

Jason Robert Brown's *The Last Five Years*:

Following a Failed Relationship

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Jason Robert Brown is quickly becoming a legend, hailed as “one of Broadway’s smartest and most sophisticated songwriters since Stephen Sondheim” by the Philadelphia Inquirer (“About Jason Robert Brown”). Since 1995, he has been composing and writing lyrics for Broadway musicals, working on pieces such as *Songs for the New World*, *Parade*, *The Bridges of Madison County*, and *The Last Five Years*, which proves his most popular work. *The Last Five Years* was first produced on Broadway in 2001, named one of the 10 best shows of 2001 by Time Magazine (“The Last Five Years”). Since then, it has continued to grow in popularity, so much so that a movie rendition starring Anna Kendrick and Jeremy Jordan premiered on Valentine’s Day 2015. Despite its deceiving release date, *The Last Five Years* is not a love story; rather, it’s a story about mismatched lovers.

The musical follows a young couple through the five years of their typical, tragic relationship: boy meets girl, boy and girl come from different worlds and probably shouldn’t be together, boy loves girl anyway, girl loves boy in return, boy and girl get married, boy and girl struggle, boy and girl get divorced. However, this typical, tragic love story is not told in a typical fashion. The two characters alternate, taking turns singing separate solos. The girl opens, lamenting the end of their marriage. The boy’s first song, though, describes their first night together. The girl, an aspiring actress named Cathy Hiatt, then progresses backwards, reconstructing their relationship in telling their story from end to beginning. The boy, a Jewish writer named Jamie Wellerstein who has just been picked up by Random House publishers, progresses forwards, deconstructing the relationship in telling it from beginning to tragic end. The two take turns singing their individual songs, only singing together when their plotlines meet in the middle for their wedding. Thus, both sets of songs make entirely different arguments as to why the relationship ended in divorce.

Cathy argues that Jamie grew selfish, too caught up in his success as a published writer to put apt effort into their relationship. In her first song, which is sung after all divorce papers have been signed, Cathy explains that Jamie simply “decide[d] it’s his right to decide” and walked out of their five-year-long relationship without considering how his selfishness would impact her life. She claims to be “covered in scars she did nothing to earn,” denying any part she had in turning the relationship towards failure (Brown, “Still Hurting”). She contrasts Jamie’s lack of grit with her own resolutions. Despite the fact that Jamie goes off on “a trip to Jamie-land / Staring catatonic out the window / Barely even breathing all the while... Handful after handful of Doritos / Circling the apartment, logging miles” as he’s writing and as he’s enjoying parties held in honor of his book, Cathy “said [she’d] stick it out / And follow through,” and “there’s no question / There’s no doubt” that she will (Brown, “A Part of That”). She’s committed to this relationship, and she’s committed to making sure that Jamie is happy no matter how difficult it is for her to watch him enjoy opportunities to create meaningful, appreciated art while she’s stuck creating second-class art at lower level institutions.

Continuing to work backwards, Cathy recounts the last time Jamie came to visit her in Ohio, where she was working as an actress in a small, summer theatre while Jamie continued to write in New York. Cathy was under the impression that Jamie was going to stay for a few days, see Cathy perform in a matinee, and celebrate her birthday. Jamie, however, planned to head back to New York for another party held in honor of his book and, more than likely, another night with another girlfriend he’d pick up at that party. Fuming, Cathy belts, “You can’t spend a single day that’s not about/ You and you and nothing but you... Miles and piles of you / Pushing through windows and bursting through walls / En route to the sky” (Brown, “See I’m Smiling”). Ironically, later in the musical but earlier in their relationship, Cathy asked for just that: “I want

you and you and nothing but you / Miles and piles of you... No substitution will do / Nothing but fresh, undiluted and pure / Top of the line and totally mine!" (Brown, "I Can Do Better than That"). Cathy claimed to want Jaime in full, without any modifications. Evidently, though, Cathy didn't want what she thought she wanted. It's harder to swallow someone in full, without any modifications when they are living the dream you aren't capable of accessing, hence the lyrical twist between "I Can Do Better than That" and "See I'm Smiling."

Cathy may have had unrealistic expectations, believing that their marriage would be "easier than it turned out to be" (Brown, "If I Didn't Believe in You"), but she believed wholeheartedly, remaining true to her want of only Jamie for the duration of their relationship. Unlike Jamie, Cathy never cheats, though she certainly had opportunities while spending her summers in Ohio. She specifically mentions a fellow actor named Richard: "He wants me, he wants me, but he ain't gonna get me" (Brown, "A Summer in Ohio"). In Cathy's estimation as described through her solos, Cathy was certainly jealous of Jamie's success. Regardless, she remained faithful to Jaime, tried to revel in his success with him, and believed that their relationship would continue to be a source of fulfillment for them both. Jamie was the one who "decided it's time to move on" (Brown, "Still Hurting").

Conversely, Jamie argues that their relationship failed because Cathy ceased to support him in his writing even though Jamie did nothing but encourage her through her struggle for the success she never finds. For example, when Cathy returns home from another failed audition, ready to throw in the towel entirely, Jamie creates an adorable allegory about an old man named Schmuel, who spent his whole life as a tailor working on all his necessary projects while neglecting the one project he wanted to work on: "'If I only had time,' old Schmuel said / 'I would build the dress that's in my head / A dress to fire / The mad desire / Of girls from here to

Minsk / But I have no more hours left to sew.’” A magic clock, though, decides to reverse itself and grant Schmucl the time to create his dress, to “sew and be happy.” In this allegory, Cathy is Schmucl and Jamie is the clock; he offers to carry their relationship financially so that Cathy can continue to audition and audition and audition until she finds her success. He promises, “Say goodbye to wiping ashtrays at the bar / Say hello to Cathy Hiatt, big-time star! / 'Cause I say... Cathy, you get to be happy!... I give you unlimited time!... Stop temping and go and be happy!” (Brown, “The Schmucl Song”).

Cathy, however, ceases to celebrate Jamie entirely. At one point, she refuses to go to one of his book signings, adamant that she will be staying home no matter how much Jamie wants her to join him. Even during the midst of this heated argument, Jamie is still supportive, explaining, “If I didn't believe in you / We wouldn't be having this fight” (Brown, “If I Didn't Believe in You”). The fact that they're arguing means that they're together, that Jamie loves and believes in Cathy's talent, that Jamie loves and believes in their marriage. If he didn't, he could walk out of the door and walk out of their relationship. No matter how bitter, how unsupportive Cathy grows at times, Jamie does his best to understand and to speak truth into Cathy's life, even if that truth is harsh: “If I'm cheering on your side, Cathy / Why can't you support mine?” He wants Cathy to be happy being married to him whether or not she is finding equal levels of fame, because “[He] will not fail so [she] can be comfortable / [He] will not lose because [she] can't win” (Brown, “If I Didn't Believe in You”). Despite this tender moment, this blend of understanding and correction, Cathy locks herself in their bathroom and Jamie heads to his party alone.

After Cathy's outburst, Jamie finds it harder and harder to remain faithful. He starts making “conscious, deliberate mistakes” (Brown, “Nobody Needs to Know”) because temptation

proves too great. He's usually at parties for his books, and there are well-dressed women at all these parties, and those well-dressed women appreciate his art, and he can't help but be enticed. In "A Miracle Would Happen," Jamie details this problem and tries to convince himself that everything will be okay, singing, "And in a perfect world / A miracle would happen... And it'd be me and Cathy / And nothing else would matter / But it's fine, it's fine, it's fine / You know I love her... It's not a problem / It's just a challenge... to resist temptation." When Cathy moves to Ohio and there's no more immediate accountability, though, Jamie starts sleeping around, weaving a web of lies that Cathy has no problem seeing straight through, fueling her anger towards the so-called "savior of writing" (Brown, "See I'm Smiling"). Jamie doesn't think Cathy's anger is justified though. He thinks that he has the right to "one private room at the back of [his] heart" for those who truly appreciate him, but when Cathy finds it, she "sends in battalions/ to tear it and blow it apart" (Brown, "Nobody Needs to Know"). Thus, Jamie lays all the blame for their divorce on Cathy's irrational inability to appreciate Jamie for who he is, which ultimately drives him to supposedly justified cheating that, in Jamie's estimation, was not a primary factor behind their divorce.

Alternating between these two arguments, formatting the plotline in an innovative order is precisely what sets *The Last Five Years* apart from other musicals. Audience members are drawn into the story, forced to evaluate Cathy and Jamie's accounts separately but concurrently. Finding out the details of the relationship out of order is honest – isn't this how we tell stories in reality? Life is too messy to tell a full story in perfect chronology. Instead, we bounce around. We forget something, we go back to add it in, and then we resume from where we left off. Telling the story in a back-and-forth fashion heightens the audience's empathy, as it makes the story more realistic. This format not only captures audiences' hearts, but it also captures

audiences' minds in working on a symbolic level. In an interview, Brown explained, "Once I hit on the idea of the alternating chronologies, it seemed like the perfect way to tell the story... 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" (Cates).

Additionally, the format of the musical forces audience members to constantly decide, debate, and re-decide whose fault the divorce is – Cathy's or Jamie's? After hearing Jamie sing, it's easy to turn against Cathy; after hearing Cathy sing, it's easy to turn against Jamie. As the final notes fade, audience members are left emotionally exhausted. It's impossible to find resolution because the romantic situation is too complex, too realistic. Making clear-cut decisions about who is right and who is wrong isn't possible. Both are right, and both are wrong. Jamie and Cathy are fully rounded characters, never flat enough for the simple answers that simpler characters from other popular musicals provide. This realistic depth that Jaime and Cathy both exhibit is remarkable, imperative to the musical's powerful effect and consequent popularity. Brown articulates it best himself: "I felt very sure, and still do, that there are no victims and no bad guys. Both of these people are equally responsible for the good things and the bad things in their relationship. It is of course my hope that the audience perceives it that way as well. I really just wanted to be honest about who these people were and how they acted" (Cates).

This character depth, the honesty with which both Cathy and Jamie are depicted is a direct result of Brown's own experience, since the entire musical is based on real people in a real, failed relationship: Brown and his ex-wife Theresa O'Neill. When the two met, O'Neill was a struggling actress hoping to make a name for herself on Broadway, but finding little success. Hence, she was answering calls for renowned producer Hal Prince, hoping to someday be cast in one of his shows. Conversely, Brown's *Parade* was on it's way to Broadway, since Prince had

taken Brown under his wing and decided that Brown was going to be the next composer/lyricist to find fame. In other words, O'Neill's situation was identical to Cathy's, and Brown's was nearly identical to Jamie's, the only difference being the occupation composer/lyricist rather than author. Brown and O'Neill's relationship fell apart because of O'Neill's jealousy, as she never earned a notable role. In fact, O'Neill is only famous today because she sued Brown for making overt ties between Cathy's character and her own. Brown was then legally forced to revise his original script before the premier in New York, removing Cathy's Irish Catholic heritage and her nickname "Angel," as those were indicative of O'Neill (Riedel). In response to the suing, Brown explained, "Honestly, I wasn't trying to settle any scores, I was just working through the very painful wreckage of a relationship that meant a lot to me" (Cates). For Brown, writing this piece was cathartic. He poured his entire heart into the score, hoping to accurately depict both his and her experiences as honestly as possible.

So, if Cathy and Jamie's relationship is so compelling because it is so realistic, if it's not possible to come to a clean-cut, universal decision about which character ruined the relationship, then the play's theme is subjective, unique to each audience member's interpretation. This is true to a certain extent. However, I would argue that Jamie and Cathy's accusations are rooted in the same, base issue, lending to an objective, universal theme: Jamie and Cathy's marriage was doomed to fail because from the start because both characters chose a partner based on what he/she was not instead of on who he/she was.

Jamie's song "Shiksa Goddess," for example, never mentions anything good about Cathy, only terrible things about the Jewish girls he's dated in the past. In fact, "Shiksa Goddess" never mentions anything about Cathy at all, only that she is a "Shiksa," a pagan woman who has enticed this God-fearing Jew. It doesn't matter where Cathy comes from "just as long as [she's]

not from Hebrew School.” It doesn’t matter if Cathy has “a shaved head” or “drinks blood” or “once [was] a man.” Jamie would be okay with any of those characteristics, even though Cathy doesn’t have any of them. The only criteria Jamie does care about? Cathy is so beautiful and so non-Jewish that he’s ready to be her “Hebrew slave at [her] service,” ready to disregard the fact that his “people have suffered for thousands of years” because they failed to hold to Jewish law; meanwhile, Jamie is also failing while undressing Cathy as he sings. Jamie doesn’t care about or even know who Cathy is; he only knows what she’s not, and that possibility excites him.

Similarly, Cathy spends the song “I Can Do Better Than That” comparing her relationship with Jamie to other relationships. First, Cathy notes that her “best friend had a little situation / At the end of senior year” which forced her to marry her high school boyfriend so the stigma of being pregnant out of wedlock would be minimized. Married far before she was ready, Cathy’s best friend was forced to settle down in “a little cute house on a little cute street / With a crucifix on the door,” while her now husband “got a job at a record store in the mall.” This less than glamorous picture helped Cathy figure out what she didn’t want out of a relationship, though it offered no clarity towards what she did want. She only knew that she “could do better than that.” Cathy’s college boyfriend ended up not being the “better than that,” though. “He was cute... he was sweet... he was good in bed,” but he “blew [her] off with a heartfelt letter,” and Cathy knew that better was still out there, thought she couldn’t define it. Because Jamie doesn’t work at a record store, and because Jamie is the polar opposite of her college boyfriend, Cathy thinks that he must be the better not because of what he is, but because of what he is not.

Ultimately, neither Cathy nor Jamie is fully responsible for their relationship’s failure. Rather, both should have been pursuing their own dreams in definitive terms, trying to find someone that matched with what they wanted instead of what they didn’t. Beginning a

relationship by comparing the current partner to past partners, creating a checklist of characteristics past partners had that aren't desirable in the current partner will not yield a sustained, fulfilling marriage. Jamie and Cathy learned this the hard way, as did Brown and O'Neill. And in creating a cathartic, honest experience in *The Last Five Years*, Brown has succeeded in writing a unique, innovative musical that speaks to all romantic relationships. *The Last Five Years* is sure to remain popular for years to come, likely earning it's place among the classics with time.

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