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## Good friends Nathan Hartono and Inch Chua play lovers in musical The Last Five Years



Singer-songwriters Inch Chua and Nathan Hartono need to rely on each other to deliver a dynamo performance. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

**Shawn Hoo**

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SINGAPORE – Singer-songwriters Nathan Hartono, 33, and Inch Chua, 36, who have been close friends for 18 years, double dared each other to play onstage lovers in the upcoming two-hander musical The Last Five Years.

The two musicians, who first connected on YouTube for a musical collaboration in 2007, bring more than their shared pop sensibility to their roles as rising novelist Jamie Wellerstein and struggling actress Cathy Hiatt. They also bring a natural ease and chemistry to the emotionally intimate show.

“As long as you don’t think too much about it,” caveats Hartono, who dodges any awkwardness of playing lovers by keeping it professional in rehearsals.

The work, written by Tony Award-winning playwright Jason Robert Brown, moves through the couple’s courtship, marriage and divorce.

The Last Five Years, which opens Singapore Repertory Theatre’s (SRT) 2025 season, plays with an extended run at the KC Arts Centre from Feb 12 to March 1.

The Singapore staging also comes ahead of the critically acclaimed musical’s anticipated premiere on Broadway – starring American singer-songwriters Nick Jonas and Adrienne Warren – in March.

Chua, who is an associate artist with SRT and has written several “anti-musicals”, says: “We are both similar in that way – we do like to torture ourselves. I like things on hard mode.”

Hard mode might be an understatement for Hartono, who confesses he is “absolutely terrified”.

It has been a long time since he acted in a musical. In 2017, he played in Jean Tay’s The Great Wall and, before that, Next To Normal in 2013.

“It’s terrifying, but it’s also an exhilarating feeling,” says Hartono, who is more used to being in a supporting role with a big cast on stage. “It’s probably my version of being an adrenaline junkie – saying yes to projects that you have no idea how you’re going to do and figuring it out as it goes along.”

Chua, whose last musical Into The Woods had 19 cast members, spells out the stakes: “If one of us sucks, it’s half of the show that sucks.”

The duo therefore need to rely on each other to deliver a dynamo performance.

Thankfully, their long-time friendship – they complete each other’s sentences effortlessly throughout the interview – means that they can skip the awkward warm-up stage.

“There is no teething period, there’s no need for chemistry reads – we just kind of hit the ground running with everybody.”



“We are both similar that way – we do like to torture ourselves,” says Singapore Repertory Theatre’s associate artist Inch Chua on taking on the two-hander musical with Nathan Hartono. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Chua describes her character, Cathy, as a “quintessential love addict” whose mantra is encapsulated by the Gen Z slang “delulu is the solulu”.

While she does not think that being delusional is the solution, Chua resonates with Cathy: “I do think love is one of the most peak human experiences anyone can have – real, true, unadulterated love.”

Hartono, meanwhile, calls his character Jamie a “gunslinger with romance”, who actively courts his lovers and is a serial dater. “I’m not like that,” he says, “but having to adopt that mindset and mentality has been quite interesting.”

He has dated only three people. Hartono’s most active romantic pursuit, he admits, was his first girlfriend in 2013 – whom he met online, back when dating apps were still new-fangled curiosities.

Asked for a piece of love advice, the duo – who are both attached – are synced on the importance of self-love.

Hartono says: “Anytime that I had any struggle in a relationship, or anytime a relationship has fallen apart, I can always link it back to just me not practising

sufficient self-love – sometimes even actively wondering why this person is in love with me.”

Chua chimes in with an appropriate aphorism: “Stop rehearsing your tragedies.”

With two musicians helming *The Last Five Years*, Chua says they are bringing a part of themselves into their performance. “Maybe a bit more pop sensibilities can come in and personal musical interpretations of how we can convey the story.”



“There is no teething period, there’s no need for chemistry reads,” says singer-songwriter Nathan Hartono, who acts with his friend of 18 years Inch Chua. ST PHOTO: GIN TAY

Does Hartono’s return to theatre mean audiences will see more of him on stage? Ask him again after *The Last Five Years* finishes its run, he says.

But Chua, who reads him like a book, is not afraid to make predictions for Hartono, who has had a varied career: “I think he’s a creative who likes variety in some way or

switching it up at some point.”

Hartono agrees: “I’m more likely to write a musical next than be in one.”

## Book It/The Last Five Years

**Where:** KC Arts Centre – Home of SRT, 20 Merbau Road

**When:** Feb 12 to March 1; 7.30pm (Tuesdays to Fridays), 3 and 7pm (Saturdays), 2 and 6pm (Sundays)

**Admission:** \$78 to \$188; youth tickets for Tuesdays and Wednesdays available at \$28

**Info:** [str.sg/qoK5](https://str.sg/qoK5)

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