

ARTS

ASL and English blend in Austin staging of 'The Last Five Years'

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Anyone who has attended a public performance or speech during the past few decades would not be startled to see a signer vigorously interpreting what is happening on the stage.

The bilingual interpreter, employed primarily to reach the deaf and hard of hearing in the audience through American Sign Language, often stands or sits in a spotlight to the side of the main action.

This typical spatial arrangement, however, has meant that the separated signer and the other stage elements compete for one's attention.

Increasingly, however, ASL — long essential to theater of the deaf — has been more fully incorporated into shows that are simultaneously performed in English.

In certain instances, ASL and English actors mirror each others' roles, as in the current Austin staging of the Jason Robert Brown musical "The Last Five Years," presented by Deaf Austin Theatre and Ground Floor Theatre through Dec. 18.

"We want it to be accessible for all," says co-director Lisa Scheps. "The idea is that a deaf person can sit in any seat in the house and fully understand the show."

At the same time, a hearing person absorbs performances compounded and enhanced by the double casting.

Just before the show opened on Dec. 1, I met with co-directors Scheps and Brian Cheslik — along with choreographer Mervin Primeaux O'Bryant — at Ground Floor Theatre. Then I watched part of the rehearsal of "The Last Five Years."

Tell us about this novel musical.

If you haven't seen an earlier version of "The Last Five Years," which pre-



Krissy Lemon, front, and Carolyn O'Brien perform the role of Cathy in Ground Floor Theatre's production of "The Last Five Years." The show is in both American Sign Language and English — with each character in the show portrayed by two actors. Lemon signs the role of Cathy while O'Brien sings. PHOTOS BY SARA DIGGINS/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

miered off-Broadway in 2002, know in advance that the story is told forward and backward at the same time.

Confused? Just two characters, Jamie, a rising author, and Cathy, a struggling actress, act out a five-year ro-



Ground Floor Theatre founder and artistic director Lisa Scheps co-directs "The Last Five Years."

mance. Jamie experiences the action in the normal chronological order. Cathy's first song, on the other hand, takes place at the heartbreaking end of the relationship.

Audiences witness the daydream and the disaster simultaneously.

Sometimes Cathy or Jamie sing alone; at other times, they share the stage.

Once you know the set-up, the action is easy to follow, just as with Stephen Sondheim's musical "Merrily We Roll Along," which, in both published versions, is told backwards.

In 2009, I first saw "The Last Five Years" as produced by Penfold Theatre in a tiny secondary venue run by what is now Austin Playhouse when the company resided at Penn Field. I was blown

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Actress Krissy Lemon is one of two actresses who play Cathy in Deaf Austin Theatre and Ground Floor Theatre's production of "The Last Five Years."



Deaf Theatre Austin artistic director Brian Cheslik co-directs "The Last Five Years" at Ground Floor Theatre.



Actor Saúl López rehearses the role of Jaime in Ground Floor Theatre's production of "The Last Five Years." The show is in both American Sign Language and English; López signs his role. PHOTOS BY SARA DIGGINS/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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away by Michael McKelvey's delicate yet powerful staging.

In 2015, Penfold revived the show at Trinity Street Playhouse. The movie that starred Anna Kendrick and Jeremy Jordan, which came out the same year, stays pretty close to the stage musical.

How does the new staging work?

In 2019, Cheslik and Scheps applied an ASL/English strategy to another musical, "Next to Normal," which deals honestly with bipolar disorder within a domestic context.

The current show at Ground Floor Theatre features Krissy Lemon (ASL Cathy), Carolyn O'Brien (English Cathy), Saúl López (ASL Jamie) and John Christopher (English Jamie).

Choreographer O'Bryant and co-directors Cheslik and Scheps shift the actors around the small, open Ground Floor Theatre stage so that everyone is on equal visual footing. The design includes a tall, skeletal platform behind the primary performance zone so we can more easily see the characters playing the parallel roles.

From the opening two numbers of the

rehearsal, each actor deepened the performances of their counterparts. They were not doing the same things. These are related but not identical performances.

"You want to experience what both characters look like," says O'Bryant, originally from Lafayette, Louisiana, and now based in Maryland. "We wanted to fully blend the dance and the gestures. We balance who is presented to make sure the audience is visually captivated by this beautiful work."

Earlier this year, O'Bryant participated in a well-received production of "The Music Man" at Maryland's Olney Theatre Center. It mixed English and ASL performances.

"We had a lot of technical difficulties," O'Bryant says. "For one thing, the supertitles were too high. But it worked out in the end."

For those wondering, Brown's score is sung gorgeously by O'Brien and Christopher, partnering with a small but full-sounding orchestra shaped by music director Ellie Jarret Shattles.

The acting by all four performers was nuanced and enlightening. I'm eager to return to Ground Floor to see the fully realized show.

But wait, there's more ...

"The Last Five Years" is not the only mixed English/ASL musical in town.

From Jan. 25 through March 5, Zach Theatre will present a similar staging of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Cinderella," with Deaf Austin's Cheslik as the co-director, along with Michael Baron, producing artistic director of Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma.

O'Bryant — you heard it here first — will play the fairy godmother.

"Things will be a little bit different at Zach," Cheslik says. "For instance, we'll be using supertitles. Also, there's a lot of speaking. And we'll use no voices at times."

The active partnerships between established companies and Deaf Austin Theatre are crucial. Founded in 2012, its first big show was "Next to Normal" with Ground Floor. It has produced a total of 10 shows, including virtual ones.

Cheslik pushed for "The Last Five Years" as the next partnership, but Scheps was equally attracted to the material.

"Romance and breakup is something that relates to everyone," Cheslik says. "We felt like it could be adapted to this kind of staging because of the relation-



Mervin Primeaux O'Bryant choreographed "The Last Five Years" at Ground Floor Theatre.

ship dynamics. Everyone understands heartache and love."

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