

THEATER REVIEW

Composer's got 'it' and we've got 'Years'

By Anne Marie Welsh

THEATER CRITIC

November 22, 2004

Melodies linger long after the lights come down on "The Last Five Years," the disarming little musical that opened Saturday at North Coast Repertory. The word "musical" may conjure too strong an image for this deft 90-minute show, a song cycle, really, by the estimable 34-year old composer Jason Robert Brown. Along with Adam Guettel, Ricky Ian Gordon, Jeanine Tesori and sometimes, David Yazbek, Brown is usually described as a hope for the future of the American musical.

He is definitely that; in an off year (1998) on Broadway, he won a new score Tony award for the dark, short-lived musical, "Parade." His range as a lyricist is as impressive as his mastery of the gospel, blues, pop, ethnic and quirky comedy rhythms that mix so smoothly in "The Last Five Years," first staged in Chicago in 2001. Comparisons may be odious, but Guettel has a richer voice, more steeped in classical tradition; still, the delicate emotional world of Brown's song cycle feels true.

"The Last Five Years" ruminates upon a love affair that germinates, blossoms and dies during the time span of the title. In 14 songs performed alternately by the young man (Jeremiah Lorenz) and young woman (Erin Cronican), we see the relationship move from meeting to marriage to parting (in his mind) and backward from the breakup to the first date (in hers).

What could be mere cleverness in the reversed time schemes actually serves to underscore the deep incompatibility of the couple – he, a gifted Jewish novelist who rockets quickly from grad school to literary celebrity, Columbia University to Random House, while she, an ambitious so-so actress from Ohio, remains stuck still doing summer tours in the Midwest.

Brown borrowed liberally from his own life for the story, an unsurprising fact that slightly sours the proceedings and makes the man's role an even bigger challenge. Neither character is particularly likable. So how do you play a suddenly famous young artist whose greater talent and deserved success make life impossible for his confused wife?

Lorenz knows how. Shrewdly guided by director Peter Ellenstein and music director G. Scott Lacy, this young San Diego actor stretches into fresh new territory; he shows a depth, range and sweetness, not to mention a vocal suppleness that alone make the show worth seeing.

Lorenz has been striking before as the no-holds-barred transsexual star of the glam-rock "Hedwig and the Angry Inch," and before that, as the corrupted Emcee of "Cabaret," both directed by Sean Murray. He showed glimpses of a more "normal" range of emotion in a fine, moving kids' show "Guitar" toured by La Jolla Playhouse. "The Last Five Years" is his breakthrough; he shapes the story of each gemlike song with subtlety and nuance, making the wonderful comedy of "The Schmue Song" and "Shiksa Goddess" as effective as the rueful betrayal in the ballad, "Nobody Needs to Know."

(Note to local directors: Cast Lorenz in a Sondheim show soon.)

As the idealized wife, Cathy, Erin Cronican fares less well. She's persuasive dramatically. Her Cathy is a pretty blonde too passive for her own good, unable to rise to the challenge of New York and the kind of artists the city breeds. Cronican's voice seemed strained on opening night, only occasionally soaring with confidence.

Her best moments came in the every-actors-nightmare number, "Climbing Uphill." Part humiliating audition, part internal monologue, it's a dazzling short story encapsulating life in the theater.

Like songsmith Yazbek in the raucous "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," Brown references musical theater lore – the "Fiddler on the Roof" beat of "The Schmue Song," the comical lament of a pair of Ohio refugees from "Wonderful Town" in "Summer in Ohio." Brown's the real thing, though he has yet to find dramatic material that will bring his original voice to a hit-seeking popular audience. In the meantime, this sturdy production of "The Last Five Years" plays through the new year.

Music and lyrics: Jason Robert Brown. **Director:** Peter Ellenstein. **Musical director:** G. Scott Lacy. **Set:** Marty Burnett. **Lighting:** Karin Filijin. **Costumes:** Jennifer Hanson. **Sound:** Robert May. **Cast:** Erin Cronican, Jeremiah Lorenz.

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