

The Last Five Years @ Tesseract Theatre

Music, Lyrics, and Book by Jason Robert Brown

Running February 17 - 26, 2023 @ The .ZACK Theater

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The Last Five Years is Tesseract Theatre's second offering in their all-musical season and what better way to celebrate the Month of Love than with a show about a doomed romance in which everyone's hearts are broken and their lives are ruined? Jason Robert Brown's semi-autobiographical two-person musical tells the story of the five-year-long relationship between Cathy Hiatt, a struggling actress, and Jamie Wellerstein, a successful novelist, both of whom are in their early-mid twenties. What makes their story unique is that it's told in a nonlinear structure, jumping back and forth between two different perspectives. Cathy tells her side of the story in reverse-chronological order, starting at the divorce and working her way backward. Jamie tells his side in standard chronological order, beginning after he and Cathy start dating, and then moving forward. Their timelines converge only during the peak of their relationship, their wedding, after which they only drift further apart.

Traditionally, *The Last Five Years* is staged so that Jamie and Cathy spend most of their time away from each other, never occupying the same space except for the halfway point of the show. At Tesseract, however, director Taylor Gruenloh has staged it so both of them are on stage the entire time, in each other's space, reacting to each other's side of the relationship. It's an intriguing directorial choice; concept musicals similar to *The Last Five Years* usually take place inside the mind of one person (take *Company* as an example), and this show traditionally sticks to that one-sided perspective for most of the songs. But at Tesseract, we get to see into the minds of Cathy and Jamie simultaneously, forcing the audience to engage with and analyze their relationship on a much more nuanced level.

Taylor Gruenloh's projections help to keep track of what year it is, and Gruenloh and Brittanie Gunn's lights help to delineate the interior monologues from the exterior character moments, often by bathing Cathy and Jamie in either red or blue to match their costumes. The production is set on a bare stage, with the excellent five-piece band above and behind the actors: musical director Leah Schultz on piano, Adam Rugo on guitar, John Gerdes on bass, Chuck Evans on violin, and Marie Brown on cello. Sound designer Phillip Evans has a pretty thankless job at the .ZACK theater because the acoustics of the venue allowed some moments where the band drowned out the actors. But Evans rose up to the challenge anyway, and everybody on stage still sounds incredible.

Grace Langford and Kevin Corpuz, as with everything I have seen them in, are fantastic as Cathy and Jamie. These are two great roles that both actors passionately sink their teeth into, and they're wonderful as always. They have great voices, a great stage presence, and really great chemistry. You feel both their extreme, joyous highs and their extreme, heartbreaking

lows. Sparks fly every second they are on stage – which is literally all the time, even while the audience enters the theater.

I cannot emphasize how genius this directorial choice is: having Cathy and Jamie always be on stage, mostly doing their own thing and only sometimes reacting to each other, makes perfectly clear exactly why their relationship failed: they were never on the same page. In fact, they were so not on the same page, they were practically reading different books. Emotionally, Jamie and Cathy were never on the same wavelength, which is why *The Last Five Years* is structured and written the way that it is. In its 90-minute runtime, Jamie and Cathy only have a handful of moments where they sing together, and very rarely do they harmonize. The show also plays around a lot with time: the differing perspectives, the significance the text places on the couple's wristwatches and lyrics that make constant references to time ("It's time to move on," "I'll be there soon," "I'm not always on time," there's even a song titled "Moving Too Fast").

Tesseract's production makes it obvious that Cathy and Jamie were never meant to be together: Grace Langford plays Cathy as an emotionally manipulative child who constantly seeks validation from others, while Kevin Corpuz plays Jamie as a self-centered douchebag who is deathly terrified of being alone. As far as the writing goes, their lack of compatibility is made even more apparent by the fact that Jamie found so much success as a novelist so early into adulthood, while Cathy is just barely getting her foot in the door as an actress, giving their relationship an undercurrent of envy and disdain. But Tesseract doesn't try to pull that dumb "Team Jamie vs. Team Cathy" bullshit you'd expect from toxic theatre kids – they let us know from the very beginning that both of them were in the wrong. Neither Jamie nor Cathy was truly ready to be in this relationship.

Whether you are in a romantic relationship or not, there is so much in *The Last Five Years* where you can see yourself reflected back at you, myself included. Jamie and Cathy had many problems that are felt not just by couples but by single people like me who struggle with these issues in their personal life. This was my first time watching *The Last Five Years* live on stage, and I actually felt a part of me crack open a little bit. After watching this, I had to do a lot of self-reflection about how much I give to others emotionally versus what I give to myself – and I found that it's very little. Watching *The Last Five Years* made me realize that I had to recognize and acknowledge my own self-worth, that I cannot be willing to accept the bare minimum in my relationships, and that I can't let people step on me the way that Jamie and Cathy stepped on each other. For a musical to have that effect on me at this point in my life, it really is something special. *The Last Five Years* has instantly become one of my new favorite musicals of all time, and I want to give huge kudos to Tesseract Theatre for sharing this absolutely brilliant, beautiful production with us. Go see it. Right now.