



JANA MARCUS

Five and Counting

Cabrillo Stage offers intimate musical, "The Last 5 Years"

BY CHRISTIAN BUSTOS TORRES

The intimate Cabrillo Black Box Theater provides the perfect stage for the poignant production "The Last 5 Years." Written by Tony Award-winning songwriter, Jason Robert Brown, the musical first opened in the Northlight Theater in Illinois in 2001 where it sold a record number of tickets over the first weekend. Nearly 10 years later, the show premieres at Cabrillo Stage July 8 and runs until Aug. 14. Though its director, Mollye Maxner, is a first-timer with Cabrillo Stage, the play stars veterans Andrew Ceglio and Ariel Buck.

"The Last 5 Years" is a musical that explores the five-year relationship of two career-driven individuals: Jamie Wellerstein, the novelist, played by Ceglio, and Cathy Hyatt, the struggling actress, played by Buck. The show's structure is non-linear as the story begins with two timelines simultaneously: the start of Jamie and Cathy's relationship from Jamie's perspective, and the end of the relationship from Cathy's. As one of them moves forward through time and the other one backward, the two characters interact for only one song during their wedding in the middle of the show.

As complicated as this structure sounds, Ceglio stresses that "[the show] is not a class," but more of a "... feast for the mind." He asks for the audience to let go of thinking about plot and just experience the show for what it is. Since the audience is aware from the start of how the relationship ends, their motivation to engage with the story comes from a desire to fill in the missing spaces. This entire narrative is transmitted in one act by the only two actors on stage. This is a first for a play appearing at Cabrillo Stage.

Buck and Ceglio met in 2007 when they both were cast in Cabrillo Stage's production of "Little Shop of Horrors." They eventually fell in love with each other in real life and are now playing opposite each other again, almost five years later. Both actors have expressed that investing in their characters for this production can be emotionally draining. Ceglio explains that in past productions with Cabrillo Stage, such as "The Wizard of Oz" in 2009 and "Little Shop of Horrors" in 2007, the

roles were more physically rather than emotionally demanding. However, Ceglio explains that while working on "The Last 5 Years," it has often been hard to shake the character off once he returns home. Buck adds that the role is challenging because the characters are the "... closest [characters to being] real human beings."

Both actors add that the characters they perform are by no means a reflection of their relationship in real life, stating that they dig into past relationships instead of their present one to connect to their roles. They hope that any person who has ever loved anyone else will connect with some part of the show. "The Last 5 Years" is relevant to a modern audience because it revolves around love in the present age. Buck describes the story as: "... a mirror to ourselves as human beings."

As the show progresses through the narrative, it is also driven by the wonderfully melancholic music and songwriting of Jason Robert Brown. Brown's songwriting for the musical won him a Drama Desk Award for Best Music and Best Lyrics as well as a spot in *Time* magazine's top 10 shows of 2001. Ceglio describes the lyrics of Brown's song as having the power to channel the emotions of the character: "The subtext of the lyrics comes from the emotion," Ceglio says.

The Cabrillo Stage production has a sextet performing the music of the songs, which are a pastiche of different genres and styles. They also contain complex harmonies and rhythms that create a wonderful experience. The music aids as an accompaniment for the audience to follow the plot of the show as well as the development of the characters. As Maxner adds of the touching quality of the songs: "You want everyone to hear them."

Cabrillo Stage presents "The Last 5 Years." The show opens at 8 p.m. on July 8 at the Cabrillo Black Box Theater, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos. For more information, call 479-6154 or visit cabrillostage.com. Tickets are \$16-38.