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CAMPUS NEWS

Last Show for GWU Fall Theatre Season, 'The Last Five Years,' Presented in Millennium Playhouse

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON NOVEMBER 10, 2021



▲ A collage of photos from rehearsals for 'The Last Five Years': from left, Rebecca Belk as Cathy Hiatt, Markus Byrd as Jamie Wellerstein and Elie Brinson as Cathy, and Byrd. Photos by Claire Allen

Production's Stage Set-up Challenges Actors to Speak to All Sides of the Audience

By Claire Allen, Intern for Communications

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—Gardner-Webb University's Department of Theatre Arts presents the final show of the 2021 Fall Season—"The Last Five Years"—a musical written by Jason Robert Brown and first performed in Chicago in 2001. In the words of the show's director, Dr. Chris Nelson, assistant professor of theatre arts, this year is the "small musical year." As such, it will be performed in the smaller Millennium Playhouse, located at 141 S. Main St., Boiling Springs.

"The Last Five Years" runs Nov. 18-20 at 7:30 p.m., and Nov. 21 at 2:30 p.m.

The show is rather simple in terms of its cast, as it only features two characters, but the story is a bit more complicated. This musical follows Jamie Wellerstein, an up-and-coming young novelist, and his wife, Cathy Hiatt, a struggling actress. Despite the two telling the same story, it is from two perspectives. As Jamie tells his side, the story progresses chronologically, beginning with meeting Cathy and ending with their separation. Cathy's account, on the other hand, begins by telling the audience she and Jamie have recently broken up and ends early in their relationship. The two characters only interact once, which is at their marriage when the two stories collide. Jamie is played by Markus Byrd and the role of Cathy is shared by Elie Brinson and Rebecca Belk.

This unusual style of storytelling causes the audience to hope for the relationship, all the while knowing it ultimately fails. Seeing the progression through the eyes of both characters also introduces the question of who was most at fault. The show explores different personalities, different backgrounds, a realistic building up and breakdown of a relationship.

The theatre department's productions serve both as entertainment and as educational opportunities for students to experience. To try something new, the decision was made to rearrange the space within the Millennium Playhouse, or the "Mill" as those who are familiar with it call it. "We chose to use a thrust stage for this show, with the audience on three sides, which is a challenge both directorially and performance-wise," Nelson described. "It's a good learning experience for our students, but it is a challenge not to play to one side all the time."

Rehearsal for this show began almost immediately after the end of the previous show, "Hedda Gabler." Cast, crew, and professors, like Nelson and Dr. Stafford Turner, who has been supervising and instructing the music during rehearsals, all gather multiple times a week in the Mill to practice. Each day, there is a specific goal for the night that builds upon the progress of the previous rehearsal. For example, at the beginning of the process, the first few scenes are the goal. The next night, the next few scenes. Eventually, once all the scenes are "blocked," which means the staging of specific scenes is set, everyone involved prepares for full run-throughs, which involve practicing the whole show with minimal interruptions. Finally, there are dress rehearsals, the dreaded "Tech Week"—the days leading up to the performance in which cues, lights, sounds, and details are perfected—and finally opening night comes around on Thursday.

Nelson describes the overall environment of rehearsal: "We have a great cast and crew who work very hard, and are fun to work with. Dr. Turner, the musical director, is great to work with as well. Things are upbeat at rehearsal and it's a fun group."

About the show in general, Nelson said, "I have been somewhat surprised by how quickly it's come together. The show is shorter than you might think from reading it and listening to it, so rehearsals go by pretty quickly, especially since the performers are generally well prepared for every rehearsal. Since it's a musical, we don't do much more than we are scheduled to do, because we want to save the actors' voices. We haven't had too many speed bumps and I feel really good about where we are."

Tickets are \$15 for adults, \$10 for veterans, students and seniors, \$5 for GWU faculty and staff, and free for GWU students. For ticketing information, click [here](https://ie1.glitnirticketing.com/ieticket/web/ev_list.php?section_id=15&refresh=1632834073&refresh=1632834074) (https://ie1.glitnirticketing.com/ieticket/web/ev_list.php?section_id=15&refresh=1632834073&refresh=1632834074).

Claire Allen is a senior English major from Salisbury, N.C. She greatly enjoys both reading and writing, and is a consultant at the Writing Center, a Writing Fellow, and president of Sigma Tau Delta. She is currently the Assistant Stage Manager for The Last Five Years.

The Last Five Years

By Jason Robert Brown
Directed by Chris Nelson

Adults \$15; Students,
Veterans & Seniors \$10;
GWU faculty & staff \$5,
GWU students FREE

Nov. 18 - 20 @ 7:30 PM
Nov. 21 @ 2:30 PM
Millennium Playhouse

For ticketing information please visit:
gardner-webb.edu/theatre-series



GARDNER-WEBB UNIVERSITY
DEPARTMENT OF THEATRE ARTS

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