



**THE ENGLISH THEATRE
OF HAMBURG**

presents

LOBBY HERO

by

Kenneth Lonergan

STUDY GUIDE

Premiere on 8th February 2024

Preview performances at reduced prices on 5th, 6th, and 7th February 2024

Tuesday – Saturday	19:30
selected Sundays	14:30
Wednesday/Friday	11:30 (Matinee performances weekly alternating)

THE ENGLISH THEATRE OF HAMBURG

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TICKETS

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About the Playwright

Kenneth Lonergan is an American playwright, film director and screenwriter. His play **THIS IS OUR YOUTH** (1996) completed a successful run in London's West End and was a Drama Desk Best Play nominee. **LOBBY HERO** was first produced Off-Broadway in New York in 2001 and revived in 2018 on Broadway, receiving a nomination for the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play. It also completed a successful run in London's West End. **THE WAVERLY GALLERY** (1999) was a 2001 Pulitzer Prize runner-up. Lonergan co-wrote the film **GANGS OF NEW YORK** which garnered a Writers Guild of America Award and an Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay. His film **YOU CAN COUNT ON ME** which he wrote and directed, was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Screenplay and won the Sundance 2000 Grand Jury Prize and the Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award, the New York Film Critics Circle, L.A. Film Critic Circle, Writers Guild of America and National Board of Review awards for Best Screenplay, the AFI awards for Best Film and Best New Writer, as well as The Sutherland Trophy at the London Film Festival. He is a member of Naked Angels, a theatre company that was formed in 1986 by a group of artists intent on creating an open environment for expression, experimentation, and production.

About the Play

LOBBY HERO is part drama, part comedy, with a good measure of romance thrown in. The play takes place in the lobby of a Manhattan apartment building where Jeff, a lonely young man in his late 20s, works the night shift as a security guard. He is bored with the job and eager to talk and joke with anyone who will give him the time of day. One night he learns about the cover up of a criminal investigation and gets caught up in the lives of the people involved. There is his supervisor, William, a black family man who has always obeyed the law but now struggles with his brother's plea to give him a false alibi for the crime he is accused of. And there is Bill, an ambitious police officer who offers to help William with his problem and is not above skirting around the law in the process. While on patrol, Bill, a married man, frequently visits a prostitute living in the apartment building where Jeff works. He is also sleeping with Dawn, a younger policewoman, who seems to be falling in love with him. When she finds out about his visits to the prostitute, however, she is devastated and threatens to report him to the police force for violating protocol while on duty. Throughout it all, Jeff is no hero. Though well meaning, he makes matters worse for himself and everyone else by trying to be helpful and by getting a romantic crush on Dawn.

Although first produced in 2001, the themes in **LOBBY HERO** are as relevant today as they were then: racial bias in the criminal justice system, gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the work place, police corruption. It's basically a morality play bordering on comedy. Failed attempts at romance and a murder investigation present each of the four characters with moral dilemmas in which they try to do the right thing while struggling to figure out what the "right thing" is.

"Kenneth Lonergan delights us with his irrepressible **LOBBY HERO**, confirming him as a comic wizard."
– New York Magazine

"A masterpiece. The best drama, the best comedy and the best romance of the year, all rolled into one."
– Time Out



SUMMARY

Setting

The lobby of a high-rise apartment building in Manhattan and the street outside the building.

Time

2001, very late at night.

ACT ONE

Scene One

Jeff, a security guard in his late twenties, is sitting at his desk in the lobby of a high-rise apartment building reading a paperback novel, a pastime that he enjoys during his long night shifts. William, his supervisor, enters the lobby from the street and greets Jeff who is glad to see him. William's regular appearances are the highlight of Jeff's otherwise boring nights. Tonight, however, William criticizes Jeff harshly for not recording the name of a cop (whom he just saw leaving the building) in the sign-in book. The cop, Bill, had come by to pay a "social visit" to a prostitute in the building so Jeff didn't think it was necessary to put his name in the book. William, a black family man, prides himself on having high morals, strength of character and always telling the truth. He constantly works on improving himself and moving up the ladder in the security department. He started out like Jeff as a security guard. Now in his late twenties, he has made it to the position of captain whose job it is to make nightly rounds to check up on security guards and be sure they are doing their jobs properly. He wants to work his way up to management and is very strict with those who work under him, firing anyone who is sloppy or asleep on the job. William also berates Jeff for always wanting to laugh and joke with him whenever he comes by, which tells him that Jeff doesn't take the job seriously enough.

When Jeff objects to William's criticism of him, William apologizes, explaining that he was being particularly hard on him tonight because he is in a bad mood. He is troubled by his brother being picked up by the police for something he claims he didn't do, and William doesn't

know how to help him. Although Jeff is curious, William is not ready to tell Jeff anymore about the situation.

Instead, he encourages Jeff to think about his future and try to make a success of himself. He often gives Jeff pep talks or self-help books to motivate him. Jeff claims that it is hard to think about the future because of the problems he is currently dealing with. He just had a relationship with a girl who turned out to be a prostitute, and he is living with his brother's family, renting one of their rooms, and paying off a large gambling debt. William praises Jeff for being conscientious about paying off the debt and tells him he is a good man. But when Jeff reveals that he has a crush on a young female cop he has seen come by on patrol, and that he also fantasizes about being tied up and interrogated naked by some other lady cops, that's too much for William. He leaves the building, saying he will see Jeff tomorrow.

JEFF. I'll be here.

WILLIAM. I know you will, Jeff.

Scene Two

Late the next night. Jeff is at his desk in the apartment lobby. Two uniformed police officers, Bill, a cop around thirty, and his patrol partner Dawn in her early twenties, are talking on the street outside. Jeff cannot hear them. They are speaking about a drunken brawl they just broke up. Dawn is concerned that she hit one of the troublemakers too hard with her nightstick and put him in the hospital. Bill assures her that she did the right thing and that he will vouch for her at the police station if necessary. Bill and Dawn have slept together, and, although she knows he is married, she is on the verge of falling in love with him. Bill flirts with her. She acts coy but seems to like the attention. He brags about the five commendations he has received from the police department and boasts that he is now eligible to receive a gold shield which means a promotion to Police Detective. Dawn clearly admires Bill and thinks he is the most dedicated person she ever met. They enter the apartment building and say hello to Jeff. He is thrilled to meet Dawn, the young cop he has observed



from afar on patrol. Bill tells Dawn to wait in the lobby while he visits a friend upstairs.

Jeff tries to get Bill to sign in before he goes upstairs, but he refuses to do so. Following William's instructions, Jeff does it for him. Alone now with Dawn, Jeff jokes and flirts with her in an effort to charm and make a good impression on her.

JEFF. I know I'm blathering, I'm just completely in love with you, can I just say that?

DAWN. OK, take it easy.

JEFF. No, I am, man: I've seen you go by a lot over the last few weeks and I just think you are it, man; I'd do anything if you would just give me the time of day.

DAWN. OK –

JEFF. Your generation of lady cops are like pioneers as far as I'm concerned. I think you guys are great. But I also happen to find most of you extremely sexy, OK?

DAWN. Get outta here!

After she resists his awkward advances and attempts to make a date with her, Jeff lets it slip that Bill is upstairs having sex with Mrs. Heinwald, an attractive prostitute he visits frequently. Not wanting to believe Jeff because of her infatuation with Bill, she tells him he should keep his mouth shut about another person's business. She has trouble, however, hiding her jealousy and hurt.

Jeff suspects that she is in love with Bill, but she denies it. She claims she just admires him because he makes it easier for her in the police department with the other male officers who harass and regard her as a sex object. When Jeff sees that she is crying, he regrets telling her about Bill and Mrs. Heinwald.

Bill returns to the lobby and senses that something is wrong. He asks Dawn why she has a funny look on her face. She turns away and does not respond to him. Bill tells Jeff to say hello to William when he sees him. Then he and Dawn leave the building.

A short time later, William enters the lobby. Jeff tells him the police were there, but they didn't ask about him or his brother. Feeling the need to talk to someone about his troubles, William tells Jeff in confidence that his brother was arrested for going into a hospital with two other men to steal pharmaceutical drugs. A nurse saw them, and they attacked her, beating her until she was dead. His brother claims he is innocent and wants

William to tell the police that he couldn't have been involved in the crime because he was at the movies with William at the time. William can't believe that his brother is capable of murder but thinks it likely that he was there at the hospital, even though he didn't participate directly in the crime. Now William has to decide whether to tell the police the truth or give his brother a false alibi. He sympathizes with his brother because he knows that a lot of black people are in jail who don't belong there because of police profiling and bias. He just wishes he could find out whether or not his brother was even with those other men at the hospital that night. He asks Jeff what he would do if he were faced with the same dilemma as he is.

JEFF. Me? Oh, well, the first thing I would do is I would definitely try to find out if my brother was with those guys or not. Because that would definitely inform the situation right there.

(Pause.)

WILLIAM. Well, no fuckin shit, Jeff, how in the world do you expect me to do that?... Hot dog, I never would have thought of that!

JEFF. Don't get mad at me, you asked me what I would do.... I'm sorry, this kind of problem is not exactly within my forté.

WILLIAM. Which is what?

(Pause.)

JEFF. OK, you don't have to get nasty, I'm only tryin' to be –

WILLIAM. What is your forté, man? What is your forté?

(Pause.)

JEFF. I don't have one. Losing money.

WILLIAM. All right, never mind, Jeff. Thanks anyway.

He tells Jeff not to say anything to the police until he can figure out the right thing to do.

Bill and Dawn appear on the street, but Bill comes into the lobby alone leaving Dawn to wait for him outside. Bill takes William aside so Jeff can't hear them talking. He tells William that he heard everything about his brother at the police station and wants to help if he can. "I'm gonna do everything I can for you within the law and maybe a little bit around the edges," he says. He gives William his phone number so William can get



in touch with him if necessary. William is surprised by Bill's offer of help. He thanks Bill, says goodnight, and leaves the building.

Bill then turns aggressively towards Jeff and lectures him about revealing things to Dawn that he shouldn't have. He points out that Dawn is still on probation as a new cop and therefore needs his help and protection. He is a kind of father figure for her, and she looks up to him. She is even attracted to him, Bill says, and suggests that making her feel he is interested in her too is part of building her confidence. So, he doesn't need Jeff using his "big fuckin' flappin' fuckin' mouth" to tell her what he is doing upstairs with Mrs. Heinwald. He tells Jeff he would really like to "smack the shit" out of him, but that is not the kind of thing he would do. He just wants to warn Jeff to keep his big mouth shut about Mrs. Heinwald, and to stick to the story that he is visiting Jim, a friend of hers. Jeff is frightened by Bill and quickly agrees to keep his mouth shut about what Bill does when he is upstairs.

Bill leaves to join Dawn outside as Jeff's buzzer on his desk buzzes. He answers it, talks briefly on the phone and hangs up. He then rushes to the lobby door, opens it, and sees Bill and Dawn who are quarrelling on the sidewalk outside. He waits at the door for an opportunity to interrupt them and give Bill the message he got on the buzzer.

Bill is explaining to Dawn that he was just telling Jeff to mind his own business about what goes on upstairs. Dawn claims she doesn't care what Bill was doing upstairs. He gives her the story that his friend Jim lives upstairs with Mrs. Heinwald and that he hardly even knows her, that she in fact is out of town now so it was impossible for him to see her. He tells Dawn he doesn't know when he felt about anyone the way he feels about her. And it doesn't help that he and his wife are like strangers to each other, he says. He feels that he and Dawn are the real thing and that that is as honest as he can get.

Jeff finally excuses himself for interrupting them. He says that Mr. Heinwald just called down to the desk and said that Bill left his hat upstairs. Bill is infuriated that Jeff has exposed as a lie everything he was saying to Dawn. He moves threateningly toward Jeff and orders him to get back inside the building.

There is nothing left now for Bill to say to Dawn except to admit the fact that he was lying. He apologizes and admits that he doesn't know what is wrong with him, that maybe he is a sex addict. Dawn replies that maybe it is because he is a "dirty fuckin' liar." This angers Bill and he stops trying to make up to Dawn. Instead, he reminds her that he is her boss and she has to do what he tells her to do. If it means waiting in the lobby all night while he is upstairs with Mrs. Heinwald, then that is exactly what she is going to do.

DAWN. No, I'm not –

BILL. Oh yes you are. You're gonna sit down here with Jeff and you're gonna answer the radio for me, and if you don't like it, Dawn, then maybe you shouldn't be tryin' to be a cop. Because that's what cops do, is support each other. They help each other, and they are there for each other.... Now I'm gonna go up there and get my hat. And you're gonna wait down here till I come back.

When she refuses again to obey him, he threatens to not back up her story about justifiably hitting the drunk with her nightstick. He also threatens to make her life hell with the other police officers unless she continues being "very, very nice to him." He goes into the lobby, past Jeff, and off toward the elevator. Dawn stays where she is.

ACT TWO

Scene One

Late the next night. Jeff is sitting in the lobby trying to make small talk with William.

JEFF. Does it ever strike you as stupid that you're "the Captain"?

WILLIAM. No....

JEFF. But there's no other ranks.

WILLIAM. What?

JEFF. Well – every body else is just a guard, but you're "the Captain." Do you know what I mean? Why aren't you a corporal? Why do they skip right up to Captain? Or why aren't you just "the supervisor"? I'm just mak-



ing conversation.

WILLIAM. Well why you gotta be making conversation? I'm just tryin' to sit here for a minute. You feel you gotta say stupid shit to me just because I'm in the Goddamn room? I'll be on my way and you can get back to your crossword puzzle.

JEFF. What's the matter with you? Lighten up. I didn't say anything.

WILLIAM. I'm sorry.

William says he talked with his brother's incompetent attorney who got his brother's case mixed up with another one. So, he gave up on him and talked with two police detectives. He told them he was with his brother at the movies when the crime took place. Jeff is surprised to hear that William lied and asks him what if his brother really committed the crime. Annoyed by Jeff's question, William replies that his brother couldn't have committed the crime because he was at the movies with him at the time. After talking to the useless attorney and knowing how badly black men are treated in the justice system, he is convinced that his brother can't get a fair trial. That is why he is giving his brother a false alibi. William is clearly in turmoil emotionally over the choice he has made because it has undermined his sense of self. All his life he has told the truth and obeyed the law, he tells Jeff, but this world is bad, so you just do your best and do what you have to do. Jeff admits that he would probably have done the same thing to protect his brother.

Bill and Dawn enter the lobby. Bill immediately pulls William aside so he can speak with him privately. He proudly informs William that he can expect good news because he talked to the police detectives and told them he believed William's story. He even went to the Assistant District Attorney's office and told him he would vouch for him. William thanks Bill for the support. Then Bill raises his voice so both Dawn and Jeff can clearly hear him, announcing that he is going up to 22-J where Mrs. Heinwald lives. After Bill goes upstairs, William leaves the building.

Jeff and Dawn are now alone in the lobby. Dawn points out to Jeff that by speaking loudly Bill was just trying to show her that he's the boss. She knows that Bill would be in big trouble if she told his superiors about his nightly visits to a prostitute while on duty. But she also knows that if she reports him, Bill will not back up her story about

why she had to hit the drunken man, putting him in the hospital. And he will certainly get her kicked off the police force if she is not nice to him. By "nice" he means that he expects her to continue sleeping with him. Jeff calls that sexual harassment, but Dawn calls it rape and says she would rather be dead. She knows she has to do something about Bill but can't figure out what that is. She just wants to be a good cop and do her duty, she says. Jeff sympathizes with Dawn and her predicament. He tells her how much he admires her and the contribution she is making to society. It's inspiring him, he says, to get a better job, maybe working with kids, or something. She is grateful for Jeff's empathy and they agree to become friends.

Dawn asks Jeff about William's brother. She heard that he was being released by the police because Bill stood up for the alibi that William gave him. Jeff feels uneasy because he knows that William made up the alibi. He wants to know what Dawn would do if she were in William's situation, but he foolishly poses the question as if it were hypothetical. She gradually realizes that the question isn't hypothetical at all and forces Jeff to admit that William wasn't with his brother when the crime took place. After Dawn insists that Jeff must tell the police the truth, they get into a fierce argument about the right thing to do in the situation. She warns Jeff that she is going to tell the police what he told her.

William comes into the lobby and wants to know what they were talking about. Before they can answer him, Bill returns from visiting Mrs. Heinwald upstairs. Everyone turns and looks at him.

BILL. What's goin' on?

DAWN. Uh, nothing too serious, Bill. I'm just doin' some police work right now. You can go back upstairs.

BILL. What police work?

DAWN. Oh, well. It turns out while you're up there with "Jim," your buddy William here has been lyin' his ass off to the whole Police Department.

She tells him that, according to Jeff, William has given to the police a false alibi about his brother, and that tomorrow she plans to report it to the Assistant District Attorney. She says everyone at the Police Precinct is now going to think he's a stupid jerk for standing up for William and practically getting the case thrown out.

Furthermore, everyone is going to know what a lousy, dishonest cheat he is. And nobody is going to believe a word he has to say about her or anything else for the rest of his "fuckin' life!" With that, Dawn leaves the building. Dumbfounded, Bill asks Jeff and William "What the hell is going on?" Jeff shakes his head and William walks out onto the street.

Scene Two

The next night. Jeff is alone in the lobby, asleep. Bill appears on the street with a bouquet of flowers. He peers through the window at Jeff for a moment and then bangs on the lobby door. Jeff wakes up, unlocks the door and Bill comes in. He tells Jeff he wants to see William when he comes. Then he shouts at Jeff for talking to Dawn about William and his brother. He also expresses his anger about Dawn telling the whole police department what really happened. As a result, he got bumped off the list for his gold shield and now has to wait another year or longer before he can get on the list again. He blames it all on Dawn who doesn't know how to act like a "professional," backing people up and "sticking to your man." He feels he has been made to look like a fool in front of the entire Police Division. He tells Jeff he's taking the flowers upstairs and Jeff should buzz him when William comes in. Jeff informs Bill that Mrs. Heinwald is away for the weekend. Disappointed, Bill starts to leave the lobby just as William comes in.

Bill greets William and, on his way out, he remarks that Jeff has been sleeping on the job. William immediately rips Jeff's badge off his shirt and grabs him like he's

going to beat him up. He is also angry at Jeff for telling Dawn about the false alibi. Jeff begs to keep his job and explains that he didn't mean to tell Dawn anything about William and his brother. William calms down and gives Jeff back his badge. He blames himself for confiding in Jeff in the first place. Then he says he's going to go home and try to figure out what he is going to do now. Jeff assures William that he really admires him in spite of everything that has happened. After William leaves, Jeff pins his badge back on his shirt.

Dawn comes into the lobby from the street. She has come to apologize for her behavior and for betraying Jeff's confidentiality the night before. He doesn't want to hear it. He says she's nothing but trouble. She nevertheless persists, insisting she is really sorry. She says she is available for a date with him if he's still interested, but he doesn't respond to her offer. She tells him she will be working days alone from now on because nobody on the police force will work with her. Jeff sees that Dawn is genuinely contrite and regrets that her actions have caused her so much pain. He confides in her that he was hoping the whole experience would encourage him to rise to greater heights. But now he feels like someone who was worn out the minute he was born. She tries to encourage him, saying she thinks he is a great person with a lot of potential. She asks, "How are you supposed to know if you're right and everybody else is wrong, or if you're just wreckin' your own chances?" Jeff replies, "I wouldn't know. I never tried to do anything before." They are both feeling lost. After a long pause Jeff hesitates, then reaches out and squeezes her shoulder.

END

Study Questions

1. Where does Jeff work and what is his job there?
2. Who is Jeff's supervisor?
3. Whom does the policeman Bill frequently visit in the apartment building?
4. What is Bill's marital status?
5. Who is Bill's partner while on nightly patrol?
6. With whom is Dawn having an affair?
7. Is Dawn an experienced police officer or is she new on the force?
8. Whom does Jeff have a crush on?
9. What crime is William's brother accused of?
10. Who gives William's brother a false alibi?
11. Who vouches for the fake alibi to the police?
12. Who tells the police that the alibi is false?

For Discussion or Written Work

1. Describe William's ethical dilemma in the play. Would you make the same choice as he does? Why or why not?
2. Jeff knows that William has given a false alibi for his brother but does not report it to the police. What would you do if you were in Jeff's place?
3. Discuss Dawn's relationship with Bill and the difficulty she has working in a police force dominated by men.
4. Bill says, "You know: the Law? It has rules? Right and wrong? You're not allowed to break it?" To what extent does he not live up to his own words?

Answer Key

1. He works in an apartment building as a security guard. 2. William. 3. Mrs. Heinswold, a prostitute. 4. He is married. 5. Dawn. 6. Bill. 7. She is new on the force. 8. On Dawn. 9. Murder. 10. William himself. 11. Bill. 12. Dawn.