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## Time-crisscrossing 'Years' superb

**Kyle Lawson**

 The Arizona Republic  
 Mar. 8, 2005 12:00 AM

*The Last Five Years*, the excellent Actors Theatre production at the Herberger Theater Center, begins as it intends to finish, though you might say the same is true in reverse.

Jason Robert Brown's elegantly crafted two-character musical is unique, at least for now. It not only tells its story in a straightforward chronological manner, it tells it from ending to beginning. Both accounts occur simultaneously. There's no dozing off during this one.

Cathy (Stephanie Likes) opens the show by revealing that her marriage to Jamie (Jared Bradshaw) is over. A few minutes later, Jamie relives their first encounter. And so it goes, Cathy moving backward in time to that meeting, Jamie moving forward to the crash. Only once, at their wedding, are they on the same track. advertisement

It sounds confusing, but it's not, thanks to the meticulous direction of Dennis Courtney and Brown's expressive songs. Once the audience understands the process, the framework becomes a metaphor for the relationship between two people who love each other deeply but never are in the same place at the same time.

The heart tugs for Likes and Bradshaw, who couldn't be better in their portrayals of the ill-fated couple. She has the harder time of it chronologically, moving from despondent to optimistically cheerful. He has the task of making the audience understand why Jamie finally gives up on the relationship. Both succeed admirably.

There is strong support from a five-member combo led by the show's musical director, Jonathan Ivie. Paul Black's lighting design is invaluable in keeping the audience aware of time and place, and Desiree Maurer's setting is a metaphor in its own right, a wall that soars into the rigging but crumbles into broken bricks at its base.

But the lynchpin here is Brown. He's been called the heir apparent to Stephen Sondheim. On the evidence of *The Last Five Years*, that seems fair. He shares Sondheim's ability to express complex human emotions in music that challenges the heart as well as the intellect. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Jamie's *If I Didn't Believe in You*, given a show-stopping performance by Bradshaw. The lyrics not only encapsulate what went wrong but express a bittersweet yearning for what might have been.

Brilliant is not too strong a word.

Reach the reporter at [kyle.lawson@arizonarepublic.com](mailto:kyle.lawson@arizonarepublic.com) or (602) 444-8947.

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### 'The Last Five Years'

Reviewed Sunday at the Herberger Theater Center, 222 E. Monroe St. Phoenix. Continues through March 20. \$22.50-\$42. (602) 252-8497.

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