



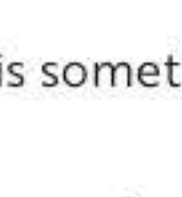
Chris Cherin and Charlotte Boyce Munson in Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "The Last Five Years." Credit: Kevin Lohman

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

# 'The Last Five Years' at Santa Cruz Shakespeare: A beautiful production of a frustrating musical

 BY JANA MARCUS September 15, 2026

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Santa Cruz Shakespeare gives Jason Robert Brown's "The Last Five Years" a thoughtful production, with terrific performances and wonderful live musicianship leading the way. But this musical autopsy of a failed marriage ultimately leaves us with one lingering question: What have we learned from the wreckage?

There is something inherently irresistible about a train wreck.

You know where it is headed. You know the outcome won't be pretty. And still, you watch.

But after 90 minutes spent watching a marriage unravel in Jason Robert Brown's "The Last Five Years," a more pressing question begins to surface:

Why are we watching this particular train wreck?

Santa Cruz Shakespeare's second fall production is a beautifully played, thoughtfully staged version of Brown's intimate two-person musical, directed by Laura Gordon and starring Charlotte Boyce Munson and Chris Cherin. Considerable talent shines onstage and behind it.

The problem, for me, is the musical itself.

Brown wrote "The Last Five Years" in the aftermath of the collapse of his first marriage. The semi-autobiographical work premiered in Chicago in 2001 before opening Off-Broadway the following year. His former wife, Theresa O'Neill, threatened legal action over similarities between her and the character of Cathy, prompting changes to the show before its New York premiere.

That bit of history is hard to forget once you know it.

Perhaps that is why the show's autobiographical roots become increasingly difficult to ignore. It can feel self-indulgent to ask an audience to spend an entire evening inside the emotional autopsy of your failed marriage without ultimately giving us much insight beyond the fact that it failed.

That's ultimately my problem with "The Last Five Years."

Its central device is undeniably clever.

Cathy, a struggling actress, begins at the end of her relationship with Jamie, a young novelist whose career takes off with dizzying speed. She then travels backward through their five years together.

Jamie starts at the other end, thrilled to have met Cathy, and moves forward toward the relationship's demise.

They meet in the middle only once, at their wedding.

It's a terrific theatrical conceit. We watch one person falling in love while already knowing the other is falling out of it. Happiness arrives with an expiration date. Every romantic moment comes with a tiny warning label attached.

But cleverness only gets you so far.

For most of the evening, Cathy and Jamie sing about their ambitions, disappointments, insecurities, resentments and increasingly incompatible expectations. There is almost no spoken dialogue. Brown's score is the conversation, the argument and the emotional landscape.

And that's a lot of Cathy and Jamie.

Fortunately, Charlotte Boyce Munson gives us a Cathy worth watching. Munson has a terrific voice, rich and expressive, but her performance works because she doesn't simply sing the sadness. She finds the humor, awkwardness and frustration underneath it. Her Cathy is immediately sympathetic, particularly as she struggles with an acting career that refuses to take off while watching Jamie's professional life shoot past her own.

"Climbing Uphill," Cathy's wonderfully frantic trip through the indignities of auditioning, is one of the evening's pleasures. Munson gets to step outside the gloom for a while, and she attacks the number with terrific comic timing and energy.

Cherin brings plenty of spunk and restless enthusiasm to Jamie, particularly early in his timeline when love, success and possibility all seem to be arriving at once.

Vocally, however, the two feel mismatched. Munson's voice has a fullness and command that Cherin's does not consistently match. When only two people are carrying an entire musical, there is nowhere for it to hide.



Kristin Garbeff on cello, Chris Cherin as Jamie and Luke Sheperd on piano in Santa Cruz Shakespeare's "The Last Five Years." Credit: Kevin Lohman

The musical accompaniment, on the other hand, is a pleasure.

Music director Luke Shepherd plays Brown's demanding score live on piano, joined by cellist Kristin Garbeff, and the two are wonderful. Shepherd seems particularly at home in this music. Watching him at the piano, you can practically see how much he enjoys playing it.

Thomas Bigley's scenic design is dominated by oversized calendars that reinforce the show's obsession with time. It's a smart idea, though I kept wanting those calendars to tell us more. Fill them up. Give us years, appointments, auditions, book deadlines, dinner dates, crossed-out plans. Let those five years accumulate around these people.

Austin Blake Conlee's costumes were an unexpected disappointment. His designs have sparkled in previous Santa Cruz Shakespeare productions, making the clothing here particularly surprising. Several pieces seemed oddly fitted and didn't flatter the actors.

And in a show this stripped down, you notice.

There is no ensemble rushing in. No big dance number around the corner. No scenery arriving to rescue us.

There are two people. And their marriage is dying.

Which brings us back to the problem.

After spending an evening with Cathy and Jamie, what have we learned?

Relationships fail. Careers create jealousy. Ambition can pull people apart. One person feels abandoned while the other feels suffocated. Resentments accumulate. Someone cheats. Hearts break.

Yes.

But why this marriage? Why these two people? What does Brown show us that makes their wreckage illuminate something larger about love, marriage, ambition or the compromises people make to stay together?

For me, not enough.

Even the ingenious timeline eventually works against the show. At first, it is fun figuring out where we are. Then we understand the device. Then we are simply waiting for two people traveling in opposite directions to reach the destination we already know is coming.

And eventually, the evening starts feeling much longer than it is.

That doesn't make "The Last Five Years" a bad production. It isn't.

Gordon has staged it with care. The musicianship is excellent. Boyce Munson shines. Cherin gives Jamie energy and youthful confidence. Brown's score is sophisticated, and some songs are far more compelling than the whole.

And the musical has passionate admirers who may find profound truths in Cathy and Jamie.

But theater doesn't require us to admire something simply because it is well made.

Sometimes a production can do almost everything right and still leave you wondering why the story needed to be told.

By the end, the calendars have turned. The marriage is over. Cathy and Jamie have passed one another in time, one moving toward hope while the other disappears into heartbreak.

The train has wrecked exactly where we knew it would.

I wish there had been something more worth finding in the wreckage.