



# THE LAST FIVE YEARS

THE OFFICIAL GRAND THEATRE STUDY GUIDE

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# The Last Five Years

## About the Writer and Composer

Jason Robert Brown, an American musical theatre composer and lyricist was born in Tarrytown, New York in 1970. He also serves as musical director, conductor, orchestrator and pianist for his own productions. He is best known for his unique composing style that combines pop, rock and theatrical lyrics. His works are often rhythmically challenging and are difficult for anyone who tries to play them. Most of his music also includes complex harmonies and requires a wide vocal range.

Brown grew up in the suburbs of New York. He attended the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, NY during the year and French Woods Festival of the Performing Arts in Hancock, NY in the summer.

Brown's career began when he started working as an arranger, conductor and pianist in New York City playing at nightclubs and bars throughout the city. He began with shows such as William Finn's *A New Brain* and at the age of 25 he marked his first major New York production with *Songs For a New World*. The off-Broadway revue ran at the WPA Theatre from October 11 to November 5, 1995 and was directed by director/producer Hal Prince's daughter, Daisy Prince. Through his association with the Prince family, Brown found himself writing for the Broadway musical *Parade*. In 1999 Brown won his first Tony Award after *Parade* won for Best Original Score.

Brown went on working with Daisy Prince and wrote not only the songs but also the book for his third major show, *The Last Five Years*. The two-person show had been inspired by his first failed marriage and after the original run in Chicago moved to off-Broadway. The show, although winning Brown a Drama Desk Award for Best Music and Best Lyrics and being nominated for Best Orchestrations, received mixed reviews and lasted only two months before closing.

In 2003, Brown was nominated yet again for a Tony Award for Best Original Score for his work on the Broadway Flop *Urban Cowboy*. This time, however, he lost to Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman for their score for *Hairspray*.

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In June of 2005, Brown released his first solo album, "Wearing Someone Else's Clothes". The album features his compositions, arrangements and vocals. Later that year his "Chanukah Suite", an eight minute chorale fanfare in three parts, premiered with two performances by the Los Angeles Master Chorale at the Walt Disney Concert Hall.

Brown married composer Georgia Stitt with whom he has a daughter.

He is working on several projects including a musical version of the hit movie "*Honeymoon in Vegas*". He teaches courses in musical theatre performance and composition at the University of Southern California. Brown also continues to perform his own work, singing and playing the piano.

His most recent work, *13* (musical), premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles, CA on January 7, 2007. On October 5, 2008 the show opened on Broadway at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre and closed soon after on January 4, 2009.

## About the Play

*The Last Five Years* is a one-act musical that was inspired by the writer, Jason Robert Brown's, first failed marriage to Theresa O'Neill. After the show opened O'Neill threatened legal actions after she stated that the musical represented their relationship too closely. Brown later changed a song in the show to reduce the similarity between his first wife and the character Cathy.

The show debuted in May of 2001 at the Northlight Theatre in Skokie, IL with Norbert Leo Butz as the male character, Jamie, and Lauren Kennedy as the female character, Cathy. Kennedy was replaced by Sherie Rene Scott, who performed on the cast recording after Kennedy had previously committed to the show *South Pacific* in London. The Skokie, IL production ran until July before opening in March 2002 at the Minetta Lane Theatre off-Broadway. Butz and Scott followed with the show to star in the New York production that was directed by Daisy Prince. The show,

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although being nominated and even winning many awards, had little success and closed on May 5, 2002.

The production ended up winning the 2002 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Music and Lyrics and received nominations for Outstanding Musical, Outstanding Actor, Outstanding Actress, Outstanding Orchestrations and Outstanding Set Design. The show also received the Lucille Lortel nomination for Outstanding Musical and Outstanding Actor and an Outer Critics Circle Award nomination for Outstanding Off-Broadway Musical.

The musical has since then been mounted at different theatres all over the world including theatres in Canada, U.S.A, Germany, Japan, Greece, Austria, U.K., Australia and Mexico.

## Play Synopsis

*The Last Five Years* tells the story of a couple, Jamie and Cathy, and goes through the relationship between the two characters over the course of five years. Throughout the musical you see the couple on their first date, their marriage and at the end of their relationship when the marriage is ending. The musical however is presented in a unique style telling the story from each character's point of view. Cathy starts the musical in the present at the end of their marriage and travels backward through time to the beginning of their relationship while Jamie starts at the beginning and ends in the present. Throughout the musical the characters do not interact with one another except for in the middle when their time-lines cross and they meet at their wedding.

**Setting:** The play takes place mainly in New York, where the couple lives, but there are some scenes in Ohio.

The play opens with Cathy sitting in her apartment reading a letter from Jamie – their relationship is over and Jamie will be moving out. Cathy wishes there was some way to fix their problems and be together. At this point, Jamie appears on the stage, unnoticed by Cathy. It is five years earlier and he is on their first date. Jamie is Jewish and Cathy is not, yet Jamie decides that despite this, he thinks he is falling in love.

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The scene switches to Cathy on a pier in Ohio with Jamie who has come to visit her for her birthday. She is unhappy spending so much time away from Jamie and she is happy to see him and try to sort out their marital problems. She thinks they have the whole weekend together when Jamie announces he must return to New York the next day. Cathy is upset at first and quickly becomes angry, accusing Jamie of always thinking only of himself.

Years earlier, Jamie speaks on the phone to a literary agent who is interested in the book he has just written. He and Cathy have been dating for a while. By this point, things are going well with plans to move in together. His future looks very promising, both professionally and romantically, although he is slightly worried that things may be moving too fast. Meanwhile, Cathy's career is stalling, and she is desperately looking for work.

The scene changes to Jamie's book signing party. Cathy is sitting with Jamie while he greets his fans and signs copies of his book. She thinks about her life with him knowing that even though he can be obsessive about his writing and sometimes ignores her, she still loves him.

Jamie and Cathy celebrate their first Christmas together. Jamie tells her a story he has written about an old tailor named Schmuel who finds a magical clock that gives him infinite time to realize his dreams. Jamie tells Cathy that she needs to take time to unlock her dreams of becoming an actress. He fully supports her wish to be an actress, encouraging her to get headshots taken and go on auditions. He also buys her a watch to remind her to take the time to find her dream.

Cathy is in a play in Ohio writing a letter to Jamie. They have just been married and she misses him. She is on tour with a play and she describes her life with her cast members to Jamie in the letter.

In the next scene, Jamie proposes to Cathy. For the first and only time in the musical, they sing together. They exchange vows and

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rings, promising to stay together forever. They kiss and Jamie escorts Cathy to a boat, watching her go.

Jamie, now a newlywed, is struggling with temptation. He feels as though now that he is married, he is surrounded by attractive women who are all interested in him, especially with his career taking off. Meanwhile, Cathy is going through auditions for an acting job in Ohio. The whole process of auditioning frustrates her and she feels inadequate.

In the next scene, Jamie, on the phone with Cathy, tries to convince her that his relationship with his editor, Elise, is purely platonic. Cathy does not believe him. Jamie wants to celebrate a glowing review he received, but Cathy is not interested. Jamie is frustrated with his wife, but he is still supportive of her dream to be an actress.

Jamie reads an excerpt from his book which is obviously about his relationship with Cathy. In the next scene, he is fighting with her, trying to get her to listen to him. He wonders if they will ever get to the point where things are easy and there aren't so many obstacles in their marriage. He accuses her of being unsupportive of his career, wishing that he would fail because her career is failing. He promises her that he still believes in her and loves her unconditionally.

Early in the relationship, Cathy takes Jamie to her parents' house in the suburbs. She talks about her past relationships and her desire to escape the small town she grew up in, and refuses to end up married with children in a dead end job, knowing that she can do better than that. She asks Jamie to move in with her.

Towards the end of the marriage, Jamie wakes up in his apartment with a woman beside him who is not Cathy. He tries to defend his actions, blaming Cathy for ruining their relationship. He promises not to lie to this woman in his bed and tells her, just as he told Cathy earlier, that he could love someone like her.

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Cathy is at the end of her first date with Jamie. She is falling in love with him already, and tells him that she is ready for this romance. At the same time, five years later, Jamie sits in their apartment writing a farewell note to Cathy at the end of their relationship. Cathy waves goodbye to Jamie saying goodbye until tomorrow, but Jamie tells Cathy simply goodbye.

## Characters

**Catherine (Cathy) Hiatt** – Jamie’s wife. She is a struggling actress.

**Jamie Wellerstein** – Cathy’s husband. He is a writer who finds success and fame at a young age.

## Questions & Activities

1. In the musical both characters start at different places in their relationship. Jamie starts telling the story from the beginning and ends the play in the present while Cathy starts in the present and tells the story backwards ending on their first date. Jamie and Cathy meet in the middle at their wedding. Do you think this way of telling the story was effective? Why or why not?
2. Did you find the play hard to follow because of the way the play unfolded? Why do you think the playwright decided to write the musical this way?
3. Write a review of the musical. Explain what you liked and what you would change if you were the director. Some things to consider when reviewing are the costumes, set, plot, music and the actors.
4. How does Jamie’s character evolve and change throughout the play? How does Cathy’s?
5. 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”?
6. Why do you think Jason Robert Brown chose New York for the musical to take place in?

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7. Listen to some of Jason Robert Brown's other musicals such as *Parade*, *Song for a New World* or *Urban Cowboy*. Are there similarities between the music in these shows and the music in *The Last Five Years*?
8. There are only two characters in the show. Do you feel the show would have benefitted by having more characters in the show or were two sufficient? Why?

## Reference Materials

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