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Rashid Johnson to Make Directorial Debut With Adaptation of ‘Native Son’

The artist will work with Suzan-Lori Parks to adapt Richard Wright's classic novel.

Eileen Kinsella, February 21, 2017



Rashid Johnson

Contemporary art star Rashid Johnson had a big year in 2016 with a blockbuster show at Hauser & Wirth's West Chelsea space last fall and a solo show at the Garage Center for Contemporary Art in Moscow.



Suzan-Lori Parks. Photo by
Stephanie Diani.

Now, just two months into the new year, comes another major announcement: Johnson will make his debut as a director with a feature length film adaptation of Richard Wright's seminal novel *Native Son*. Rights to the novel were acquired by Bow and Arrow Entertainment, which was founded in 2014, and Pulitzer Prize-winning writer Suzan-Lori Parks will adapt the story.

Bow and Arrow partners Matthew Perniciaro and Michael Sherman will produce the film, and Malcolm and Julia Wright, who handle Wright's estate, will serve as consultants on the project.

The film project was Johnson's brainchild. "I'm really excited. It's a project that I've had on my radar for a long time. I knew I wanted to direct at some point, and to direct *Native Son* as my jumping off point," is exciting, he said in a

conversation with artnet News. "I came up with the project originally, and then I was able to find great partners to participate with it," including requesting that Parks be the writer.

Johnson seems upbeat about the challenge of his first directorship. Asked which filmmakers he admires, he cited a diverse range of directors, including Fellini, Spike Lee, Godard, and Woody Allen.

Native Son is represented by the UTA Independent Film Group, which negotiated deals on behalf of Johnson and Parks.

Native Son was an immediate success when it was first published in 1940, and Wright was quickly recognized as one of the most important African-American voices of his generation. The novel follows Bigger Thomas, a 20-year old African American man who grows up poor on Chicago's South Side as he navigates a life-changing series of events.

Johnson said of *Native Son*: "I first read it in my late teens. It was a real eye opener. It was such a complicated book and story that it just really changed the way I was seeing the world. I came back to it in my early 30s and was thinking about the times that we were living in and how significant a book like this continues to be. It just stayed on my mind, the idea of an incredibly complicated black character and investigating his incredibly difficult, complicated circumstances in a world that was also kind of pitted

against him. All of those things against him came to me while trying to bring it to the screen.”

In addition to his many achievements in the realm of fine art, Johnson was appointed to the board of trustees at the Guggenheim Museum last year, the first artist in nearly four decades to be appointed. For her part, Parks was the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer for drama, for her play *Topdog/Underdog*. She is also a recipient of the MacArthur Foundation’s Genius Grant and has written screenplays that include Spike Lee’s *Girl 6* and the film adaptation of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.