



Hart Theater Company's *The Last Five Years* • Review (SLC)

Description

SALT LAKE CITY, UT *The Last Five Years* is an intimate and structurally experimental two-person musical with book, music, and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown. It premiered at Chicago's Northlight Theatre in 2001 before transferring Off-Broadway in 2002 at the Minetta Lane Theatre, where Norbert Leo Butz and Sherie Rene Scott originated the roles of Jamie and Cathy. The show traces a five-year relationship through a distinctive non-linear design: Cathy's storyline moves backward in time from the end of the marriage to the beginning, while Jamie's moves forward from their first meeting to their break-up, intersecting only once at their wedding. Over the past two decades, it has become a staple of regional, academic, and international theater and was adapted into a 2014 film starring Anna Kendrick and Jeremy Jordan. After more than 20 years of productions, *The Last Five Years* received its first Broadway staging in 2025 at the Hudson Theatre, directed by Whitney White and starring Nick Jonas and Adrienne Warren.

Brown's musical is challenging to stage precisely because of its Möbius-strip architecture—a structure that loops back on itself like a one-sided surface with no clear beginning or end. Hart Theater Company's new production at the Regent Street Black Box meets that challenge with a staging that is delicate, disciplined, and deeply felt. Under the direction of Morag Shepherd, with music direction by Anthony Thomas Buck, this *Last Five Years* becomes less a nostalgic postmortem of a failed marriage and more an excavation—a careful sifting through memory, ambition, gendered imbalance, and the quiet violences couples inflict on one another while still believing they are doing their best.



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Diego Rodriguez as Jamie. PC: Brighton Sloan

A Production Built on Intimacy

This is a musical that thrives in small spaces. Jamie and Cathy don't need a proscenium; they need proximity. They need the audience close enough to see micro-shifts: a flicker of hope, a defensive tightening of the jaw, a smile deployed to dodge an argument. Staged at the Eccles black-box stage, they are able to do that, and Shepherd, whose work often leans into psychological fragmentation and nonlinear storytelling, is perfectly matched to Brown's structure. Her directorial hand is light but precise—she trusts the actors and the score to carry the emotional architecture, choosing staging that feels lived-in rather than presentational. The characters inhabit the same physical world even when they are not in the same temporal one. That juxtaposition—joy and devastation sharing the same space—creates a haunting resonance.

Becca Lichfield's Cathy: Raw, Resonant, and Unflinchingly Human

Becca Lichfield brings Cathy to life, opening the show with "Still Hurting." What Lichfield brings to that number—and to Cathy overall—is not only heartbreak but a kind of wounded clarity: she sings like someone whose body remembers the relationship even if her mind wishes it didn't.

Her interpretation is grounded, rich, and emotionally textured. Lichfield avoids the trap of playing Cathy as the perpetually defeated partner; instead, she gives her flashes of humor, frustration, ambition, and self-awareness.

Two of Cathy's most affecting moments come in "Climbing Uphill/Audition Sequence" and "I Can Do Better Than That." In "Climbing Uphill," Lichfield embodies the exhausting grind of being a woman in the acting industry—walking into audition after audition, only to be dismissed for type, weight, age, or nothing at all. Shepherd's staging sharpens the metaphor: Cathy fights to be seen while Jamie is wrestling not with failure but with the temptation to cheat. The juxtaposition lands with devastating clarity. Cathy is literally climbing uphill in a field where women often must work twice as hard because there are roughly two male roles for every female one, while Jamie's greatest struggle is resisting the attention his success invites. The imbalance is structural, emotional, and marital.

Later, in "I Can Do Better Than That," Lichfield offers a burst of optimism and vulnerability, reminding us who Cathy once was—hopeful, ambitious, ready to leap toward a future she believed they could build together. Seeing these songs in such close narrative proximity heightens the tragedy of their unraveling and illuminates the uneven terrain Cathy has been navigating all along.

Another standout moment is Cathy's "A Summer in Ohio," one of the show's funniest numbers and an absolute vocal knockout. Lichfield delivers the song with razor-sharp comedic timing and a grounded exasperation that feels both personal and universally relatable to anyone who has ever worked a less-than-glamorous regional contract. Her ability to balance humor with loneliness makes the number land not merely as comic relief, but as a window into Cathy's resilience and her desperate hope that her career—and her marriage—might someday feel less like an exercise in waiting.

A woman sitting on a blue chair, appearing contemplative and serious, dressed in a light blue shirt and dark pants.
Becca Lichfield as Cathy. PC: Brighton Sloan

Diego Rodriguez as Jamie: Charismatic, Complicated, and Uncomfortably Real

Diego Rodriguez offers a sharply intelligent performance as Jamie Wellerstein, a character too often flattened into villain or victim. His Jamie is bright, funny, talented, and charismatic: precisely the man Cathy fell for. But he is also impatient, self-absorbed, and increasingly intoxicated by his own success.

“Moving Too Fast” is exhilarating under his kinetic drive; the musical ensemble—especially the pianist—does an excellent job supporting him. His rendition of “The Schmuely Song” is delightful. Rodriguez delivers the whimsical parable of Schmuely—the old tailor who inspires Cathy to chase her artistic dreams—with playful earnestness and impeccable comedic timing. It is one of the few moments where his affection and optimism align fully, and in this production, the number becomes a tender window into who they were before ambition and insecurity began to erode them.

One number worth noting is Jamie’s early song “Shiksa Goddess,” whose humor is rooted in Jewish cultural references and the idea of dating outside one’s faith. The lyrics carry a bit of early-2000s cultural baggage, but they land differently in this production because Rodriguez is Argentinian and Jewish himself. Instead of leaning into the song’s ethnic joke, Rodriguez plays it with youthful bravado and affectionate silliness—more about Jamie’s excitement at being in love than about religious boundary-crossing. It’s a smart, grounded interpretive choice, allowing the song to function as character exposition without reproducing the original’s more reductive stereotypes. The result keeps the number aligned with the emotional intelligence of the rest of the production.

In “If I Didn’t Believe in You,” Rodriguez finds the quiet cruelty of self-righteous tenderness—not shouted, but insidious. His “Nobody Needs to Know,” sung with raw, conflicted agony, is one of the most emotional performances of the night.

Promotional image featuring Anthony Buck, the music director for 'The Last Five Years' musical, with Music Direction by Anthony Buck

Anthony Thomas Buck’s Musical Direction: The Production’s Beating Heart

Hart Theater Company’s greatest strength continues to be its commitment to live musicians, and this musical is arguably the clearest proof of why.

Anthony Thomas Buck leads a small but exceptionally tight ensemble that handles Brown’s rhythmic intricacies, shifting tonalities, and layered emotional landscapes with remarkable precision. The score breathes, expands, stretches, contracts—alive in a way only live music can achieve.

Brown’s compositions demand sensitivity to storytelling, and Buck’s direction ensures every tempo change, sustain, and instrumental color supports the emotional world of the actors. Cathy’s despair and Jamie’s exhilaration are not just acted: they are brought into being.

Design Elements: Minimalist, Strategic, Effective

Grace Heinz’s sound design keeps the mix balanced in a space that can easily muddy vocals. Kai Sadowski’s lighting design subtly delineates timelines, with the show starting out in blue and shifting throughout between emotional tones, utilizing warm and cool palettes. Paige Wilson’s costumes ground the characters in the contemporary world without distraction—clean, straightforward, and

character-centered.

These understated choices elevate the performers without drawing unnecessary attention. The production knows the show is the story, the music, and the emotional dissonance between two people trying—and failing—to meet each other in time.

Promotional image for the musical 'The Last Five Years' featuring a smiling woman with long hair, w
Directed by Morag Shepherd

Morag Shepherd's Direction: Precision, Parallels, and the Architecture of Small Gestures (Spoilers)

Morag Shepherd's direction is full of small, quietly devastating choices—the kind that never draw attention to themselves, but accumulate power over the course of ninety minutes. What makes her work so effective here is not just her sensitivity to the musical's nonlinear structure, but her commitment to mirroring, echo, and reversal—the visual and emotional grammar of *The Last Five Years*.

One of Shepherd's most striking contributions is the subtle physical mirroring she builds between Cathy and Jamie, reinforcing the show's Möbius-strip design. Jamie begins the play dressed head to toe in denim, grounded and casual in the early flush of his career; Cathy ends the play wearing a similar jean jacket and jeans, a quiet sartorial rhyme that links their trajectories without ever commenting on it. They complete each other's aesthetic arcs, passing through and into the emotional states the other once occupied. It's the kind of detail an inattentive director would overlook, but Shepherd treats clothing as temporal storytelling.

Likewise, the staging contains gentle reversals that reveal how the couple has effectively swapped positions by the end. Cathy's opening moments find her seated at the table, surrounded by papers, notes, and fragments of a past she is sifting through in despair. By the musical's end, it is Jamie at that same table gathering papers, sorting his life into something he can carry forward. Shepherd makes no announcement of these parallels; she allows the imagery to speak for itself. The result is a production that quietly underscores how relationships bend, break, and invert—how two people can start in opposite emotional worlds and, over the course of five years, arrive in each other's.

These thoughtful repetitions—gestural, visual, emotional—give the production a sense of cohesion that honors Brown's structure while deepening it. Shepherd doesn't force a connection where the script withholds it; instead, she threads tiny stitches of resonance between two stories moving in different directions through time. It is a disciplined, elegant direction: nothing ornamental, everything intentional.



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Quibbles?

Because *The Last Five Years* hinges so heavily on its non-linear architecture, a production bears some responsibility for orienting its audience. I knew the structure in advance; my guest did not. When I asked her what she thought afterward, she said simply, “I was lost.” With no intermission and no playbill or dramaturgical note to explain the opposing timelines the production assumes a level of prior knowledge not all audiences will bring with them. And when someone unfamiliar with the musical misses the structure, they risk missing the entire point: the emotional engine of the show is that its two timelines only converge once, in the wedding duet “The Next Ten Minutes.” Without understanding the reverse-and-forward design, that moment of convergence the musical’s single breath of shared time can pass without its full weight.

Professional critics have noted this same structural fragility. Jonathan Mandell’s Broadway review stresses that the musical coheres only when staging choices help the audience track its emotional and temporal shifts. Lane Williamson goes further, arguing that blurring the timelines “blurs the clear delineation in Brown’s plotting.” Their critiques echoed in my mind during Hart Theater Company’s production. For first-time viewers, the absence of even a brief structural cue makes it easy to lose one’s footing. In a musical built entirely on temporal disjunction, a small bit of orientation isn’t just helpful it’s part of the production’s responsibility to its audience.



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On the Beauty and Brutality of the Non-Linear Structure

Although *The Last Five Years* is tricky, it is also—perhaps paradoxically—the perfect form for this particular story. Relationships rarely unfold in clean chronology; we live and relive their memories in loops. A small hurt from years ago resurfaces without warning, while longing for their company comes once they are gone. The show’s reverse-and-forward structure captures that truth with startling precision. Cathy’s rewind through the relationship echoes how we return to old memories even after we’ve lived through the ending. Jamie’s steady move forward feels like the way people sometimes rush ahead, believing that if they just keep moving, they won’t have to deal with what they’re leaving behind. The musical’s design becomes a map of how love is remembered: not as a straight line, but as a series of collisions between hope and hindsight.

That is why the ending of the show feels quietly symbolic. Their timelines pull apart, but not into despair—into possibility. Jamie walks toward an uncertain future, and Cathy walks toward a still-intact hope. The two images held side by side form a kind of emotional palindrome: the end is also a beginning. In the production, this moment lands with particular poignancy. The nonlinear structure becomes not only the story of a breakup, but an invitation to consider how we carry former loves with us—how we learn from them, mourn them, and eventually, gently, let them go so that something new can begin.

A Lasting Impression

The Last Five Years is a musical about memory, misalignment, and the tragedy of two people who love each other but cannot grow in the same direction. Hart Theater Company’s production honors that complexity without sentimentalizing it. It is honest, intimate, musically alive, and emotionally rigorous.

More importantly, it understands that the show is not asking for a villain. It's asking for recognition for the audience to see themselves in the messy, complicated, beautiful attempt to build a life with another person.

This production delivers that poignantly.

If you're looking to begin 2026 with theatre that feels close, vulnerable, and genuinely moving, this is the one to see. Hart Theater Company plays *The Last Five Years* at the Eccles Regent Street Black Box through January 18.

Creative Team

Director *Morag Shepherd*
Music Director *Anthony Thomas Buck*
Stage Manager *Milla Bee*
Sound Design *Grace Heinz*
Lighting Design *Kai Sadowski*
Photography *Brighton Sloan*

Cast

Cathy Hiatt *Becca Lichfield (@becca.lichfield)*
Jamie Wellerstein *Diego Rodriguez (@diego_rodriguez_actor)*

The Last Five Years is an emotionally charged, two-person musical by Jason Robert Brown that deconstructs the rise and fall of a marriage through a unique, non-linear structure. Set in New York, the story follows Jamie, a rising novelist, and Cathy, a struggling actress, as their personal and professional ambitions collide.

The narrative unfolds through two opposing timelines that intersect only once. Jamie's story progresses chronologically from their first spark of romance to their final goodbye, while Cathy's tale begins at the end of the marriage and moves backward to their very first date.

Run time: 105 minutes, no intermission.

Age policy: **Mature Audiences 16+. Strong language and adult content. No infants being held. All patrons must have a ticket regardless of age.**

Ticket Information

- **Dates:** January 8-18, 2026
 - **Venue:** Regent Street Black Box, Eccles Theater, Salt Lake City, UT 84101
 - **Adult / Full:** ranges approximately **\$30.00** (plus fees)
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- **Student (with ID): \$30.00 total** (discount-based pricing)
 - **Senior (65+): \$30.00 total** (discount-based pricing)
- (Pricing from the box office interface shows a range around these amounts; fees vary per ticket.)*

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Date

2026/05/23

Date Created

2026/01/10

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