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## Five Years Rates Five Stars

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Saturday, April 10, 2010; Posted: 07:04 AM - by [Jack L. B. Gohn](#)

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Limelight Theatre, a newcomer on the Washington-Baltimore theater scene dedicated to the musical stage, is only in its second season. Yet it seems to have been born full-grown, capable of proffering a production of Jason Robert Brown's challenging 2002 musical *The Last Five Years* that works on every level. Brown's show, a *succes d'estime* but not a commercial hit, lasted only two months on Broadway. Limelight's production makes clear why the critics loved it - and why the public should not miss the local revival.

*Five Years* tells the story of a relationship from first kiss to divorce, following the perspectives of the man and the woman involved from chronologically opposite standpoints. The story of writer Jamie (John Loughney), goes forward in time, while that of actress Cathy (Carolyn Myers) goes backwards. They occupy the same scene at the same point in the show only at the midpoint of the relationship, their wedding. So with Cathy's half of the show we are following the track of Stephen Sondheim's *Merrily We Roll Along* or Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*, knowing, as we see

anything hopeful or happy, that it all ends in tears (tears we have already witnessed). With Jamie's half we are seeing the shadows lengthen - just as the contrapuntal excitement of new love from Jamie's side of the stage is reminding us how promising it all was when it began. It's a terrific stunt in terms of keeping the audience churning with conflicting emotions.

Does it actually afford any insights that a more conventionally told tale would not? In one sense no, because there isn't enough information imparted about why the marriage collapsed. Yes, Jamie has an affair. But the affair begins after Cathy seems to have withdrawn emotionally. But Cathy's withdrawal may be a reaction to Jamie's callous tendency to bask in celebrity and ignore the mandate to keep home fires burning. In sum, there is no definitive reason why. One could as easily conclude from the evidence that they simply "grew apart," as the nondescript conventional phrase puts it. Since there is no "there there" when it comes to reasons, the only lesson the play can or does teach as the audience puts all the pieces in place is that the more information you get, the blurrier the picture you come away with.

Since the show was reportedly based on the collapse of Brown's first marriage, one could feel free to view this indeterminacy as a cop-out that leaves little to offend an ex-spouse. Equally one could view it as profound.

But it is undeniable in its emotional impact. The whole show is sung, and the sinuous, pulsing music is put at the service of the lyrics most of the time. Brown's way with words calls to mind Sondheim at his supplest. He doesn't craft tunes you can carry away, as Sondheim often does, but he serves up wistful that punches you in the gut in the same way, and leaves space for wisecracks sung as if they were spoken with perfect timing. And in this show, backed by a small, string-heavy pit band, the orchestration has a plaintive quality and a rock-y feel that calls to mind *Spring Awakening*. Enough said.

Every element of this production is just about perfect. It's hard to imagine a better Jamie than John Loughney, loping around the stage with a constantly expressive, ever changing demeanor that keeps us off-balance with emotional surprises and funny remarks. Carolyn Myers' Cathy is equally mercurial, moving rapidly from toughness to brassy stage audition showoffness to exultation to desolation, and back again. Each of them can deliver a sung line with the kind of expressive subtlety one ordinarily expects to hear only in speech - while landing on pitch (well, almost always) while the band lurches into an unexpected key. Even the band, behind violinist and conductor Jeffrey Newberger, is tight and flexible. As always, when things are going just right, it's hard to distinguish the director's creative control from the successful efforts of the ensemble, but obviously director Jay D. Brock must have been doing a great deal right.

So: just go. This is theater on all cylinders. And if you should miss the production at Limelight in April, it will be moving on to spend part of May at 1<sup>st</sup> Stage Theatre in McLean, Virginia.

*The Last Five Years*, April 9<sup>th</sup> to April 24<sup>th</sup>, Kreeger Auditorium, Jewish Community Center, 6125 Montrose Road, Rockville, MD. 800-838-3006. [www.mdlimelight.com](http://www.mdlimelight.com). Tickets \$30

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A lawyer, blogger, and critic of many years' standing, Jack is a regular columnist on public affairs and the law for the Maryland Daily Record. For several years he reviewed theater for the Baltimore Business Journal and books for the Baltimore Sun. His writings have appeared in the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, as well as the Maryland and Georgetown Law Journals and other professional legal and literary publications. Check out his blog, [www.thebigpictureandthecloseup.com](http://www.thebigpictureandthecloseup.com). He is delighted to be reviewing theater once again.

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