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Stage Review: 'Youth' offers insight along with questions

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By Christopher Rawson, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Snapshots have a disarming naturalness. Kenneth Lonergan's "This Is Our Youth" strings them together into an appealing comedy-drama about two days in the lives of three 20-somethings. It's perfect material for the simple staging and generally unaffected acting of the equally youthful company, barebones productions.

Actually, the lives of these three characters are pretty appalling, with more-or-less dysfunctional families in their past and theft and drugs in their present. But their touchingly awkward relationships evolve against all odds into a persuasive drama about faltering toward adulthood.

So, the snapshots aren't as haphazard as they may appear. Lonergan ratchets the clever naturalness of his writing into something larger. A couple of monologues are too calculating, perhaps, but we forgive that in return for sharp comic dialogue and insightful characterization.

And the seemingly naturalistic text is also full of questions. Just how dysfunctional are these families we hear about? Just how temporary are these lives they lead? And who are they to us?

What, for that matter, are we to make of that disarmingly simple title, "This Is Our Youth"? Its faux documentary self-assurance sounds like a War Department training film or a Soviet praise of heroic tractor drivers.

But beneath its bland assertion, there's ambiguity: For one thing, it isn't clear whether it refers to our young people as a whole, or to us -- not



Mara Rago
barebones productions staging of "This Is Our Youth." features (l-r) Dalla Andracchio, Jason Planitzer and Patrick Jordan.

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"These are our nation's young," but "This is the youth we spent."

The key is the calm chumminess of "our." Whose? Ours as a nation? Or just of you and me and a few others? But why are you assuming I'm one of you?

The simplest solution is the autobiographical. The play is set in 1982, giving it a slight sepia tint, and that happens to be when Lonergan was 18. So it was his youth -- maybe.

Whatever that youth held, it certainly included exposure to the seminal work of David Mamet. "This Is Our Youth" plays out very much like an alternative version of "American Buffalo" moved into the affluent class.

College dropout Warren and the charismatic, more experienced Dennis are like Mamet's Bobby and Teach, struggling similarly over friendship, love, status and money.

In "American Buffalo," the scam at issue is a robbery of a coin collection. In "This Is Our Youth," it's drugs, fueled by a bag of money Warren has stolen from his father.

Both plays share a sharp parody of capitalist calculation. In Lonergan, though, there's also a girl, Jessica, the object of Warren's nervous desire. Their faltering courtship occasions some perceptive writing, but ultimately the play's central relationship is that between Warren and Dennis.

All three actors contribute. Dalla Andracchio has the least developed role, but the flush on her face speaks volumes. Patrick Jordan is a suitably flashy Dennis, a study in obsessive self-regard with a self-congratulatory smile always playing around the corner of his lips. Of the three, Jason Planitzer seems most completely at home in his character, slowly revealing Warren's smarts, growing before our eyes.

Director Melanie Dreyer gets credit for the shapeliness of the whole. Whatever touches of pretension the play exhibits seem to come from the writing, not the production, which is perfectly at home with itself and in its totally unpretentious home in Garfield-Bloomfield.

"This is our youth"

■ **Where:** barebones productions at Modern Formations Gallery, 4919 Penn Ave., Garfield-Bloomfield

■ **When:** Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m. through Jan. 31.

■ **Tickets:** Donation \$7-\$10; 412-363-5847; www.barebonesproductions.com

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