ARTS

"So much is asked of parents, and so little is given."
VIRGINIA SATIR, AMERICAN AUTHOR

Zora Neale Hurston's 'Spunk' to premiere Friday at the Yale Rep

BY KIVA BANK
STAFF REPORTER

The Yale Repertory Theatre will open its season Friday with a performance of a little-known play recovered from a well-known writer's manuscripts.

Originally a short story written by Zora Neale Hurston — the American writer and anthropologist known for her novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God" — "Spunk" is a three-act play that tells a story of romance, community and Black Christian spirituality.

The Yale Rep's production of "Spunk" will be the first performance of Hurston's play to a public audience, its website says. Hurston's original "Spunk" is not to be confused with another play called "Spunk," which is an adaptation composed by George C. Wolfe of three of Hurston's other short stories.

The plot centers around the titular character Spunk, who is new to town – a Black community in the south — and Lina, who has a history, and a husband, there.

"The actual main narrative of 'Spunk' is one of love," Nehemiah Luckett, the composer, arranger and music supervisor for the production, said. "It is one of a love that finds its way regardless of what the world around it thinks and the powers that try to stop it. I think that is something that regardless of age or race, that is a story that we all need to hear."

Catherine Sheehy, the chair of dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the School of Drama and and a dramaturg at the Yale Rep, explained that the short story "Spunk" won the second prize in an Opportunity magazine contest in 1925. Then, after Hurston conducted field research in Florida over the next decade, she wrote the story into a play but changed the ending to better suit a live performance.

Hurston's play was recovered from the Library of Congress archives, which was sent to Sheehy upon her request in 2001.

"I think they're going to be surprised and satisfied," Sheehy said of audiences who will see the production this weekend. "I think almost everybody who encounters it for the first time is surprised by the ending. But I think in a way that will still be delightful."

Five preview performances open to the public are scheduled for the upcoming days, with the first scheduled for Friday evening. Opening night is set for Thursday, Oct. 9.

The conflict within the story involves the community's reaction towards the love between Spunk and Lina.

"What's the fallout of a great love story?" Sheehy asked. "Does it water the ground and everything grows? Does it water the ground and flood?"

Music also plays a central role in the production, with characters singing and playing instruments on stage. There are 28 distinct songs referenced in Hurston's manuscript, many of them Florida folk songs she discovered through field research.

"It's been a beautiful collaborative process of how we create the musical world of this piece and one that serves the story that we are trying to tell," Luckett said of his work to recover the songs alongside other members of the creative team, including director Tamilla Woodard, musical director John Bronston and choreographer nicHi douglas.

Luckett said that music and movement are used as modes of celebration, collaboration and collective grief throughout the play.

Actor J. Quinton Johnson, who plays Spunk, emphasized the role songs played in the lives of enslaved peoples and their descendants that developed from "Negro spirituals," which uplifted them through burdensome times.

Johnson said that music is deeply important to the Black community and humankind, saying it makes "a community a chorus."

Luckett said he appreciates how the show "blurs" the boundaries between traditional music theater, folk opera and plays. He explained that there is a "musicality" to all of the dialogue in the play.

Sheehy agreed, comparing Hurston to Shakespeare because both playwrights' writing allows actors to "ride its rhythm" to give them "propulsion" into a scene. Sheehy said she wants the world to recognize Hurston as a playwright, in addition to her fame as a novelist.

"She finds a way to reintroduce herself to a new set of people," Sheehy said.

Johnson, known for playing the dual role of Hercules Mulligan and James Madison in Broadway's Hamilton, said he was "heartbroken" that he hadn't been exposed to Hurston's works in his study of musical theater in college or during the nearly 10 years he spent working in New York City.

Johnson said he hopes the audience feels "seen" by Hurston's story. He recalled Luckett saying during rehearsal that recordings of Hurston singing some of the songs in the play remind him of his grandmother.

"I want that moment for as many people that need it," Johnson said. "I just hope that someone sees an image of someone that they know in real life and feels like they can weep for that person, if it feels correct, and laugh with and at that person, if they need that."



KIVA BANK / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The Yale Rep's first production of the season will premiere Friday and run until Oct. 25.

Johnson said that, despite being written in the 1930s, the play feels timeless because faith and belief in God was integral for enslaved Black people and continues to be integral to the emotional wellbeing of Black Americans.

Luckett echoed, saying he believes audiences should see the play now because of parallels between the historical events of the 1930s and present day, remarking that facism was on the rise during that time period.

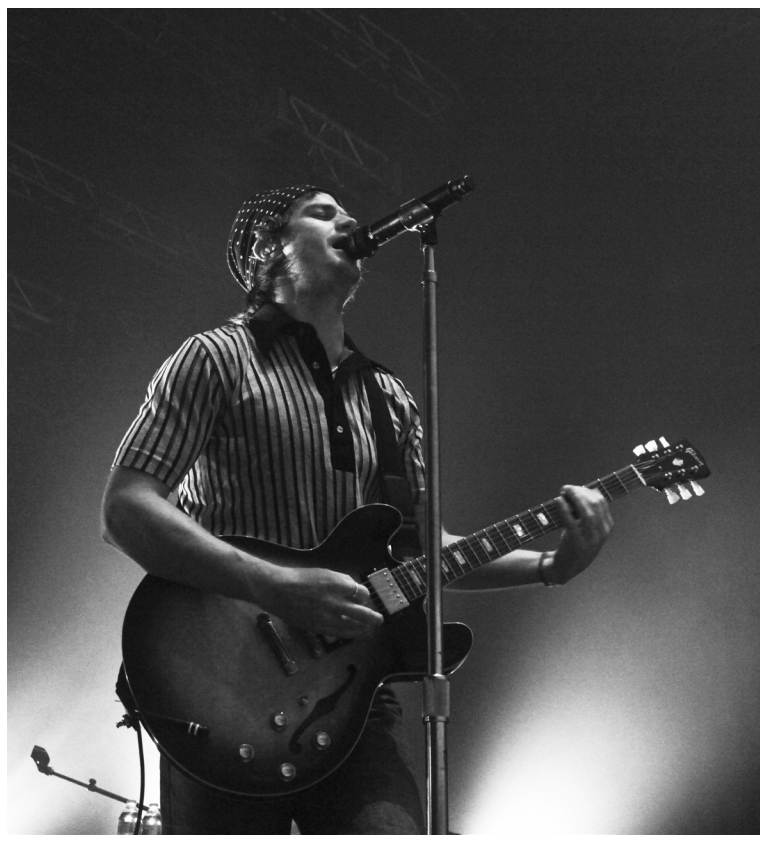
"I desperately believe that the arc of the universe bends towards justice," Luckett said, quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. "There are lots of cycles, and we happen to be back at a place that feels very familiar, and so in that way, it's just even more exciting to be lifting up Zora Neale Hurston's work at this time."

"Spunk" will be staged at the University Theatre, located at 222 York St.

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Djo performs to sweaty crowd at College Street Music Hall





KIVA BANK / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

American musician and actor Joe Keery, who performs under the stage name Djo, played a sold-out show at College Street Music Hall Saturday night, officially opening his Another Bite tour.

BY KIVA BANK
STAFF REPORTER

Fans packed together in a sweat filled crowd Saturday night to see Joe Keery, who performs under the stage name Djo, begin his "Another Bite" tour alongside Post Animal, a psychedelic rock band.

The band opened for Keery, their former bandmate who had been part of the Chicago group's formation in 2014. Keery reunited with the band this year for their album "Iron," which was released on July 25.

"Unfortunately I can't write two songs that sound like they're on the same record so you guys are going to have to hang on," Djo told the crowd, which included his father, whom the singer shouted out.

Djo played several songs from his genre-mixing discography, opening with the techno-pop song, "Awake." He played many of his most popular songs throughout the night, including the '80s-esque nostalgic rock hit, "End of Beginning."

Quinn Matteson '28, who has been a fan of Djo since the release of his debut album, "Twenty Twenty," in 2019, likes that the artist shifts genres. Matteson saw Djo perform earlier this year in Denver for his "Back on You" tour, before Djo released new albums "The Crus" in April and "The Crus Deluxe" on Sept. 12.

"I really like the new album and the new Deluxe," Matteson said. "It's definitely a little bit different of a mood, but it works super well."

Throughout the show, Djo explored a variety of musical modes. He sang, played guitar and mixed music live on stage, sometimes cycling through all of these in a single song.

Fan Victoria Thurber enjoyed his stylistic choices, the lighting and his "vocal runs."

"I think he's a musical genius," she said. "I think that everything he does is really awesome."

Thurber, who has been a fan since 2022, was accompanied by friend Eden Mata, both wearing pink sleeved baby tees that read "Who the fuck is Djoel Keeny?"

They explained the shirts were a play on words inspired by an interview in which Keery joked he had an evil twin named Joel Keeny.

Mata said she has been a fan of Keery since he was in Post Animals in 2016, before he left the band in 2017 to focus on his role as Steve Harrington in the hit Netflix series "Stranger Things." With the release of his first single "Roddy" in July 2019, Keery began using the musical alias "Djo" — pronounced like his first name, "Joe."

As longtime followers and frequent concert attenders, both Mata and Thurber said they have enjoyed seeing him improve over the years.

"I remember going to early shows, and they weren't the greatness you see today," Mata said, remarking that he has developed more stage presence. Thurber added that his ability to be vulnerable with the crowd has made his performances even more enjoyable to watch.

Djo led the audience through an electrifying musical score, until, in the midst of singing "Delete Ya," he abandoned his microphone. The singer halted his performance when he noticed a member of the audience had passed out.

While the apparently unconscious fan was escorted out of the pit, Djo surveyed the state of the audience.

"Anyone need water?" he asked the crowd.

Numerous people raised their hands, and Djo and his band proceeded to toss water bottles to the audience members.

The sold-out show had 2,000 people in attendance, packing people next to each other. Ian Bunting, operations manager at College Street Music Hall, said that younger crowds, like the one at Djo's show, tend to be high energy and "super sweaty," which contributes to a dehydration problem.

He explained people often hang outside the venue all day without eating or drinking much, so they come into the concert hot, leading to dehydration.

"When you have this many people in a crowded area, it's gonna get hot," Matteson said, adding that he thought the venue handled the situation well by handing out as much water as they could.

Typically someone who looks unwell is escorted to the lobby, and according to Bunting, once they drink water and their complexion returns to normal, they can usually return to the concert to enjoy the rest of their evening.

But on Saturday, two attendees were transported by ambulance to Yale Hospital, where Bunting assured they would be taken good care of.

Thurber and Mata, who were in the middle of the crowd by the barricade, said they thought Keery handled the situation well too.

"I think he did a fantastic job," said Mata. "There's been a lot of shows where he has shown a lot of care for the audience."

Yet, the crowd still wasn't satisfied when the lights came up. They continued to chant for Djo, asking for one more song.

After a few minutes of suspense, the pit lights dimmed again and Djo came out to perform a two-song encore. The crowd roared with the opening notes of "Chateau (Feel Alright)," one of his most popular songs.

"This song and dance is only possible because of you guys listening to the music," Djo said as he thanked the crowd before performing his last song of the night, "Flash Mountain."

The energy to the crowd reached its peak as Post Animal came out to perform alongside Djo for the finale, ending the night with a rock bang.

Post Animal is set to return to Connecticut on Nov. 5 for their performance at Space Ballroom in Hamden.

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