ARTS

"If you like piña coladas / And gettin' caught in the rain"
ESCAPE (THE PIÑA COLADA SONG) RUPERT HOLMES

'East of Eden' showrunner discusses adaptation of Steinbeck novel

BY ASPYN KASKALLA
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Viewers flocked to the Humanities Quadrangle on Thursday evening to watch the first episode of Netflix's latest limited series "East of Eden," which premiered Oct. 1 on the streaming platform.

The seven-episode limited series stars Florence Pugh, Christopher Abbott and Mike Faist. The show is an adaptation of John Steinbeck's 1952 novel and follows the dysfunctional Trask family across multiple generations. Following the screening, Zoe Kazan '05, a co-showrunner and writer of the show, discussed her adaptation with Yale senior lecturer Karin Roffman GRD '04.

"This whole book and this material is so deeply questioning what it means to be good and what it means to be evil, and how we all have the capacity for all things inside of ourselves," Kazan said.

The event, which was free and open to the public, also included clips from episodes beyond the first one. The novel was previously adapted into a 1955 film directed by Kazan's grandfather, Elia Kazan.

Kazan first read "East of Eden" at 15 years old, she said, but hesitated for years to step further into her grandfather's shadow. She changed her mind after having her first child, wanting to prioritize working on projects that she felt were worth the effort, money and time spent away from family.

"I really had this strong feeling of like, 'Well, someone has to make the thing that's in my head,'" Kazan said. "I just didn't think it was going to be me."

Kazan said she watched the 1955 film a few months after first reading the novel and was shocked by how much was missing from the plot. The film left out the "intergenerational aspects" of the story as well as the characters of Lee, Samuel Hamilton and "almost everything about Cathy."

Kazan's adaptation restores Lee, the Trask family's servant and moral anchor, who is played by Hoon Lee in the series. Kazan said she reread the novel at 36 years old, with a toddler at home, and identified with the way Lee showed up in the Trask family's daily life.

During the discussion, Roffman said that the narration of the show is a "striking choice" that sets the series apart from the source material. In the novel, a male, "Steinbeck-like" narrator tells the story. On the other hand, Cathy Ames, the book's primary antagonist, narrates the opening scene in the series, Roffman explained.

Kazan said she based the changes in narration on letters Steinbeck wrote to his editor while drafting the book. While writing the script, she used the letters as "a secondary text to work off of," she said.

Kazan added that she wanted viewers not to judge Cathy but "be invited to a kind of self-identification with her."

Some attendees were already familiar with the story. Rachel Fine GRD '24, the executive director of the Schwarzman Center, said she watched the series in two sittings.

"It is riveting," Fine said after the event. "It's like a novel you can't put down."

Others were less familiar with the series. Zachary Lu '30 said he came to the screening knowing neither the book nor the show.



ASPYN KASKALLA / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

In a Thursday evening lecture, Zoe Kazan '05, the writer and co-showrunner of Netflix's newest limited series, spoke about her experience diving into John Steinbeck's archives to envision the show and transitioning from an actor to a showrunner.

"Going in, I honestly had no idea what to expect, having not seen the show or read the novel previously," Lu said after the event. "I became quickly invested."

Kazan said she originally planned eight episodes, one of which was written in collaboration with novelist Alexander Chee and would have followed Lee through San Francisco's Chinatown.

According to Kazan, budget forced her to cut the episode, along with 10 pages from each remaining episode. In all, she said, she lost roughly "140 pages right before production began."

"I gave myself one night to be mad about it," Kazan said. "The next day, I just started the work."

Kazan said limits became a creative principle for her.

"I have learned to find the joy in limitations," Kazan said.

Becoming a showrunner also meant unlearning habits from her acting career, Kazan said. After 20 years of trying to please directors, she had to learn to say, "We don't have the money for that. Period."

When asked by a student in the crowd about her time at Yale, Kazan recalled applying for the Sudler Fund to stage a "four-person Romeo and Juliet in a basement." She referred to her time at Yale as "completely unharnessed from commercial needs."

The event was co-sponsored by Yale Public Humanities, the American Studies Program, the English Department and the Schwarzman Center.

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Renovated Downtown gallery opens exhibit on connection to land

BY JAMES EWART
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The recently renovated Wábi Gallery opened its doors last Friday for its inaugural exhibition, "Grounded," that celebrates human transience, ancestral legacies and the ever-evolving relationship between Americans and the land they live on.

Organized by curators Kim Weston and Moshopefoluwa Olagunju ART '27, "Grounded" unites the works of artists Nona Faustine, Inkpa Mani ART '26 and Yves François Wilson. Through their photographs, sculptures, paintings and multimedia artworks, the exhibition explores common themes of memory, migration and materiality.

"I wanted to build a gallery that was welcoming to established artists, up-and-coming artists but also artists that were getting their start, recognizing their talent and giving them a place in New Haven to have their new beginning," Weston said.

Graduating with a master of fine arts degree jointly offered by Bard College and the International Center of Photography, Weston is also an accomplished artist herself, having been featured in the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum and the Housatonic Museum of Art. As an artist, Weston said, she knows firsthand the difficulties of breaking into the art world.

Weston said she worked extensively with Olagunju to decide how the gallery's new space could enhance the inaugural exhibition. Olagunju paid particular attention to cloth's depiction in the artworks, linking art by different artists together, he said.

"All these things were connected with each other, even though they're all visually distinct," Olagunju said.

That unification was central to Weston's planning, who said she hoped to "tune" the various perspectives of these artists and their processes.

Weston's focus on the visual medium extended to the gallery's name. As an Afro-Indigenous artist, Weston said, she chose the name "Wábi" because it means "to see" in the Algonquian language of Connecticut's Indigenous peoples. Similarly, "Grounded" honors the land's memory, restoring histories that have been ignored or erased.



JAMES EWART / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

Curators said Wábi Gallery offers new community-focused opportunities for all artists in the New Haven scene. Its first exhibition explores the relationship between humanity and land.

The late Nona Faustine met Weston at the ICP-Bard program. Her photography on display at the Wábi Gallery unearths New York City's often-dismissed complicity in the American slave trade. Posed above concealed slave burial grounds in places like Wall Street, Faustine's self-portraits emphasize the importance of remembering this brutal history. She died in 2025.



JAMES EWART / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

"It's a visual history lesson, and it makes you dive deeper. That was one of the reasons why Nona made this," Channon Anita Faustine, Nona Faustine's sister, said.

According to Channon Anita, when Weston asked her late sister about displaying her art in Wábi Gallery, Nona said she would allow it "if she could be the first person to be displayed." "Grounded" is a fulfillment of that request.

"Her work is rooted in connecting to the past and the land we're on and reclaiming space, and I really connect with that," Wilson said about Faustine's work.

Wilson's own work in "Grounded" repurposes objects like cigarettes and tobacco products to demonstrate how materials hold memories. Raised in Bridgeport, Wilson said, she has noticed "a generational disconnect" between the Black people who migrated North during the Great Migration and Wilson's generation.

Weston said Wilson watched his father cultivate tobacco as a child and later used these objects to interrogate American culture and Black identity as an adult. That focus on materiality connects Wilson's art to the land and agriculture.

Inkpa Mani's series "Muki," displayed in "Grounded," focuses on the relationship between cloth and culture for Indigenous communities. Mani said fabric is "intimate" because "it's one of those materials that is always around and on us." He also utilizes natural resources like earth and stone to pay homage to his Indigenous and Mexican ancestry.

"My artistic practice is an earth-based material practice," Mani said. "For my tribe and my ancestry, one of our creation stories is that we were made from clay and corn and that as long as we honor these materials, we will be a perpetual culture."

In a speech at the Friday event, Weston told the crowd that this land "is our home now, and it's important that we stay connected, we stay grounded, and we stay in love with each other."

"Grounded" will be on view until Nov. 20 at the Wábi Gallery's new location at 126 Court St.

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