

Review: *The Last Five Years*, Farmington Valley Stage Company, Collinsville, CT.

By: Rebecca Pokorski Theatre Artist and Community Arts Advocate 3/9/2026

It's hard to believe that "The Last Five Years" is celebrating its 25th year. This Jason Robert Brown musical is one of those shows that we theatre geeks, young and old just really love. At the Farmington Valley Stage company in Collinsville, Connecticut, director Dianna Waller Wood delivers the JRB experience, simply and beautifully. The last five years follows a couple, Cathy and Jamie, through five years of their relationship and marriage. What makes this show so unique is that the story is told by both characters; however, the character of Cathy begins her story at the end of their relationship, and the character of Jamie begins his story at the beginning. They do meet in the middle during the wedding scene. I'm not going to provide a whole synopsis of the show because it's a waste of time and everybody skips it anyway.

I saw the Sunday matinee with Kate Stango as Cathy and Cole Urso as Jamie. Both actors were tasked with telling their story entirely through song. This not only requires exceptional musicianship but also requires intense, acting abilities. This show features scenes that display the run of an entire emotional gambit. This is not the type of show that a performer can just stand and sing, which is particularly challenging because anyone who has sung JRB before (which I have) knows that he will find your break, wherever it is, and dance around it with enthusiasm. This is a particular challenge for a director. Trust and self-awareness has to exist between the actors and the director. The actor needs to be able to honestly express when it's too much. The director needs to remain intuitive enough to know when the actor needs to pull back or conversely can handle more. Additionally, no matter what, the director needs to make blocking choices that will keep an audience interested. Waller Wood, who has trodden the boards as a very talented and accomplished actor herself, was certainly up to the challenge.

Miss Stango as Cathy of course, has an exceptional voice. I love that she doesn't overdo her vibrato, which is appropriate for this show. She'll add it at the end of a sustained note and it's perfect. I particularly enjoyed her performance of "Summer in Ohio," which also happens to be one of my favorite JRB songs. She portrays vulnerability without appearing wishy-washy. Her character is a working actress, yet she sees herself as a failure of sorts because even though she's working, she hasn't made it big. She marries Jamie, who becomes an extremely successful author which just compounds her feelings of inadequacy. In her portrayal, we see Cathy as she sees herself. We don't see her as she is perceived by her husband, Jamie.

Cole Urso as Jamie also possesses an exceptional voice with a beautiful falsetto that surprises and delights. We get to see Jamie's evolution since his story starts at the beginning and that's what I want to focus on. The first couple of scenes seem as if Mr. Urso and the Orchestra are not really in sync with each other. I'm sure this was not

done on purpose, but it worked because at the beginning, Jamie comes off as being very awkward, and the truth is that he is. As the character progresses, you are watching Jamie mature, and Mr. Urso portrays this progression very nicely. Of particular note is "If I didn't believe in You" where you're able to see the frustration of feeling unsupported. We are also able to get an additional glimpse into Cathy as we learn of Jamie's perception of her reaction to his success. Now whether or not that perception is reality or not, is really left up to the viewer. Nonetheless, Cathy's insecurity has clearly grown as she suspects her husband of infidelity which ends up being true.

The ending of the show is a blend of hope and heartbreak. Powerful lessons on the importance of partnership in a relationship, and the corruption of ambition without wisdom are taught and audience was clearly along for the ride. You could hear a pin drop during "Goodbye Until Tomorrow/I Could Never Rescue You" and after all, isn't that the goal? Waller Wood, Stango, and Urso were able to successfully achieve some very intense storytelling. In the directors note in the program, Waller Wood writes: "rather than layering on concepts or adding "cleverness", we chose to stay grounded in the honesty of the writing." Good choice.

Now let's talk about technical elements. First off, the small yet exceptional Orchestra led by Musical Director Micheal Yachanin was on point and quite balanced. There is nothing worse than seeing a show and having the Orchestra overpower the singers. Of particular note was Laura McLaughlin on the violin. I don't remember what song it was but she played a couple of high notes that just made my heart sing. Bravo.

I have to comment on the lighting. (Wes Baldwin) I loved it. It was simple and effective. A large screen up Stage very subtly changed colors adding to the emotionality of the scene. I know Waller Wood's work, and I know that these colors were well thought out. Also, what a delight when an actor knows how to find their light. Thank you for not frustrating me with that.

The costume design by Cindy Braunlich was perfectly appropriate and not distracting from the story. The sound (Chris Lilley) was fine for the most part, a good balance. There were a couple unexpected microphone hiccups, but it wasn't excessive. The set changes were fast and not distracting, which I appreciated.

Overall, this was an extremely polished quality production that allowed the audience to experience the story without worry. There are three more chances to experience this exceptional production. March 13 and 14th at 7:30 PM and March 15 at 2:30 PM. Tickets can be purchased at Fvstage.org.