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Zora Neale Hurston’s Play Comes Alive 100 Years Later

Salamishah Tillet October 11, 2025

Like her groundbreaking novel, “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” Hurston’s 1935 play, “Spunk,” has lively Black southern vernacular, a self-actualized heroine and witty, folk humor. But, even after that book becamecanonized, “Spunk” remained essentially unknown for years. That’s because, until its rediscovery in 1997, the play had languished in the Library of Congress’s drama collections.

But that only partly explains its absence. To mount a production as colorful and layered as her script envisioned, the play required not just critical will and patience but also a creative team capable of delving deeply into Hurston’s archives.

Set in the rural, segregated South, the story follows Spunk, an outsider, as he falls in love with Evalina, a married woman, and their attempts to overcome the naysayers, neighbors and even supernatural forces that try to prevent them from being together. When Hurston reimagined it as a play, she transformed it into a comedy, jettisoning its tragic elements and ending. She also incorporated folk songs, sermons and sacred practices, like a conjure ceremony.

After the prizewinning short story version of “Spunk” was published in the National Urban League’s journal, Opportunity, Hurston spent the next decade conducting extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the South and the Caribbean, under the guidance of the anthropologist Franz Boas. During this time, she recorded Black folk tales, music and cultural traditions, even documented — and at times participated in — spiritual rituals. It was those experiences that led her to revisit “Spunk” and reshape her story as a play.

“You can feel Zora trying to get at what it means to have agency and liberty in your life, and mean not to be bound by what people tell you you’re supposed to do and how you’re supposed to do it,” said Tamilla Woodard, who is directing “Spunk” at Yale Rep.

Woodard was a second-year M.F.A. student in Yale’s acting department when Catherine Sheehy, a dramaturg and professor at Yale, heard an NPR story about Hurston’s unpublished works in 2001 and quickly requested a copy of “Spunk.” “I read and loved it,” Sheehy recalled. She “started giving it to friends, sharing it with my students, and passing it along to various directors, artistic directors and choreographers.”

“Spunk” was one of 10 Hurston plays rediscovered. (Not to be confused with George C. Wolfe’s 1989 staging of “Spunk,” an adaptation of three of Hurston’s stories: “Sweat,” “Story in Harlem Slang” and “The Gilded Six Bits.”)

“The Library of Congress used to hold these scripts for authors who couldn’t have a copyright on them because there was no production of them,” Sheehy said. “Then in the late ’90s, they started going through their files to see what they had.”

The plays were written after Hurston moved, in 1925, to Harlem from Eatonville, Fla., to pursue her first passion: drama. But only one of her plays made it to Broadway in her lifetime: “Fast and Furious” in 1931.

And despite Hurston’s posthumous acclaim, a stage production of “Spunk” wasn’t a given. In 2021, Roundabout Theater Company hosted a virtual reading of the play. But the script itself is highly annotated with stage plans and production notes.

“The scripts have these little notations, like ‘Sing song here,’ and then there’s nothing,” said Jean Lee Cole, who, in 2008, edited with Charles Mitchell, “Zora Neale Hurston: Collected Plays,” an annotated volume of Hurston’s forgotten plays. “That was our biggest challenge.

Another challenge was finding a creative team to stage the play. In the years since Sheehy first requested a copy of “Spunk,” Woodard graduated and built her own career as a director. She is now the chair of the acting program at David Geffen School of Drama at Yale University and the resident director at Yale Repertory Theater. “She was the right person” to lead it, said Sheehy, who gave Woodard a copy of the play in 2021. “It was the fullness of time that made the best possible outcome for this play.”

For Nehemiah Luckett, the composer and music supervisor for the production, it also meant listening directly to Hurston’s own voice, and the music she and the ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax collected during her travels in the South. “The first source material was the Library of Congress-filed recordings that we had of Zora, in which we have the opportunity to hear Zora singing, which is phenomenal,” Luckett said. “I spent a lot of time listening to those recordings to get into the mood and the zone and the era.”

During a visit last month to a rehearsal at the Yale School of Drama, I witnessed J. Quinton Johnson (Spunk) and Kimber Elayne Sprawl (Evalina, a.k.a. Lina) give a marvelous rendition of the song “Halihmuhfack,” a song Hurston learned while traveling along the Florida coast.

But it was through Woodard’s detailed research that another important discovery occurred. “There is a photo from that time period of Zora on the porch with [the musician Rochelle French] and a well-known blues artist, Gabriel Brown, holding a guitar,” she said. “He might have been the origin of Zora’s Spunk character.” And given their similarities, also the muse for the bluesy, freedom-seeking turned heartbreaking Teacake, in “Their Eyes Were Watching God.”

Luckett added, “For the songs where we have lyrics but did not have music, it was actually just a very exciting journey of trying to write something that felt like it was of that time, but that would not be too unfamiliar to our ears today.”

As enriching as the music is, the choreography possesses its own electrifying dynamism, particularlyin the movement featured in a work song set on a railroad track and a subsequent number at a juke joint, where the lovers first meet.

To create that meeting, the choreographer nicHi douglas also turned to Hurston's research. "There is a field research video that depicts what I think is a version of a song and dance that we call 'Baby Child' on the show," Douglas said. "And the way that the children were playing the circle game, all of the physicality in that specific video really anchored my approach to the world of the movement throughout the show."

Building these moments for the stage entailed leaps of imagination and acts of faith among the collaborators. "I'd say to the team, 'Trust Zora.' It's in the play, it's in the script, we just have to be able to see it," Woodard said. She noticed, for example, the reappearance of certain phrases as well as the likeness between the awakenings of Janie in "Their Eyes Were Watching God," and Lina in "Spunk."

For the conjure scene, "part of the research was looking at the spell book and asking, 'What's the earth candle?' and collectively reading every book at this point that she wrote, or like 'Dust Tracks on a Road' and 'Their Eyes Were Watching God,' that happened around the same time or directly after the play."

When Hurston arrived in New York during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of unprecedented creativity for Black artists, she hoped to create what she called a "new Negro play company."

"What people don't know is that she was a theater person. She loved theater. She was even a drama teacher for a short time," said Charles Mitchell, who, with Cole, edited "From Luababa to Polk County: Zora Neale Hurston Plays at the Library of Congress." "And she was always trying to get her works produced. So there's kind of a what-if universe that she actually had gotten the opportunities, she could have written the great folk musical, which didn't really exist during that time."

Instead, she hit up against the competing demands on Black performers. The first was the popularity of vaudeville, in which Black actors often continued the racist stereotypes perpetuated by white actors performing in blackface minstrelsy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The second, espoused by Black intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, argued that the purpose of Black theater was to dismantle racism and serve the cause of political progress and uplift.

Hurston's vision was a stark contrast to those. As she asked Langston Hughes in a letter in 1928: "Did I tell you before I left about the new, the REAL Negro art theater I Plan? Well I shall, or rather we shall act out the folk tales, however short." (She and Hughes later wrote the play "Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life," in 1930, which led to the dissolution of their friendship.)

Today, her celebration of the ordinary speech and otherworldly beliefs of early-20th-century Southern Black communities seems even more original. And now that “Spunk” is onstage, her omission from the American theater canon feels even more glaring; the absence of her voice marks an even greater void.

“Hurston’s deft ability to weave together humor and melodrama, music and movement, and bold statements about the vibrancy and complexities of Black life despite Jim Crow tyranny are utterly distinctive and set her apart,” said Daphne Brooks, a scholar of music and Black Studies at Yale University, comparing Hurston to her contemporary Southern playwrights DuBose Heyward, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams.

“Her work exists outside the standard ways in which critics have defined ‘Black drama’ since the Harlem Renaissance. American theater critics and audiences largely weren’t ready for her then, and I’m not sure if they are now.”