

ARTS

“A good laugh is a mighty good thing, and rather too scarce a good thing; the more’s the pity.”
MOBY-DICK HERMAN MELVILLE

REVIEW

‘The Last Five Years’ offers a love letter and goodbye to Yale theater

BY ZOE FROST
STAFF CRITIC

Since its premiere in 2001, Jason Robert Brown’s “The Last Five Years” has remained an inescapable pillar of modern musical theater. Past productions of the two-character show have cast famous pairs like Norbert Leo Butz and Sherie Rene Scott, Nick Jonas and Adrienne Warren and, most recently, Ben Platt and Rachel Zegler. This weekend, a production in the Schwarzman Center’s Dome under the direction of Alastair Rao ’26 featured two big names of Yale College’s own theater scene: Ben Heller ’27 and Hannah Kurczeski ’26.

The musical follows Jamie and Cathy, two young artists in New York, as they fall in and then out of love. Jamie’s story runs chronologically forward and Cathy’s backward, the pair meeting in the middle on their wedding day. In the opening numbers, the audience witnesses Jamie at his most ecstatic and in love, while Cathy is disillusioned and lonely. At the show’s close, Cathy giddily reflects on their first date while Jamie moves his belongings out of their apartment.

Kurczeski’s past credits at Yale have included highly characterized, larger-than-life roles like Schwarzy in “The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee,” Paulette in “Legally Blonde,” Joanne in “Company” and Sally Bowles in “Cabaret.” With a powerful belt known to practically every theater-going undergraduate on campus, she seems most in her element leading large companies and riotous pits through showstopping numbers.

The role of Cathy, however, required her to step back and down to embody a character deeply unsure of herself and her marriage. Alone on The Dome’s stage and accompanied by a small pit led by the virtuoso Justin Wang ’27, Kurczeski opened the show gently, singing with incredible care and control rather than the wonderful bombast that her Yale roles so often exhibit. Throughout the evening, she leaned into the tension between Cathy’s different

emotions: at times cautious and forlorn, then unraveling into anger and overflowing with affection.

In “I’m a Part of That,” Cathy reflects on her love for Jamie despite his preoccupation with his writing. Kurczeski sang with candor, her performance a heartbreaking and resigned confession of an unrequited commitment to her husband. She also brought humor to the role: the witty lyrics of “A Summer in Ohio” were delivered playfully, with Kurczeski teetering on the line between determined optimism and extreme frustration at being stuck doing regional theater “40 miles east of Cincinnati.”

Heller seemed at home in the part of Jamie, embellishing Brown’s eclectic score with stylized runs and his signature vibrato. He is accustomed to playing narcissistic, romantically problematic men — Franklin in “Merrily We Roll Along,” Bobby in “Company” and Caldwell B. Cladwell in “Urinetown,” to name a few — and his performance on Saturday evening conveyed both the charm and cruelty that make Jamie’s character complicated and compelling.

Jamie sings “A Miracle Would Happen” just after the pair’s wedding, lamenting that his marriage to Cathy means he cannot sleep with other women. On Saturday evening, Heller leaped across the stage in frustration, singing about how he wished “every girl would look like Mister Ed” with infectious and hilarious energy. Later, in “Nobody Needs to Know,” Jamie attempts to justify himself after waking up next to another woman. Jamie’s assertions that “it’s over, it’s done” and “nobody needs to know” were undercut by Heller’s guilty delivery of the song’s lilting and modest melody.

At times, both Kurczeski and Heller demonstrated a studied and practiced understanding of their characters’ nuances and challenges — each actor especially shined when portraying the older versions of their characters, jaded and worn down by the last five years. Less

convincing, unfortunately, were their portrayals of their characters as young and smitten with one another. In chronologically earlier songs like Jamie’s “Shiksa Goddess” and Cathy’s “Goodbye Until Tomorrow,” Heller and Kurczeski leaned so much into the happiness and naivete of their characters that they became less real, appearing more as caricatures of young lovers rather than complex people who happened to also be in love.

Perhaps the largest challenge of a show like “The Last Five Years” lies in the solitary nature of each actor’s performance: Although most songs are delivered to the

other character, the actors sing them alone onstage. An important directorial choice must be made, then, about where the other character is in the space of the theater. During some songs, I felt unsure if Jamie was sitting on the couch next to Cathy or somewhere at the back of the audience as she sang; in others, I wondered if Jamie was singing to himself in frustration, or really speaking to Cathy as she sat at the desk. More specificity of space within the set and the theater would have taken this production to the next level and transformed two exquisitely executed vocal performances into a storytelling feat.

Along with Kurczeski and Rao, producer Abby Asmuth ’26 and stage manager Elizabeth Stanish ’26 will graduate in a few weeks, leaving Yale College theater behind them. In many ways, this production — about young artists and staged in the heart of Yale’s campus — felt like a love letter to the artistic community to which they have contributed so much. Their absence will certainly be felt upon our return to campus in the fall.

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COURTESY OF ABIGAIL YADEGAR

A show of contrasting chronologies, “The Last Five Years” uses intimate melodies and emotional overtures to tell a story of love won and lost. Hannah Kurczeski ’26 and Ben Heller ’27 played the musical’s two characters in The Dome.

Berkeley College Orchestra marks 50 years with concert in Woolsey Hall

BY GEMARD GUERY
STAFF REPORTER

The Berkeley College Orchestra hosted its 50th anniversary concert on Sunday.

In Woolsey Hall, the orchestra performed one of its most ambitious undertakings with alumni from across the country, as a celebration of the orchestra’s history and impact on Yale’s campus.

“It’s become even bigger to so many of our alumni,” Taylor Burke ’27, one of the orchestra’s presidents, said. “It’s been a really rewarding experience because there

are people who work across such a wide range of things, because that’s really the heart of BCO, that it’s for anybody who loves to play music.”

The student-run orchestra, originally known as the Berkeley Chamber Players, was formed in 1975.

The group wouldn’t become the Berkeley College Orchestra until Scott Speck ’83, a music major and member of Berkeley College, proposed the change. Speck now serves as artistic director and principal director for the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra.

According to the orchestra’s

website, each residential college at Yale used to have its own distinct orchestra. However, due to limited involvement, most could only perform smaller pieces.

Over time, the Berkeley College Orchestra combined with Saybrook College’s orchestra. Most students involved were not music majors, a trend that has continued to this day.

“I was thrilled that something that I had the idea to start back then continued to be relevant and continued to be a need within the Yale community,” Speck said. “It’s much bigger, and they’re performing in many more diverse places.”

The orchestra is heavily supported by Berkeley. It receives funding from the college and rehearses in it, after which members eat in the Berkeley dining hall.

Students do not need to be members of Berkeley to be a part of the orchestra. The orchestra is also open to graduate students and professors.

Head of Berkeley College David Evans ’92 played in the orchestra as an undergraduate student and has continued during his tenure as head of college, which will end after this semester.

According to Burke, the group has grown since the COVID-19 pandemic, with the support of Nicole Lam ’25. The orchestra has grown from a group of around 15 people to an ensemble of about 75.

At the concert, the orchestra performed Tchaikovsky’s Fourth Symphony and closed with his “1812 Overture.” The latter piece was written to be accompanied by cannons. Unfortunately, that feat proved impossible for the orchestra, because Woolsey Hall does not allow pyrotechnics, Burke said.

However, with the help of the Yale Symphony Orchestra, the Berkeley orchestra was able to recreate the sound of canons using bass drums and Mahler hammers from the YSO’s performance of Mahler’s Second Symphony.

Lam — who served as the Berkeley College Orchestra’s music director for three years and recently finished work as an assistant conductor for a “Phantom of the Opera” national tour — played the Mahler hammer during the performance.

Harrison described the closing as the “loudest and grandest” in the orchestra’s history, so much so that the wind section had to wear earplugs.

The final piece also featured orchestra alumni, who had gathered for a rehearsal earlier in the day. Evans had also gathered brass players to create an off-stage brass section. Thus, the finale was performed with over a hundred musicians playing at the same time.

“It was as loud as we wanted to be,” Harrison said. “It was a really memorable production, and everyone played very well. It was everything we wanted it to be.”

Berkeley College was founded in 1934.

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COURTESY OF LAURENTIA WOO

The 50th anniversary concert celebrated the orchestra’s history by bringing together current members and alumni for a finale performance. For one piece that Tchaikovsky wrote to be performed with cannons, the orchestra found an alternative sound.