The Guide
A theatergoer’s resource edited by the Education & Community Programs department at Portland Center Stage

The Last Five Years
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Jason Robert Brown,  
_Book, Music and Lyrics_

Jason Robert Brown has been hailed as “one of Broadway’s smartest and most sophisticated songwriters since Stephen Sondheim” (Philadelphia Inquirer), and his “extraordinary, jubilant theater music” (Chicago Tribune) has been heard all over the world, whether in one of the hundreds of productions of his musicals every year or in his own incendiary live performances. The New York Times refers to Jason as “a leading member of a new generation of composers who embody high hopes for the American musical.” The Bridges of Madison County, a musical adapted with Marsha Norman from the bestselling novel, is currently running on Broadway, directed by Bartlett Sher and starring Kelli O’Hara and Steven Pasquale. Honeymoon in Vegas, based on Andrew Bergman’s film, opens on Broadway later this year following a triumphant production at Paper Mill Playhouse last fall. His major musicals as composer and lyricist include: 13, written with Robert Horn and Dan Elish, which began its life in Los Angeles in 2007 and opened on Broadway in 2008; The Last Five Years, which was cited as one of Time magazine’s 10 Best of 2001 and won Drama Desk Awards for Best Music and Best Lyrics; Parade, written with Alfred Uhry and directed by Harold Prince, which premiered at Lincoln Center Theatre in 1998, and subsequently won both the Drama Desk and New York Drama Critics’ Circle Awards for Best New Musical, as well as garnering Jason the Tony Award for Original Score; and Songs for a New World, a theatrical song cycle directed by Daisy Prince, which played Off-Broadway in 1995, and has since been seen in hundreds of productions around the world. Parade was also the subject of a major revival directed by Rob Ashford, first at London’s Donmar Warehouse and then at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. His orchestral adaptation of E.B. White’s novel _The Trumpet of the Swan_ premiered at the Kennedy Center with John Lithgow and the National Symphony Orchestra, and the CD was released on PS Classics. Future projects include a new chamber musical created with Daisy Prince and Jonathan Marc Sherman called The Connector, an untitled new piece created with Claudia Shear and Casey Nicholaw, and a new solo album for release in 2015. Jason is the winner of the 2002 Kleban Award for Outstanding Lyrics and the 1996 Gilman & Gonzalez-Falla Foundation Award for Musical Theatre. Jason’s songs, including the cabaret standard “Stars and the Moon,” have been performed and recorded by Audra McDonald, Billy Porter, Betty Buckley, Karen Akers, Renée Fleming, Philip Quast, Jon Hendricks and many others, and his song “Someone To Fall Back On” was featured in the Walden Media film, Bandslam. As a soloist or with his band The Caucasian Rhythm Kings, Jason has performed sold-out concerts around the world. His collaboration with singer Lauren Kennedy, Songs of Jason Robert Brown, is available on PS Classics. Jason’s piano sonata, Mr. Broadway was commissioned and premiered by Anthony De Mare at Carnegie Hall. Jason is also the composer of the incidental music for David Lindsay-Abaire’s Kimberly Akimbo and Fuddy Meers, Marsha Norman’s Last Dance, David Marshall Grant’s Current Events, Kenneth Lonergan’s The Waverly Gallery, and the Irish Repertory Theater’s production of Long Day’s Journey Into Night, and he was a Tony Award nominee for his contributions to the score of Urban Cowboy the Musical. Additionally, Jason served as the orchestrator and arranger of Charles Strouse and Lee Adams’s score for a proposed musical of Star Wars. Jason also took over as musical director for the Off-Broadway hit When Pigs Fly. Jason has conducted and created arrangements and orchestrations for Liza Minnelli, John Pizzarelli, Tovah Feldshuh, and Laurie Beechman, among many others. Jason studied composition at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y., with Samuel Adler, Christopher Rouse, and Joseph Schwantner. He lives with his wife, composer Georgia Stitt, and their daughters in New York City. Jason is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild and the American Federation of Musicians Local 802 & 47.  

www.jasonrobertbrown.com
The Rise of a Musical

By Claudie Jean Fisher,
Public Relations and Publications Manager

Jason Robert Brown wrote The Last Five Years while he was traveling the country as conductor and musical director for the national tour of his popular musical, Parade. Though Brown claims the story is not autobiographical, it can be said that it was very loosely based on his brief marriage to actress Theresa O’Neil, who later sued Brown, claiming it too closely resembled their relationship. Of the reverse chronology used in the show (as the story begins, Jamie is at the beginning of the relationship and Cathy is at the end – through inter-cutting scenes, we watch Jamie move forward in time as Cathy moves backward), Brown has said, “it seemed like the perfect way to tell the story, both because it solved the problem of the audience getting ahead, and because on a metaphorical level, it said exactly what I wanted the show to say: these are two people who were never really in the same place at the same time.”

The Last Five Years has risen to cult fame, capturing hearts and garnering the kind of fandom that seems to ensure its place in the musical canon. It all began in 2001 when The Last Five Years took the stage for its world premiere at the Northlight Theatre in Skokie, Illinois, starring Lauren Kennedy and Norbert Leo Butz. Though it ran only two months, the show earned much critical acclaim and broke box office records. “Exhilaration, so intense that it brings tears of joy, is at hand in the premiere of The Last Five Years,” proclaimed the Chicago Tribune’s senior theater critic Richard Christiansen in his review. The show sold more tickets in a single weekend than any other production at that theater, in the company’s then 26-year history. Time magazine later named it one of the top 10 shows of 2001.

The following year, it headed east for its New York debut, this time Off-Broadway at the Minetta Lane Theatre, with Sherie Rene Scott starring opposite Butz. It earned Drama Desk Awards for Outstanding Music and Outstanding Lyrics, and the 2002 original cast recording sealed the popularity of the musical. It was the first cast album released by Sh-K-Boom Records and remains one of its best-selling albums.

The success of the cast album and hundreds of regional productions that followed gradually brought The Last Five Years to the cult popularity it enjoys today. A massively popular Off-Broadway revival at Second Stage Theatre in 2013 further propelled the mania. Directed by Jason Robert Brown himself, with Betsy Wolfe and Adam Kantor taking on the challenging roles, the production broke box office records for an Off-Broadway institution and became the longest running production in Second Stage's history. Sh-K-Boom Records captured this production with a second cast album.

The Last Five Years has enjoyed thousands of productions worldwide, with hit shows in Australia, Germany, Netherlands, Italy, France and the Philippines. It has been translated into several other languages, including Dutch, Japanese, German and Italian. A feature film is slated to be released soon, starring Anna Kendrick and Jeremy Jordan (with a cameo by Sherie Rene Scott). Directed and adapted by Richard LaGravenese, and produced by Sh-K-Boom Records, the film was shot in just 21 days. Fans are eagerly awaiting its distribution. It is clear the enthusiasm will only grow for this touching, intimate musical.
Musical Numbers:
- Still Hurting - Catherine
- Shiksa Goddess - Jamie
- See I’m Smiling - Catherine
- Moving Too Fast - Jamie
- A Part of That - Catherine
- The Schmuel Song - Jamie
- A Summer in Ohio - Catherine
- The Next Ten Minutes - Jamie, Catherine
- A Miracle Would Happen/
  When You Come Home to Me - Jamie, Catherine
- Climbing Uphill - Catherine
- If I Didn’t Believe in You - Jamie
- I Can Do Better Than That - Catherine
- Nobody Needs to Know - Jamie
- Goodbye Until Tomorrow/
  I Could Never Rescue You - Catherine, Jamie

Terms Referenced in The Last Five Years

Shiksa: A Gentile girl or woman, especially one who has attracted a Jewish man. The term derives from the Hebrew word “sheketz”, meaning the flesh of an animal deemed taboo by the Torah. Since a Jewish man marrying a non-Jewish woman is taboo also, this word applies to her. Traditionally this is a derogatory term, though in modern times it has also been used more light-heartedly.

“The shiksa obsesses many Jews: Rabbis see her as an inter-marital threat to the survival of Judaism; parents fear that she will lure their sons away from family and faith; and Jewish men fantasize about her sexual and social desirability. She figures prominently – even compulsively--in popular movies and best sellers by Jewish directors and writers.”

– Frederic Cople Jaher, “The Quest for the Ultimate Shiksa”

JCC-Jewish Community Center (a line in the play: “The JCC of Spring Valley is shaking and crumbling to the ground.”)

Sonny Mehta: Publisher and editor-in-chief of Alfred A. Knopf publishers (a division of Random House). He’s a big deal.

John Updike: An American novelist, poet, short story writer, art critic and literary critic. His most famous work is his “Rabbit” novels (Rabbit, Run; Rabbit Redux; Rabbit Is Rich; Rabbit At Rest)

Daisy Mae: A character in Li’l Abner, a satirical American comic strip running from 1934-1977. Upon marrying Abner she became a domesticated housewife.
"THE LAST FIVE YEARS" was written during the two years that composer Jason Robert Brown was touring the country as conductor and musical director of the national tour of PARADE, for which he won the Best Original Score Tony in 1999.

World premiere at the Northlight Theatre in Skokie, Illinois, where Brown had once worked. The production starred Norbert Leo Butz and Lauren Kennedy and was directed by Daisy Prince, who had previously directed Brown's SONGS FOR A NEW WORLD.

Rehearsals for the New York production began, with Norbert Leo Butz reprising his role as Jamie. Sherie Rene Scott took over the role of Cathy, as Lauren Kennedy had a previous tour commitment that prevented her from continuing with the show.

Opened off-Broadway at the Minetta Lane Theatre in Greenwich Village. As he had done in the past, Jason Robert Brown conducted the show. This production won the 2002 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music & Lyrics and was nominated for five other Drama Desk Awards, the Lucille Lortel Award, and the Outer Critics Circle Award.

As is the fate of many off-Broadway shows, "THE LAST FIVE YEARS" struggled to find an audience, and its stay at the Minetta Lane was disappointingly short. The show closed just after two months. However, the songs have been re-created in productions worldwide as well as in hundreds of cities across the US.

"THE LAST FIVE YEARS" is revived at the Second Stage Theatre for a limited engagement. This production starred Adam Kantor and Betsy Wolfe and was directed by Jason Robert Brown. It closed May 18.

An upcoming film based on the musical is in production – directed and written by Richard LaGravenese. Anna Kendrick and Jeremy Jordan will star as Cathy and Jamie.

Sources:
http://www.broadway.com/shows/last-five-years/ - 2013 revival
http://www.mtishows.com/show..detail.asp?showid=000240 – production history
http://jasonrobertbrown.com/projects/the-last-5-years/ - synopsis
Notes from the Creative Team

Director Nancy Keystone (PCS credits: Venus in Fur, 39 Steps, Apollo) offers up some of her research notes on the show.

“I might be the only person who didn’t know this show. It’s a very popular much-loved, two-person musical about a relationship that spans five years which, as most do, has a very ecstatic beginning and a very sad ending. Not to give anything away, but it does give the sad ending away at the very beginning, so it’s no surprise.

Its structure is one thing that is very unique; it’s sort of like two solo shows put together. It’s told from both characters’ perspective: Cathy and Jamie. Cathy tells her story from the end of the relationship to the beginning and Jamie from the beginning to the end. And then they meet in the middle and they get married. The characters don’t really interact until the moment when they get married. That moment is a very special moment and should feel very magical for the audience.”

Scenic and Lighting Designer Daniel Meeker:

“The typical choice for this play is you do every scene fully realized, but we agreed that that’s not really what the story is about. The best way to tell the story is to be simple and focus on the words of the two characters. For me, it was how to maintain the intimacy of the space. It’s curious that the studio is a flexible space but in certain configurations, it can feel very distant from the audience and we wanted a configuration that made everyone feel as close as possible.”

PCS Resident Costume Designer Jeff Cone is designing his 50th show at the Armory.

“It’s a little bit different process this time because we are going to let the characters develop throughout the process and the costume needs will become clear as we go. We’ve had consultations with both Meredith and Drew where they brought in stuff from their own wardrobe and modeled it. Meredith brought in about a couple dozen looks and Drew brought in a couple hundred looks (laughter).”

Musical Director Rick Lewis:

“The score is already full at the keyboard, but one of the things we are trying to do is find lines of the violin or the cello and move them into the piano. They won’t necessarily have the same articulation, but they will have the same idea and will help push the music forward thematically. And we have a great pianist [Eric Little], so that will bring a lot to the show.”

Quotes from:
http://www.pcs.org/blog/item/the-last-five-years-meet-greet/
Meredith Kaye Clark: Renaissance Woman

by Alice Hodge, Communications Associate

Google The Last Five Years star Merideth Kaye Clark and two things become immediately clear: one, she played Elphaba in Wicked on the First National Tour and two, she is incredibly creative and talented. An accomplished musical theater professional and singer-songwriter, her work jumps from bootlegged performances in 2,500 seat theaters to relaxed house shows with just her guitar and no end of songs from her two studio albums. Her voice ranges from boisterously brassy in “Suddenly Seymour” to her quietly haunting mash up “If I Only Had a (Blackbird)”.

She also has a Bachelor of Science in Neuroscience and Behavioral Biology from Emory University and plays every single melodic string instrument. All of them.

I sat down with Merideth before the designer run last week to chat with her about her craft, her music, The Last Five Years and, of course, love.

I’d like to start with your path in the arts. In a nutshell, how did you arrive here?

Merideth: Well, when I was two...just kidding. I had a really great arts education in my public school in Missouri, where I am from, and when I was in college, I didn’t pursue the arts because I majored in Neuroscience [at Emory University].

Yeah, we’re going to talk about that later...

So I got my degree in neuroscience, but I also played in the orchestra, I sang in the choir, I had a voice teacher and I was a part of a student theater group called “Ad Hoc” productions where we picked a musical every single semester and produced it. Those people became my circle and my people. By my senior year it was really obvious where I fit – in the theater, but I had only taken a couple of classes and didn’t really know much about it other than being directed by other students. Then I went to New York for the summer and did the Cap21 program at NYU. That was the first time I learned about regional theater, the actor’s union and that there was a whole collection of performers that weren’t famous, but were working professionals. I never knew that before I was 21. So, then I decided “that’s what I want to do”. I didn’t want to do community theatre and I didn’t want to be a super star, I want to be a working actor, but I had no training, so then I went to grad school and got my masters in musical theater in California [at San Diego State University]. After I finished grad school in California, I was really focused on becoming a performer, so then I moved to New York.
How do you identify as an artist?
Are you a musician first, actor second?

That’s a really good question. And one that I don’t really know how to answer which is probably why I feel like a jack-of-all-trades. I identify as an acting musician, how about that? I think that acting is connecting to a story and connecting to an experience. And one of the best ways I know how to do it is through music. I talk sometimes, too. [laughs] But I’m more successful when I do it with music.

So, you started your M.F.A. program in musical theater with no real formal acting education?

Yeah and the crazy part was as part of my master’s degree, as part of my scholarship, was that I had to teach “Acting For Non-Majors.” So, I was 23, had never taken a formal acting class, and I was put in front of students, mostly 18 year old, non-majors and they were looking to me about how to act.

The first semester was really rough. It was a lot of reading books and then teaching what I had just read. When I realized that I already knew a lot because I had produced and seen a lot of theater, I just needed to learn the how and the why of all these things that I already naturally knew.

In an interview, you mentioned that you had auditioned 93 times in your first year in New York and didn’t book a single show? How did you stick with it?

I thought that’s just what you had to do. I thought that was the right of passage. When I first moved to New York, I had three jobs and lived in a brownstone with five other girls. It was so beautiful, but it hadn’t ever been renovated. There were five of us and three bedrooms. One of my 3 jobs was a temp 9-5 job. I would wake up in the morning, get in line at Actor’s Equity Union building, sign up for an audition, go to my job, come back and do my audition during the lunch break – I always signed up for the lunch slot – go back and finish my job, and then go to whatever my night job was. I did that for a year and no wonder I didn’t book anything – I was exhausted. How can you have a successful audition when you are that tired? And I didn’t have an agent and I didn’t have connections. I didn’t go to a conservatory and that was the only way I knew to get people to see me. That first year was rough.

And then the first job I finally booked was from a recommendation from somebody who had worked with me before when they lost an actor and I was available. They gave me the job and from that moment on until where we are now, I’ve always had something on the horizon and that was twelve years ago.

Let’s talk about The Last Five Years. You mentioned that you are most excited about the challenge of the construct of time in this piece. Can you talk about that challenge and if that has changed throughout rehearsal?

It’s still so hard, because I don’t get the journey that as an actor you really get to connect with from point A to B – what are experiences, how are they growing and changing and how are they becoming who they are now. I have to go backward. I have to start at the end of the journey and go backwards. It’s a mind game about the journey you take and how I can’t really rely on my natural growth and natural journey that you expect to go beat by beat. I’m constantly thinking about what chronologically happened instead of what actually happened on stage. It’s so much easier for Jamie because he gets to have his journey. [Laughs]

Do you find the change of style is a challenge? Or does it even feel to you as the performer that the songs are, in fact, written in different styles?

Yes. When I listened to it originally and when I first started looking at the music that was exactly how I thought of it. But now that I’m working through it, I’m trying to have it be a single voice. So, I’m coming at it with the same warm up, the same passaggio, the same placement so I don’t feel schizophrenic. Stylistically the sounds might be different, but I’m trying to sing it with the same voice.

So, we’ll see. We haven’t opened yet, so talk to me in a few months. [laughs]

Is there anything else you want to add?

I just think, for the record, I feel more connected to the art that I’m doing and a more whole person living and working here in Portland than I ever did in New York. It’s so great. I love living here and I love riding my bike to work and being here in this building and the resources we have here and the support. I’m just thrilled.
**Local Connections**

Although things don’t go well for Jamie and Catherine, that doesn’t mean that all love goes wrong. To start your romantic journey, contact Pearl District Matchmakers (pearldistrictmatchmakers.com) to find a love worth singing about. Once you’ve made a connection with someone, here are three dates inspired by The Last Five Years to explore your new love.

Travel through time like Jamie and Catherine at the TARDIS Room Bar at the Fish and Chips Shop (1218 N Killingsworth St.). Fun place that truly has great fish and chips and a fun time travel theme. Then, continue your trip through time at the Oregon History Museum (1200 SW Park Avenue).

Catherine sings a beautiful song at a pier at the Ohio River. Although we’re not in Ohio, you can visit Willamette Park (SW Macadam Ave & Nebraska St) and enjoy a beautiful sunset walk along the river. Then visit Paley’s Place (1204 NW 21st Ave.), voted the most romantic restaurant in Portland in 2012 by the website Portland Food and Drink.

Jamie is an author and Catherine is an actress who sings. Encourage your inner writer at a monthly meeting of the Willamette Writers (www.willamettewriters.com). To show off your singing skills, have a fun night of karaoke, food and drinks at The Boiler Room (228 NW Davis St).

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**Discussion Questions**

- Who do you think is at fault for the failed marriage – Jamie or Cathy? Both?
- Do you think the composer intended to make one character the victim or split the blame equally?
- How does Jamie’s character evolve and change throughout the play? How does Cathy’s?
- Jason Robert Brown has been called the “new Sondheim”. Research Stephen Sondheim. Compare the two composers and their music to find similarities and differences. Do you agree with this statement? Why do you think he has been called the “new Sondheim”?

Merideth Kaye Clark and Drew Harper in The Last Five Years. Photography by Patrick Weishampel.