid characterization. Heather Ayers sings quite well (save some minor pitch problems in a few of the show's later numbers), and she convincingly conveys both the enthusiastic optimism and frustrated anger of Cathy.

Director Dennis Courtney misses a few opportunities to clarify the backward/forward storytelling, but nails the tone and pacing of the piece. Courtney also furnishes smooth transitions between songs. Musical Director Ed Goldschneider leads a first-rate six-piece orchestra.

The small performance space available is used well by set designer Brian C. Mehring. A turntable, windows, and rose pedals are prominent throughout, and several props and set pieces help establish the setting. Costume Designer David Kay Mickelsen also helps to match the diverting stories when necessary, but his opening costumes for Jamie aren't really appropriate to the character at that time in his life. The lighting by Betsy Adams has some bright moments as well.

The material for *The Last Five Years* manages to be both superbly entertaining and emotionally devastating. In its staging at the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, the impact of this show shines through both because of and despite the strengths and weaknesses of its cast, director, and design staff. The show can be seen through June 19, 2004 at the Thompson Shelterhouse Theatre. For additional information and tickets, call the box office at (513) 421-3888.

-- [Scott Cain](#)

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