

***This Is Our Youth* at Burbage: Burn-Out Bromance**



This Is Our Youth at Burbage Theatre

There is an old joke that there are three kinds of people: Those who make things happen, those who let things happen, and those who ask, “What happened?” This is a play about that third group.

The three characters in *This Is Our Youth* at Burbage Theatre inspire a certain affectionate empathy in me, since they would now be about the same age as I am. The play was first produced off-Broadway in 1996 when playwright Kenneth Lonergan had just turned 34 years old, but it is set in early 1982 when he would have been 19 - like his character “Warren Straub” (Brooks Shatraw), who shows up unannounced at the apartment of his friend and pot dealer, 21-year-old “Dennis Ziegler” (James Lucey). Warren has just been thrown out of his house by his father, a wealthy lingerie manufacturer, and on the way out stole \$15,000 in cash from his father’s bedroom. (Accounting for inflation, that would be about \$40,000 today.) Among other hare-brained schemes, they decide to spend a little of the money to throw a party and invite Dennis’ girlfriend Valerie (whom we never see), getting her to bring her friend “Jessica Goldman” (Cassidy McCartan) in hopes of hooking up with Warren.

All three are profoundly directionless, and the males could fairly be described as burn-outs. Dennis “works” as a bicycle messenger - tellingly, there is no bicycle in his apartment - but really makes his money dealing drugs, and his parents are supporting him and paying for his apartment to keep him out of their way. Warren does almost nothing while living with his father. Only Jessica is in school at the Fashion Institute of Technology, which has a reputation, deserved or not, as something of an unselective vocational college with an undemanding academic curriculum. (FIT is a public college, part of the State University of New York, accepts about half of its applicant pool, and even today has a student body that is 85% female.)

All of the characters and all of their friends seem to come from upper-middle-class Jewish backgrounds and live on the expensive Upper West Side in Manhattan, although Jessica says she finds FIT “too JAP-y,” a derogatory slang term (for “Jewish American Princess”) that would have been of recent coinage in the early 1980s, popularized by Frank Zappa (who is mentioned in the play) in a 1979 song. Warren recounts how his grandfather would embarrass him by asking Warren’s friends if they were Jewish, and,

since they all were, would proceed to regale them with stories of having been the greatest Jewish aviator in the 1920s - since he claimed to be the *only* Jewish aviator in the 1920s.

This is a talk-y play, in some cases a shout-y play, but the dialogue is consistently sharp and, by the time two hours and an intermission have passed by, we definitely feel we know Dennis and Warren. Lucey is outstanding, energetically tearing into a great role as Dennis, alternately motivated by unwarranted if not idiotic over-confidence and panicked with fear, not least that Warren's father, who is implied to have underworld connections, will hold Dennis responsible for the theft so that goons with guns will burst into his apartment at any moment. Shatraw acquits a difficult role as Warren, more subdued in the shadow of his animated and frenetic friend and whose main personality trait is under-confidence. McCartan as Jessica is stuck with a third-wheel role whose purpose is to serve as a conversational foil for Warren, although she does well in a long scene where they are alone together and have an extended argument about philosophy of life: She believes that people inevitably change such that who they are at 30 has no connection to who they are at 20, while he believes that people stay the same throughout their lives. Of course, the point of this is that the audience is expected to understand that each seemingly contradictory position is actually a self-fulfilling prophecy, such that Warren will never reach adulthood because he expects never to reach adulthood.

At one point, Dennis screams in Yiddish at Warren, calling him a "schmuck" - but Warren is by no means a schmuck, a term defined with precise accuracy by the Philologos language column in *Forward*: "A schmuck is, in short, someone who lacks not intelligence, but all insight into what is humanly appropriate and what is not." ("Etiquette for Schmucks, Schlemiels, Schlimazels and Schmendriks", May 12, 2010). It is Dennis who is the schmuck, while Warren is instead a classic "schlemiel" who even repeatedly knocks things over physically.

As the play winds down through its second and final act, Dennis is freaked out enough by events to begin seriously questioning whether he wants the fate toward which he seems to be hurtling in his directionlessness, and we learn the extent of his dysfunctional family upbringing. On a parallel course, Warren becomes resigned to his fate, despite being aware that it will turn out badly for him, because he is unable to envision any alternative to his directionlessness, in significant part because of his even more dysfunctional family. As they try to figure out whether there is more to life than pot and coke, they begin delivering long monologues where they are talking past each other rather than having a real conversation.

Lonergan would go on to write well-known plays and screenplays, some quite good (*You Can Count On Me*, 2000; *Margaret*, 2011; Academy Award-winning *Manchester by the Sea*, 2016) and others beyond atrocious (the live action debacle *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*, 2000), but *This Is Our Youth* was his first play and it has undeniable weaknesses as a result, especially the reliance upon monologue soliloquy as opposed to dialogue near its end. While not a perfect play by any means, it is a strong play where every line spoken is true to the character, even if unrealistically articulate at times. (Shakespeare does that, too, but he gets a pass because he does it so well that no one notices.) I'm sure nearly everyone at about age 35 looks back on themselves as they were at age 20 and is horrified by what they see in the rear-view mirror, and that ultimately is what this play is about. The title has a double-meaning: It could be said by the characters as a simple declaration, but it also could be said by an observer expressing tut-tutting incredulity.

One is forced to wonder about these characters: Where are they now? In that era, I knew people who could have made the "least likely to succeed" list, but I doubt I knew anyone quite this bad. Even the

characters themselves speculate whether their parents' wealth has enabled their self-destructive behavior and so far insulated them from its consequences, but it does not require wealth to be self-destructive. At least they do ask, "What happened?"

This Is Our Youth, by Kenneth Lonergan, directed by Allison Crews, Burbage Theatre Company, 249 Roosevelt Ave, Pawtucket. (In rep with Thom Pain.) Two acts, about 2h including intermission. Through Feb 24. Refreshments available. Web: burbagetheatre.org/thisisouryouth E-mail: info@burbagetheatre.org Tel: 401-484-0355 Tickets: app.arts-people.com/index.php?ticketing=burb Facebook: facebook.com/events/235063637413664