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## In 'Five Years,' time and love run forward, backward

Kyle Lawson  
The Arizona Republic  
Feb. 27, 2005 12:00 AM

Gimmicks are good, when they work. Take fooling around with time. Theater loves that one.

Harold Pinter pulled it off in *Betrayal*. He began his story of a wife's extramarital romance at the end of the affair and followed it back to the start. Audiences never had a problem figuring out what was happening.

Stephen Sondheim didn't have the knack. His musical *Merrily We Roll Along* tried the same approach. Audiences would have none of it. Despite numerous rewrites, the show never has been successful.

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Jason Robert Brown (*Parade, Songs for a New World*) often is called the heir apparent to Sondheim. Maybe that's why he felt he could succeed where his mentor failed. Better yet, he would go him one better.

In Brown's musical *The Last Five Years*, which is being staged by Actors Theatre, a couple relive their courtship, marriage and divorce from finish to start and from start to finish. The woman begins her story at the end, while the man tells his from the beginning. The stories coincide only once - at the wedding.

"To the best of my knowledge, that's never been done before," music director Jonathan Ivie says. "Every song flips your perspective. But I don't think it's hard to follow. The music takes you right where you need to be."

Brown, 35, wrote *The Last Five Years* in 2001, loosely basing it on the breakup of his marriage. Although the critics raved, the show received a lukewarm welcome in New York. That hasn't kept it from becoming a hit in regional theaters.

In the Actors Theatre production, directed by Dennis Courtney, Stephanie Likes plays Cathy, a struggling actress who falls in love with Jamie, a successful author (played by New York actor Jared Bradshaw). She isn't able to cope with his success; he cheats on her. The relationship ends messily.

Simultaneously moving two ways in time is tough, Courtney says: "It's always easier to go from beginning to end. That's how we move on in our lives. As a director of a straightforward story, you chart the ups and downs, the conflicts, the decisions made and the resolutions. In this one, you have to figure out how to make the story credible to the audience no matter when it's taking place."

The audience also has its task.

"This isn't a mystery," Courtney says. "You know right at the start that the relationship ends badly. You have to sit back and love the journey of these characters and not judge them. It's not important whether he's right or she's right. Relationships fail, no matter how hard people work to make them succeed. It's having the relationship that's the important thing."

For Bradshaw, the trick comes in keeping everything straight in his own head. At the beginning of the show he's on top of the world, while Likes' character is in the pits of depression. That means one minute he's Gene Kelly dancing in the rain and the next (because it then becomes her story), he's yelling at his wife.

"For me, the job is to make the audience like Jamie, and if that's not possible, at least to understand why he does what he does," Bradshaw says. "The audience

Related

### 'The Last Five Years'

WHERE: Herberger Theater Center, 222 E. Monroe St., Phoenix.

WHEN: Friday through March 20. Times vary.

ADMISSION: \$22.50-\$42. Ticketmaster: (480) 784-4444 or <http://www.ticketmaster.com/>

DETAILS: (602) 252-8497.

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shouldn't take sides. There are two stories here, and both of them are valid.

Likes thinks the finish-to-start progress of her story line is a good thing, and not just because it makes a good metaphor for a couple who are never at the same place at the same time in their relationship.

"It's a different take," she says. "If you had two people telling you the identical story, it could be boring. The beauty of this show is that you've never seen anything like it before. It makes you pay attention."

**Reach the reporter at (602) 444-8947.**

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