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Poor Little Rich Kids

This Is Our Youth's reprehensible characters are nonetheless absorbing

THIS IS OUR YOUTH

barebones productions

By Kenneth Lonergan

Directed by Melanie Dreyer

ModernFormations Gallery, Garfield

412.363.5847

Through January 31

By Heather Bowlan

There's something about rich, miserable kids that our society just finds fascinating. We've got this concept at its fluffiest with TV shows like *Beverly Hills 90210* and *The OC*, and with a bit more substance in films like *Traffic*, and plays like the latest from barebones productions, *This Is Our Youth*. Whether we get a sick sense of satisfaction from the idea that the privileged aren't any happier for their privileges -- or whether we are the privileged and feel validated by the portrayal of our struggles -- there's definitely a draw to the young, beautiful and angst-ridden.

In *This Is Our Youth*, written by Kenneth Lonergan, the miserable rich kids are three spoiled brats living in New York in the 1980s. Warren Straub, a tortured young man played by Jason Planitzer, has just been kicked out of his house by his abusive father, who is a lingerie tycoon, of all things -- one of the many details that nearly steers this play into the ridiculous. As an act of revenge, he's stolen \$15,000 and beat it over to the apartment of his equally abusive friend, Dennis Ziegler, played by Patrick Jordan. Dennis is furious, sadistic and self-absorbed from start to finish, and his convenient excuse of a ball-breaking mother doesn't hold a lot of weight in explaining his almost pathological personality.

Since the action of the play takes place entirely within Dennis' apartment, and since there's only so long we can watch two guys insult each other and beat each other up, Jessica, played by Dalla Andracchio, enters the scene, for a night of cocaine and champagne at the apartment, funded by Warren's stolen money -- a plan that of course goes awry. A friend of Dennis' girlfriend, Jessica banter with Warren. They show off their intellectual prowess and are mutually seduced, at least for a moment. Along the way we get a little background about everyone's pain, which may or may not excuse anyone's behavior.

The only character for whom the audience feels any sustained sympathy is Warren, who has the best excuse for misery -- the murder of his sister by an abusive boyfriend and the subsequent "liquidation," as he might put it, of his family. At the end of the play, it's our hope that Warren will stop being such a slacker and get the hell out of that trashy apartment, a hope that Lonergan

acknowledges and nurtures, but doesn't fulfill or quash definitively.

Basically this is a play in which nothing much happens, in which characters don't come to any great realizations -- or if they do, they don't do much about them. In one particularly frustrating scene in the second act, Warren and Jessica have a fight, and it's hard to determine what it's actually about. Clearly insecurity and stubbornness are playing a role, but the jump from one person's manipulative action to the other's passive aggression is difficult to predict or understand. The audience has no idea what the argument is, and why it's taking place. On a larger scale, you could say the same for the whole script.

Despite the play's limitations, however, barebones has put on the best possible production. Their choice of hip, up-and-coming ModernFormations Gallery as a performance space perfectly complements the development of the company thus far. Director Melanie Dreyer, as usual, has an even and invisible control over the action; even in the play's most physical or emotional moments, the actors never lose sight of the audience, and the space itself is too simple for any intellectual tricks outside of the script.

The actors, though, are what should be enjoyed here. They manage to bridge the gap between appearing young, pretty and clever -- which the script, left to its own devices, tries to do -- and appearing as three-dimensional characters, even if not particularly savory ones. As Warren, Planitzer whines, sulks and slouches his way through the action, hands perpetually jammed in the pockets of his sweatshirt. But when he does stop pouting long enough to become angry or deeply saddened, the change is natural. Andracchio sports her 1980s getup, put together by costume designer Marissa Miskanin, with a natural grace, and her defensive, opinionated rants may seem all too familiar to those of us who have ever been around a group of drunken college kids.

However, it's Patrick Jordan as Dennis, the least likeable character, who has the most success in convincing the audience. He literally throws his body into the character, whether it's wrestling Warren, meticulously rolling a joint, or standing tense over the telephone, waiting for it to ring at least three times before he'll answer. All of these small details only serve to make his character more exasperating and yet even more captivating. Jordan, along with Andracchio and Planitzer, overcome most of the pretentious posturing of *This Is Our Youth* and give the play a lot more weight than it deserves.

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