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## Theatre Tulsa turns to film for 'Last Five Years'

**James D. Watts Jr.**

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Brena Caldwell (right) and Tristan Lesso star in "The Last Five Years," a unique film version of the acclaimed Jason Robert Brown musical.

Courtesy, Theatre Tulsa

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James D. Watts Jr.

**I**t took a walk in the park for Brenna Caldwell to come up with the idea of doing a theater-film hybrid production of the musical “The Last Five Years.”

Getting that idea realized, on the other hand, was nothing close to a walk in the park.

The Tulsa native has spent the past year in Texas, teaching choir to middle and high school students. While she was grateful for finding a job, and enjoyed working with the students, she had expected to have spent 2020 working as an actress in New York City.

“I had my students on stage all year, but there was absolutely no professional work happening,” she said. “I was so missing doing theater, and I decided the answer was to come up with a project myself.

“So I went for a walk, thinking about all the musicals that could possibly be done safely and reasonably online,” Caldwell said. “And the one that really stuck out was “The Last Five Years.”

“The Last Five Years,” written by Jason Robert Brown, is a two-person musical that charts the ups and downs in the relationship between Jamie Wellerstein, an up-and-coming writer, and Cathy Hiatt, a struggling actress.

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What is unusual about the musical is that the story unfolds in two directions at once: Jamie's version of the story is told from the beginning to the end, while Cathy's story starts with the couple's breakup and works backward in time to their first meeting. The only time the two characters share a scene is when they get married.

She got in touch with Tristan Lesso, an actor she knew from her time at New York University, and asked if he would be interested. When Lesso agreed, Caldwell then reached out to Theatre Tulsa.

"I have to give Theatre Tulsa and (executive director) Jarrod Kopp a lot of credit, because I just came to them with little more than an idea, and they agreed immediately to it," Caldwell said. "They trusted us enough that we had the freedom to create the sort of production we wanted."

"Theatre Tulsa has been experimenting with live shows online throughout the past year of the pandemic, but they have been more like TV broadcasts than live theatre in a shared space," Kopp said. "For this final online project before we return to live theatre, we decided to go all in on the streaming experience, and produce a full movie adaptation of a musical beloved by theatre fans. It was shot as an indie film throughout New York City, and we are incredibly proud of the end result."

“The Last Five Years” will be available to view April 30-May 2 on the streaming platform SHOWTIX4U.

Caldwell said she wanted the production to have the rawness of live theater — something that streaming platforms such as Zoom cannot easily replicate.

“We wanted this to have a real humanness to it,” she said. “It’s something that the show itself requires, because there is a real raw quality to this story. A lot of musicals tend to sugarcoat things — well, there’s nothing sugarcoated about this show. It’s the story of two people who try their best to love each other, and they mess it up.”

Caldwell and Lesso worked with another fellow NYU grad, A.C. McCarthy, who served as the production’s videographer and editor, to map out the production in detail. Then, Caldwell flew to New York as soon as she could safely travel, and much of the film was shot over the course of 72 hours.

“We wanted it to look like an good indie film, with the power of live theater,” Caldwell said. “There are a lot of long takes, and moments when we’re singing directly to the camera, which gives it that theatrical air.”

The musical is sung-through, with little spoken dialogue, although the music and lyrics rarely follow conventional forms.

“You kind of have to get out of your head to do this musical,” Caldwell said, laughing. “It’s very contemporary — there are no choruses, the lyrics are more like prose than poetry, and because every scene is some intense, emotional moment, you’re singing on the edge much of the time. It

took me a while to realize that if I focus on the text of the song, my voice would do what it needed to do.

“But I must confess, Tristen and I were calling each other many times, saying, ‘I don’t think I can sing this,’” she said. “But we got each other through it.”

Caldwell said she also appreciated being able to follow her character backwards in time.

“It meant I was able to get the intense, hurtful moments out of the way at the start, and then get to work my way toward the happier parts of Cathy’s life,” she said. “And I was surprised at how much I love working on film. Because you aren’t worried about being heard at the back of a theater, you don’t have to overdo anything, and it becomes a much more intimate experience.”

## **Viet Huong restaurant review**

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