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This Is Our Youth By Kenneth Lonergan

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795581738554756

Introduction: The Enduring Relevance of a Modern Classic

In the landscape of American theatre, few works capture the raw, unfiltered turbulence of young adulthood with as much precision and empathy as **This Is Our Youth** by Kenneth Lonergan. First performed in 1996, this three-character play has become a touchstone for generations of actors, directors, and audiences. It offers a stark yet tender portrait of privileged, lost teenagers navigating the wreckage of their own choices in 1980s New York City. More than just a coming-of-age story, Lonergan's drama delves into the paralysis of inherited wealth, the ache of missed connections, and the fragile hope that flickers even in the most cynical of hearts. Whether you are a theatre enthusiast, a student of modern drama, or simply someone searching for a story that feels both specific and universal, **This Is Our Youth** remains a masterclass in character-driven storytelling.

This article will explore every dimension of the play—from its plot and characters to its thematic depth, historical context, and lasting legacy. By the end, you will understand why Kenneth Lonergan's debut remains required reading for anyone who wants to understand the American theatre of the 1990s and the timeless anxieties of growing up.

Plot Overview: A Single Night of Reckoning

The action of **This Is Our Youth** unfolds over a single evening in 1982, inside a Manhattan apartment owned by the wealthy parents of Dennis Ziegler. Dennis, a fast-talking, hyper-articulate young man, has allowed his friend Warren Straub to stay there after Warren was kicked out of his own home by his abusive father. The play begins with a tense exchange: Warren has stolen $15,000 in cash from his father—a sum meant for a furniture business. Dennis, both horrified and excited, pushes Warren to use the money to gain some semblance of power and independence.

What follows is a series of impulsive, often disastrous decisions. Warren buys a huge quantity of drugs (specifically, cocaine and marijuana) from a dealer, hoping to sell them quickly to earn back his father's money. He also attempts to connect with Jessica Goldman, a young woman he has long admired from afar. Jessica arrives at the apartment, and the three characters spend the night in a volatile mixture of flirtation, confrontation, confession, and regret. By morning, the money is mostly gone, the drugs are dissipated, and each character must face the consequences of their actions—and the painful truths they have been avoiding.

Character Analysis: Three Faces of Youth

Kenneth Lonergan's brilliance lies in his ability to make every character both deeply flawed and profoundly sympathetic. Let us examine each of the three figures in detail.

Warren Straub: The Innocent in Over His Head

Warren is the emotional core of the play. He is a quiet, awkward young man, crushed by a lifetime of paternal

abuse and emotional neglect. His theft of the $15,000 is less an act of rebellion and more a desperate cry for autonomy. Throughout the play, Warren oscillates between childlike hope and adult despair. He clings to the idea that Jessica might love him, and he uses the stolen money to try to buy a version of himself he cannot otherwise create. Yet Warren is not merely a victim—he shows surprising flashes of insight and even cruelty. Lonergan portrays him as a boy who has learned to be passive but is yearning to become a man, and the play asks whether that transformation is even possible in such a crushing environment.

Dennis Ziegler: The Mouth That Hides a Wound

Dennis is the engine of the plot—a fast-talking, cynical manipulator who believes he has the world figured out. He lectures Warren and Jessica about the realities of money, power, and sex, yet his own life is a shambles. Dennis lives off his parents' trust fund, has no direction, and uses wit and sarcasm as a shield against his own deep self-hatred. He is simultaneously the most articulate and the most lost of the three. Dennis represents the intellectualism that becomes a cage: he can explain everything but fix nothing. His relationship with Warren is a toxic blend of friendship and exploitation, and his final moments in the play reveal a hollow core of loneliness.

Jessica Goldman: The Observer Who Steps In

Jessica is the most enigmatic character. She arrives at the apartment as a potential love interest for Warren, but she quickly becomes a kind of moral compass—or at least a curious bystander. Jessica is perceptive and not easily impressed; she sees through Dennis's posturing and recognizes Warren's vulnerability. Yet she is also young, uncertain, and desperate to be seen as sophisticated. Her interactions with the two men reveal the limited options available to a smart woman in that social milieu. She is not a savior; she is just another kid trying to figure out who she wants to be. Lonergan gives her sharp dialogue and moments of quiet power, making her much more than a simple love interest.

Major Themes in This Is Our Youth

The play is rich with intersecting themes that resonate as strongly today as they did in 1996. Below are the most prominent ones, explored in depth.

The Weight of Inherited Wealth and Privilege

All three characters come from affluent families, yet none of them are happy. Lonergan uses their material comfort as a backdrop for spiritual bankruptcy. Dennis's parents provide an apartment and money, but no emotional connection. Warren's father gives him nothing but abuse, yet even that abuse is wrapped in the trappings of upper-class respectability. The play suggests that wealth without love or purpose can be more damaging than poverty. The $15,000 is a symbol of this: it offers a brief illusion of freedom but ultimately leads only to more entanglement and despair.

The Failure of Adult Authority

Every adult in **This Is Our Youth** is absent, abusive, or useless. Warren's father is a tyrant; Dennis's parents are invisible; Jessica's family is mentioned only in passing. The young people are left to raise themselves, and they do a terrible job. This absence of guidance mirrors a broader cultural disillusionment in post-Vietnam, post-Watergate America. The play is set in 1982, at the dawn of the Reagan era, a time when many young people felt abandoned by the institutions that were supposed to protect them. Lonergan captures that generational vertigo with painful accuracy.

Identity, Performance, and Self-Destruction

Each character is performing a version of adulthood that they do not actually believe. Dennis acts the part of the worldly cynic; Warren tries to be the romantic hero; Jessica plays the aloof intellectual. But the masks keep slipping. The stolen money and drugs function as accelerants for these performances, revealing the fragility underneath. Self-destruction, in Lonergan's world, is not just a dramatic gesture—it is the logical outcome of living a life without authentic connection.

The Elusive Nature of Connection

The central question of the play might be: can two people ever truly understand each other? Warren and Jessica share a fragile, tentative bond by the end, but it is unclear whether it will survive the morning. Dennis remains locked in his own isolation. The play does not offer easy answers; instead, it dwells in the ache of near-misses and the brief, bright moments when characters almost manage to say what they mean.

Historical and Cultural Context

This Is Our Youth premiered off-Broadway at the Second Stage Theatre in 1996, but its setting is intentionally placed fourteen years earlier, in 1982. This temporal gap allows Lonergan to examine the pre-digital, pre-Giuliani New York of the early 80s—a grittier, more dangerous city where young people had more physical freedom and perhaps less emotional safety. The play also reflects the aftermath of the 1970s cultural hangover: disillusionment with the counterculture, the rise of consumerism, and the beginning of the AIDS crisis, which hovers unspoken in the background.

For audiences in the mid-1990s, the play was a nostalgic but critical look at a generation that had been promised everything and given nothing of meaning. Today, it remains relevant because the same dynamics of privilege, disconnection, and longing persist. The specific references—to cocaine, to art galleries, to the music of the era—may date, but the emotional terrain is timeless.

Writing Style and Structure

Kenneth Lonergan is known for his naturalistic dialogue, and **This Is Our Youth** is a prime example. The characters speak in long, overlapping monologues—verbal jousting matches that reveal both intelligence and evasion. There are no soliloquies or asides; everything is communicated through the way people talk to (and past) each other. The language is profane, funny, and heartbreaking by turns. Lonergan's skill lies in making the characters sound authentically young—self-absorbed, desperate to sound wise, yet painfully naive.

The structure is classical: a single location, a single night, a rising arc of tension leading to a climax and a quiet denouement. The play adheres roughly to the three-act structure but feels loose and natural, as if the audience is eavesdropping on a night that could have happened to anyone.

Production History and Notable Revivals

Since its 1996 premiere, **This Is Our Youth** has been produced extensively around the world. The original off-Broadway production starred Mark Ruffalo as Warren, Missy Yager as Jessica, and Josh Hamilton as Dennis. The play's success helped launch Ruffalo's career and cemented Lonergan's reputation as a major voice in American theatre.

A prominent revival occurred on Broadway in 2014, directed by Anna D. Shapiro and starring Michael Cera as Warren, Kieran Culkin as Dennis, and Tavi Gevinson as Jessica. This production introduced the play to a new generation and received strong reviews. Another notable London revival featured Matt Smith in the role of Warren. The play has also been adapted for radio and filmed for archival purposes, ensuring its continued reach.

Critical Reception and Legacy

Critics have consistently praised **This Is Our Youth** for its razor-sharp dialogue, its unflinching honesty, and its deep empathy for characters who could easily be dismissed as spoiled brats. Frank Rich of The New York Times called it "a play about the real world, not a fantasy world of teen rebellion." It has been studied in university courses on modern drama and is often cited as a key work in the 1990s revival of character-driven,

naturalistic playwriting.

The play's legacy extends beyond the stage. It influenced a generation of playwrights and screenwriters who sought to capture the texture of everyday life with similar precision. Lonergan himself went on to write and direct acclaimed films such as *You Can Count on Me* (2000), *Margaret* (2011), and *Manchester by the Sea* (2016), all of which explore similar themes of grief, family, and moral ambiguity. **This Is Our Youth** remains the foundation of his career—a small, perfectly formed work that contains the seeds of everything he would later achieve.

Why This Is Our Youth Matters Today

In an era of constant digital distraction, the play's focus on face-to-face conversation feels almost radical. The characters have no phones, no escape—they are trapped in a room with their own thoughts and each other. That claustrophobia is exactly what makes the play so compelling. It forces us to sit with discomfort, to listen, and to recognize that the struggles of these three young people are not so different from our own.

The play also resonates in a time of growing economic inequality and anxiety about the future. Warren, Dennis, and Jessica are children of privilege, yet they are profoundly unhappy. Their story is a cautionary tale about the emptiness of material success without emotional intelligence or moral grounding. It asks us to consider what kind of youth we are creating for the next generation.

Conclusion: The Unfinished Business of Growing Up

This Is Our Youth is more than a play—it

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