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Jason Robert Brown offers two sides to a love story

April 14, 5:05 AM Baltimore Performing Arts Examiner Mark Beachy



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Jason Robert Brown, best known for his Tony Award-winning score of "Parade," continues his complex composing style with a two person musical called, "The Last Five Years," now being produced by the Limelight Theatre.

Inspired by Brown's failed marriage to Theresa O'Neill, the story chronicles a five year relationship between Jamie Wellerstein, a rising novelist, and Cathy Hiatt, a struggling actress.

Brown's divorce was so bitter that according to the Washington Post, O'Neill threatened legal action on the grounds that the story was too similar to her relationship with Brown, forcing him to change the song title "I Could Be in Love With Someone Like You" to "Shiksa Goddess."



Carolyn Myers & John Loughney in "The Last Five Years." Photo Credit: Joe Tessmer

"The Last Five Years" is told in an unconventional manner in which Cathy's story starts at the end

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of their relationship while Jamie's begins the day they met. Some intellectuals may find this forward/backward, tell not show storytelling clever, while others may see it as just a confusing gimmick.

Consisting of fourteen songs, musical director Jeffry Newberger brought out the emotion of Brown's work with an orchestra so beautiful that I would come and see the show again just to hear the strings. With many pit orchestra's simulating strings with synthesizer's, it is refreshing to hear live strings, including a violin, played by Mr. Newberger himself and two cellos.

Musical theatre actors love performing songs by Jason Robert Brown because of his complex composing style which requires singers to have large vocal ranges and the ability to tackle rhythmically challenging pieces, much like Sondheim.

Taking on this challenging music are performers Carolyn Myers as Cathy Hiatt and John Loughney as Jamie Wellerstein.

Since the show is all songs with a few words of dialog thrown in here and there, the production weighs heavily upon the two actors and their ability to sing.

Unfortunately, Ms. Myers must have been having an off night the evening I saw the performance because not a song went by that she did not sing off key at some point in the music. On a less sour note, she had enough pleasing vibrato and rhythm to help pull her out of the tar pit.

John Loughney was well-cast as Jamie because of his everyman appeal and his character appropriate singing voice. Most of his vocals are performed very well, but Mr. Loughney is sometimes too vocally mechanical as in the song "Moving Too Fast" where he needs to work on letting the notes breathe more freely.

The nature of the production is designed so the two characters rarely interact with each other. This makes it even more difficult for actors to pull out emotion since they don't have another actor to play off. Thankfully, director Jay D. Brock worked with both actors so well that you can see both performers and their characters develop and change through time.

It was the director's vision to have the central image be a tree house. Mr. Brock in an interview with [Joel Markowitz](#) said that "the metaphor of a tree-house as marriage was a perfect design spring-board for set designer Joe Musumuci. His initial designs spawned from key-words like disintegration and fragmentation, and while I was not interested in a literal "tree-house" as a set, the imagery of the fragility of that structure was perfect."

For the effort of constructing the huge monster of a set, production-wise, it had very little impact. The story would have survived just fine with having just a few small set pieces.

In only Limelight's second season, it is apparent that producer Jan Stewart is not afraid of challenging musical theatre works.

"The Last Five Years" plays through April 24th at Limelight Theatre before continuing performances at 1st Stage Theatre in McLean, VA in May.

Ticket Information: Performances are held at the Kreeger Auditorium, Jewish Community Center, 6125 Montrose Road, Rockville, MD 20852. For tickets, visit <http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/100552> or call 1-800-838-3006.

Production Credits: Book, Music, & Lyrics by Jason Robert Brown, Directed by Jay D. Brock, Musical Direction by Jeffry Newberger, Set Design by Jos. B. Musumeci Jr., Costume Design by Cheryl Patton Wu, Lighting Design by Jason Cowperthwaite, Producing Director: Jan Stewart.

Cast: Carolyn Myers & John Loughney

MARK BEACHY

Performing Arts Reporter
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Joel Markowitz says:

You can read my entire interview with Limelight Theatre's producing director Jan Stewart, director Jay D. Brock, and cast members John Loughney and Carolyn Myers on DC Theatre Scene in my Theatre Schmooze column. Go to DC Theatre Scene.com and click on "COLUMNS" and then "Theatre Schmooze". Joel Markowitz

April 14, 9:04 AM

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