

Director's Note

A Note to the Note: I could offer a tidy and conclusive director's note that aims to hide the seams of our surprise COVID-19 adaptation. I am choosing to offer this instead. The joy of being able to create work for a class is that there is space for experimentation and mess, to take things apart for the joy of seeing what they're made of. Removing physical presence from the equation took away some pieces from our pile of musical parts in a way that meant that we are not able to put it neatly back together for an audience as we had planned. Instead, we used the pieces we had left and made something new. What follows is some context for that process.

I have always had a complicated relationship with *The Last Five Years*. On the one hand, the music is beautiful, the narrative structure is interesting, and musicals that can be done with two actors and a very simple set are in short supply. On the other, I struggle with the tension of feeling that the musical was written to favor Jamie's narrative while not personally finding Jamie to be a particularly sympathetic or interesting character. The musical struggles with some of the challenges of *Merrily We Roll Along* – namely, it is extraordinarily difficult to get an audience to emotionally invest in a relationship that they know from the very beginning will not last.

In an effort to explore what an adaptation of *The Last Five Years* would look like that overcame some of these obstacles, my collaborators and I took a two-pronged approach. First, we cast Cathy and Jamie as two women (which required very minimal adaptation of the script or keys of songs). Many musicals with queer couples position queerness as the source of conflict in the characters' lives; this adaptation allowed the couple to engage problems that had nothing to do with their sexual orientations. Positioning Jamie as a woman who was both openly Jewish and openly queer gave her a complex intersectional identity, one that added nuance to her determination to be publicly successful. Similarly, presenting Cathy as a bisexual woman in her first queer relationship allowed her a larger and more personal container for both the highs and lows of her character's arc as she celebrated a newly discovered personal identity and navigated uncharted relational waters.

In many ways, *The Last Five Years* depends on absence – the absence of the actors from their partners' scenes, the absence of trust and communication in Jamie and Cathy's relationship, the absence of broader context for their lives. Our second adaptive path sought, instead, to create presence – to (without altering the text more than pronoun shifts required) use additional technical and physical elements to create rich layers of history and community for the characters that could offer specificity and depth to songs largely describing immediate emotional realities. Our hypothesis was that putting Cathy and Jamie in shared physical space as appropriate throughout the musical would allow the audience to more deeply invest in their relationship, using bodies in space to establish physical truth in conversation with (and, occasionally, in contrast to) characters' highly subjective narration. (In production, the height of this choice occurred at the wedding scene; visit the special features section of the website for more information!)

It is, of course, impossible to predict what would have read in a conventional performance – due to COVID-19, we did not have the chance to have one. Our digital offering explores Jamie and Cathy's digital lives as a couple in two highly mobile fields, allowing for their presence via video calls and contrasting their public and private performances on social media with their emotional realities in song. This was not initially exclusively a musical about long-distance relationships or commuter marriages, but that it has turned into as much is not

inappropriate – theatre artists, authors with publicity circuits to which they must attend, and queer people *are* likely to find themselves living and loving long-distance more often than the general population, and distance presents unique challenges. I suspect we are all more sympathetic to those challenges now than we could ever have been before.

Lusie Cuskey