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Scenes: The Last Five Years

New production of Jason Robert Brown musical showcases up and coming talent

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*Kaleigh Gorka and Josh Wiles fall in love and break up in *The Last Five Years*.*

Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years* has always been considered an intimate musical. Two actors. A dozen or so songs. And an intriguing way of telling the story about the rise and fall of a relationship between two 20-somethings.

But the recent release of Richard LaGravenese's film and now an ambitious live staging by Daemon Theatre has opened up the show considerably.

In the live show, which ran for four performances last weekend, director Carl Pucl gave it a bigger production than it usually receives, filling the large stage of the SMSC Centre for the Arts (at St. Michael's College) with a white multi-platform set and a shattered glass motif in Pavlo Bosyy's design that symbolizes the fissures in the relationship between Jamie (Josh Wiles), a talented young novelist, and Cathy (Kaleigh Gorka), a struggling actor.

Brown's brilliant conceit is to have the story proceed in two directions. Cathy's journey begins at the end of their relationship and goes back in time, while Jamie's moves forward from the start. The only time the two share the stage to sing together is during their wedding scene in the middle of the show.

In most live productions, the performers sing their songs without interacting with the other (except in that middle song). Here, Pucl has interrupts some of the songs to give us bits of action – a handed drink here, a stony glance from the opposite side of the stage there – and fill us in on what’s happening in the other’s life. That device was used brilliantly in the film, and it works here too.

An especially clever bit of staging has Cathy leaving the bed she shares with Jamie (early on in chronological time) after one scene, to have him sing a song to another woman in that same bed (later in time). And there’s another lovely moment when Cathy sings When You Come Home To Me, a series of increasingly disastrous auditions that ends with her in fact alone.

The performers have powerful voices, although I’m not sure they needed to be amplified; microphones made their occasional pitch issues harsher, and the sound mix on the live orchestra wasn’t always complimentary.

But Gorka shines in a hilarious sendup of bad summer stock, A Summer In Ohio, and moves from despair and heartbreak at the beginning of the show to excitedly optimistic at the end (Brown’s lyrics are so good that you can see the seeds of her own downfall here, in her ambition, manipulation and need to be rescued.)

Wiles has the more difficult role of making the smug, talented Jamie into a figure worthy of sympathy, but he achieves that. By the end we see the effect Kathy’s behaviour has had on him, his eyes dead and his body stiff.

Pucl, a talent to watch, directs so that each scene builds on the one that came before, resulting in an ending that’s richly emotional. He has the show begin with Cathy walking down an aisle to the stage and Jamie leaving it, a nice encapsulation of what’s to come.

Tags **musical reviews, Jason Robert Brown, The Last Five Years**



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