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Love is Bittersweet over 'The Last Five Years'

Playhouse in the Park journeys through a relationship in Jason Robert Brown's song cycle.

By [Allyson Jacob](#)

A little gem is waiting for Greater Cincinnati audiences at the Playhouse in the Park (PIP). Jason Robert Brown's "The Last Five Years" will play for four weeks beginning Thursday, May 26, with previews beginning Saturday, May 21.

Brown's two-person musical follows the lives of Jamie and Catherine, a young couple whose relationship has ended at the beginning of the play. In a modern twist of time, however, the two characters move in different directions through their story: Jamie starts at the beginning of his relationship and moves forward towards its end, while Cathy begins at the end and moves in reverse, contemplating and commenting all the while. Structurally, the musical makes for an interesting and challenging production. Vocally, the score calls for singers at the top of their musical theatre game. The Playhouse production appears to have the elements in place to make the run a memorable one.

Dennis Courtney, an Anderson High School and University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music graduate, directs "The Last Five Years" for the Playhouse. Prior to the current production, Courtney directed "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change" as part of the 2000 PIP season, and some "200 shows in between," he laughs. "I went to CCM for acting, and moved to New York to work as an actor. Somewhere along the way, I found that directing was my true calling. So I've been directing for 15 years."

According to Courtney, the key to the production coming together occurs at the characters' wedding. "It's the perfect moment," he explains. It's also the only time that the couple is on stage together in the same moment in time, which can be challenging for both actors and audience to absorb. To aid in understanding the time transitions that are in the script, Courtney has opted to allow the "memory" of one character to appear on stage as the other one sings. "But," he says, "it will be clear to the audience through lighting which character is lit in the present and which is lit in memory."

The set design for "The Last Five Years" will also aid in conveying the passage of time, both forwards and backwards. "We're using a donut turntable onstage," Courtney states, "that alternatively moves the set and the actors. The turntable can move in two different directions. So when Cathy moves, the turntable moves counterclockwise, to represent backwards in time. When Jamie moves, it turns clockwise." It's a subtle detail that should lend itself well to the actors' and audience's subconscious.

Prior to the Playhouse production, Courtney directed the same show at the Actors' Theatre in Phoenix in March, with a different cast and in a different type of space. "The Phoenix production was mounted on a proscenium stage," he explains. "This production will be on a ¾ stage—there's nowhere to hide."

Not that his actors will need to hide. Cathy will be sung by Heather Ayers who appeared in "Beehive" at the Playhouse in 2001, and whom Courtney previously directed in "I Love You..." Jamie will be portrayed by D.B. Bonds, a newcomer to the Playhouse stage who was a part of the off-Broadway production of "The Last Five Years" directed by Daisy Prince.



Just The Facts

What: The Playhouse in the Park presents The Last Five Years

Where: 962 Mt. Adams Circle

Date: May 21 through June 19

Time: Tues and Wed at 7:30 p.m.,
Thurs and Fri at 8 p.m., Sat at 5 and
9 p.m., and Sun at 2 and 7 p.m.

Cost: \$37-52

Contact: (513) 421-3888 or
<http://www.cincyplay.com/>

"The two actors couldn't be better," Courtney exclaims. "The show is a roller coaster ride. But there is no blame. You have sympathy for one and then sympathy for the other."

Despite the challenges in communicating time and space to the audience, Courtney believes that the story will ultimately win out. "Jason Robert Brown gives clues along the way," he explains. "But [the time] becomes unimportant after the first few songs. Once the audience discovers what's going on, they just go with it."

Tickets to "The Last Five Years" run \$37-52, depending on the date and location of seats. For more information about the production, or for tickets, visit <http://www.cincyplay.com>.

Allyson Jacob is a freelance writer and playwright living just outside of Cincinnati.

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