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Music 1010 Semester Project

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Jason Robert Brown’s History

Jason Robert Brown is an American composer who has swept Broadway with his moving music. Brown is a contemporary musical theatre composer but creatively combines modern sound with classic theory to produce new (and very popular) repertoire. He has won Tony Awards for his scores of “Parade” in 1999 and also best music and lyrics for “The Last Five Years” in 2002. The accomplished accompanist turned composer has raised the bar for all hopeful musical theatre composers everywhere while giving hope for more professional productions with the perfect blend between contemporary style and classic sound.

Born in 1970, Brown grew up in the suburbs of New York and has been very musically involved since a young age. He later attended Eastman School of Music but after attending a camp where he saw the musicals ‘Sweeney Todd’ and ‘Sunday in the Park With George,’ he realized his desire to pursue a career in musical theatre and left Eastman. He has said that had it not been for the two shows, he would’ve tried to join a rock band to be like Billy Joel.

After Eastman, Jason was earning money by playing piano in nightclubs and cabarets; little did he know that this would open the door to the next big shift in life. It was at one of these small side piano performances where he met Daisy Prince, daughter of famous theatrical director Hal Prince. They became friends quickly and began to piece together a show named “Songs For A New World.” The show was built around many of the songs Jason wrote for various occasions. With Daisy’s direction and Brown’s musical genius the show made it to Off-Broadway in 1995. The production played only 28 times on Off-Broadway but has since been seen in more than two hundred productions around the world. One of Brown’s most well known songs “Stars and the Moon” is featured in this show.

Soon after his Off-Broadway debut, Hal Prince asked Jason to compose the music for his new musical “Parade.” Parade, the true story of Leo Frank, required moving music while keeping the time period in mind. Brown took the story and pulled together one of the most compelling scores in decades. After opening at the Lincoln Theatre in 1999, “Parade” was awarded the Tony Award for best original musical score but only ran for a total of 85 performances. (I would’ve KILLED to see this!)

During this time, Jason married Theresa O’Neill, who was Daisy’s secretary. This marriage would sadly end in divorce, although there is no documentation available to the public about any time frames. “The Last Five Years,” Brown’s next musical, was inspired by the previous failed marriage. But Brown had to change some of the script once Theresa threatened to take legal action claiming the plot represented their relationship to closely. I wouldn’t be surprised if, because of this, Brown has made it hard for the public to find any personal information about him or his loved ones. “The Last Five Years” is being turned into a film and will begin filming shortly.

Brown has become his own genre in the musical theatre world. With rhythmically challenging scores, deep lyrics, and unique vocal arrangements, Brown is a musical theatre composer god. According to Broadway world, most of his songs are written in AABA form, except for his love duets. In all of his shows he tries to distinguish his love songs to really make them stand out, typically by using compound time during the duet and then ending on the same pitch.

Since 2003, Jason Robert Brown married Georgia Stitt (also a composer) and they have two daughters together. It is safe to say Brown is only at the beginning stages of his composing career. He continues to write new scores and has many projects on hand. (one of which is “The Last Five Years” with Anna Kendrick and Jeremy Jordan) His most current project is his announcement of creating a musical version of “Honeymoon in Vegas.” He likes to keep his fans updated through his website as well as the social media site Twitter.

Jason Robert Brown’s score of *“Parade”*

Chosen Songs:

“The Old Red Hills”

“The Factory Girls/Come Up To My Office”

“All The Wasted Time”

As the curtain opens, a young soldier begins to sing to a young lady about his conviction to defeat the “Yankees” in the war. (“The Old Red Hills”) Throughout the song one gets the strong sense of southern pride and the beauty of fighting for a cause believed to be true. Later, an older man steps onto the stage, representing the young man who has matured. He still stands strong with the southerner pride and seems to have some grievances towards the north. When the opening number has finished, the real story of “Parade” begins.

“Parade” is a musical based on the true story of Leo Frank. Leo was a wealthy factory manager in Marietta, Georgia. A faithful Jew, Leo had a hard time fitting in to the southern life and the town wasn’t about to make room to befriend a Northerner right after losing the civil war. In 1913, a 14-year-old girl named Mary Phagan was found brutally murdered in the basement of his factory. The town quickly turned to point fingers at Frank, gossiping and making up lies. The trial seemed it needed to end as quickly as it began, as most of the town believed Frank was the murderer even though there was no actual evidence to convict him. As each of Mary’s friends took the stand, the lies began to spin. In “The Factory Girls/Come Up To My Office,” three of Mary’s teenage co-workers falsely claim that Frank continually tried to seduce them. (this song is a sort of fantasy sequence with how they “imagined” it happening)

After being wrongly convicted of rape and murder, Frank is sentenced to death by hanging. While his wife desperately works on getting him an appeal, her love and appreciation grows for him deeply, as well as he for her. She brings him lunch in his jail cell one day and they sing the beautiful duet “All The Wasted Time.”

Shortly after beginning his career in New York, Jason Robert Brown was introduced to Harold Prince (through working with Hal’s daughter, Daisy) who hired Brown to write songs for the historically based musical. Prince wrote the show with the help of Alfred Uhry’s book, which went into more depth of Leo’s story. Parade opened on December 17, 1998 but didn’t stay open for long with a little over 100 runs. Audiences gave good reviews for the show, but the more “belty” theatrical shows began blooming around the same time which took more precedence and popularity. . Even though it didn’t last long, Brown won the Tony Award in 1999 for Parade in the category of Best Original Musical Score. Parade went on to win six other awards that year. With a Tony in his pocket, he went back to working with Daisy to produce his next hit “The Last Five Years.”