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# An Affair to Remember

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## Stars shine in Cabrillo Stage's bittersweet 'Last Five Years'

The winning streak continues at Cabrillo Stage with its new production of "The Last Five Years," the second offering in the company's 30th Anniversary season. More of a song cycle than a conventional musical play, the show is a tightrope duet that takes its two performers through an entire romance, from joyous beginnings to bitter end. The songs won't be familiar to most audiences, and the staging is intense: two people onstage in the intimate Black Box Theater for an hour and a half, without an intermission. But as a showcase for two terrific Cabrillo Stage veterans, Andrew Ceglio and Ariel Buck, it's a knockout.

Written and composed by Jason Robert Brown, the story-songs in "The Last Five Years" touch on every aspect of love and

romance (goofy jubilation to disenchantment, rage, and poignant regret) in the five-year relationship of Jamie Wellerstein (Ceglio), a young novelist on his way up, and Cathy Hiatt (Buck), an aspiring actress whose career has stalled. In the show's high-concept structure, Cathy sings her story starting at the end of their marriage, going backward in time, while Jamie moves forward through their relationship from beginning to end.

So while both characters are onstage throughout, they rarely participate in the same song together; their opposing viewpoints (one always looking backward with regret, the other looking forward with hope) play in counterpoint to each other. This can be a little frustrating; we'd like to see these two dynamic performers interacting more often. (Only in mid-show, when the characters finally reach the same page in their relationship, do they sing the same song together, the breathless and buoyant proposal/wedding dance number, "The Next Ten Minutes.") But the concept makes sense in terms of staging: at least one character onstage is always happy, if not downright giddy, so the audience gets a breather between the more dramatic songs.

It's a good thing. No sooner does Buck unleash her beautiful, powerhouse voice on Cathy's blistering, end-of-the-affair ballad, "Still Hurting," than Ceglio counters with his riotously funny "Shiksa Goddess," in which young Jamie revels in his gorgeous new non-Jewish girlfriend. The gist of the narrative is that 23-year-old Jamie lands an agent, then a New York publisher for his first novel, and finds himself swept up into the glitterati. (Ceglio gives the song, "Moving Too Fast" a punchy mix of cockiness and pure euphoria.) Cathy, meanwhile, is still schlepping to auditions and doing summer theater in Ohio. (Her caustic "A Summer In Ohio," is another gem.)

Director-choreographer Mollye Maxner's thoughtful staging makes the most of the small theater space. Patrick Klein's effectively minimalist set consists of a platform and two cubes that the actors shuffle around into various configurations of furnishings and vehicles. And kudos to costume designer Christina Dinkel for the sparse array of clothing items that do so much to define the characters. (Young Jamie's red sneakers are an especially nice touch.)

But the reasons for the couple's disharmony, as laid out in the songs, can be problematic. Brown wrote the piece after the breakup of his own marriage, and he's careful to show how hard Jamie tries to encourage Cathy's dreams. But it's also suggested that Jamie sours on the marriage because Cathy's not living up to her potential ("I won't lose because you can't win," he sings), or because he thinks she's too resentful to go to book parties with him. Also, right after their wedding duet, Jamie sings, "A Miracle Would Happen," about how hard it is to resist other women now that he's married. (He needs a "miracle" to stay faithful to his wife?) It's hard to keep track of the exact timeline, but Brown never lets Jamie stop and consider that the reason for Cathy's persistent unhappiness may not be her career, but his infidelity.

Still, however dubious the reasoning, Ceglio and Buck put it all over with conviction, in splendid, virtuoso performances that hit every note of the joy and pain of falling in and out of love. Just when you think nothing could be more sublime than Jamie's "The Schmueel Song," a tour-de-force fable about a Jewish tailor enacted by Ceglio with relish, humor, and heart, along comes Buck with Cathy's hilarious "Audition Song." Ceglio's "Nobody Needs To Know," sung by Jamie from another woman's bed, is devastating.

These are difficult, complex songs that require range and stamina, beautifully performed. Buck is radiant, and Ceglio is a one-man theatrical master class. (He's played Seymour in "Little Shop of Horrors," Cliff in "Cabaret," the Scarecrow in "The Wizard of Oz," and a show-stopping Herod in "Jesus Christ Superstar;" in his spare time, Ceglio also directed the popular "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change," and choreographed this season's "The Full Monty.")

Andrew Ceglio and Ariel Buck make "The Last Five Years" an affair to remember. Don't miss them.

The Cabrillo Stage production of "The Last Five Years" plays in repertoire Thursdays through Sundays through Aug. 14, at the Black Box Theater, Cabrillo College. For more info, call 479-6154, or visit [cabrillostage.com](http://cabrillostage.com).

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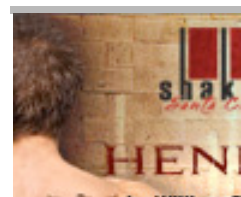
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