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Hungry Ghosts

By

ERIC COBLE

Dramatic Publishing Company

Woodstock, Illinois • Australia • New Zealand • South Africa

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“*Hungry Ghosts* was commissioned by Palm Beach Dramaworks
(William Hayes, Producing Artistic Director; Sue Ellen Beryl, Managing
Director) and premiered on Sept. 11, 2024. Creation and original production
were funded by the William Randolph Hearst Foundations.”

Hungry Ghosts was commissioned by Palm Beach Dramaworks (William Hayes, Producing Artistic Director; Sue Ellen Beryl, Managing Director) and funded by the Hearst Foundations. The play premiered on Sept. 11, 2024, in Pahokee, Fla.

CAST:

VALORA.....	Natalie Donahue McMahon
KAL.....	Paolo Pineda
NERI.....	Emma Seeger

PRODUCTION:

Director	Gary Cadwallader
Scenic Design.....	Kira Barnes
Costume Design.....	Brian O'Keefe
Sound Design.....	Roger Arnold
Stage Manager	Caroline Castleman

Hungry Ghosts

CHARACTERS

KAL: A boy who's floating; sophomore in high school.

VALORA: A girl who's racing; freshman in high school.

NIRI: Valora's sister. A girl who hangs around the edges; 8th grade.

PLACE: Various locations in a U.S. city.

TIME: Now.

PRODUCTION NOTE

All roles can be played by actors of any gender or ethnicity, changing language as needed.

Feel free to update tech/drug/game/slang terms as needed to keep the play current.

Hungry Ghosts

(A bare stage representing various areas around the city.

Lights up on three teenagers in simple clothes: KAL, VALORA, and the youngest, NERI. KAL holds a very used electric guitar, unplugged. Perhaps VALORA is in nice sweatpants and hoodie. NERI has her hands shoved into her pockets.)

KAL *(to the audience)*. I just want to play my guitar.

VALORA *(to the audience)*. I just want to run a mile in three minutes and forty-three seconds.

NERI *(to the audience)*. I just want to build a time machine.

KAL. Which, I mean, OK, my grades aren't the best. And by "not the best" I mean, like, *(Covering with a cough.)* "really bad," but like, is my mom yelling at me really gonna make me suddenly understand algebra? So I just, like, put on my headphones and sit on my bed and start makin' up songs. And she can still be yelling on the other side of the door, but for a little while ... *(Points to his head.)* Everything in here is cool.

VALORA. 'Cause I know I can beat the world record. I mean, I was only like, *thirteen*, and there were scouts from colleges watching my meets. Which is weird, having these old dudes staring at you when you're trying to focus. *(Grins.)* But to be real, everyone was staring at me. I was used to that. And when I'm actually *running*—all I feel are my feet hitting the ground—boom, boom, boom, boom—every step pushing me forward, through the air, like fast, like faster than the Earth can spin, faster than any old men can think.

KAL. And if I get good enough, someone's gonna see me on TikTok, and I'll get in a band or whatever and be making a

million dollars, and I'll bet my mom stops shouting about algebra then. My grandma, she's the only one who gets it. She lets me come over to her house whenever I want, sit in her living room and practice for hours. She's always, like, making me soup and nodding at me with this big old smile on her face, "You're gonna be something, Kal."

NERI. 'Cause if I built a time machine, I wouldn't use it go back and save Abraham Lincoln or even stop a war or anything. I mean, I probably would, I'd get around to that, and probably go back and stop myself from wearing that polka-dot dress on the first day of sixth grade. And I might not push Devon Mitchell off the slide in third grade—I really didn't have a sense of how high up we were—but, OK, so I'd change a lot of things, but the *first* thing ... the very first thing ... is I'd go back and figure out a way to stop Valora on that day.

VALORA. I will say this: The one thing I can sometimes hear over my own steps when I'm running—even though there's this whole crowd screaming—I can hear this one little voice screaming louder than anyone—

NERI (*cheering loud*). VALORAAAAA!!

VALORA. And I know my little sis is out there.

NERI. 'Cause I was *never* popular. I was too shy. And maybe some people were scared I'd push them off the slide. *But*. You get a sister like Valora, who's, like, good at *everything and smart and cool*. *And* doesn't mind dragging me along with her to parties and stuff? It was like she was a walking glitter bomb and I was just always covered in her shininess.

KAL. And it's not like I don't got friends. Me and Ramiro and Jeremy still play *Fortnite* for, like, hours. Even though Jeremy has this habit of emoting right in the middle of a fight *every single time*. I'd be happy to be a video game tester if the guitar thing doesn't work out, but I know it's a

long shot. (*Strums his guitar with pride.*) This is gonna be my ticket out of here.

(*NERI enters VALORA's room as she gets ready to go.*)

NERI (*cheerfully to VALORA*). Hey, just so you know?

VALORA. Yeah?

NERI. I think you're gonna lose today.

VALORA. Yeah?

NERI. So hard.

(*They start a complex handshake ritual.*)

VALORA. I doubt it.

NERI. Can't beat fate.

VALORA. I doubt it.

NERI. Loser's gonna lose.

VALORA. I doubt it.

NERI. Bruisers gonna bruise.

VALORA. You know it.

(*They stop, grinning at each other.*)

VALORA & NERI. Do it.

(*VALORA steps away.*)

NERI (*to us*). It's what we did every meet. It's the last thing I said to her that day.

KAL (*to us*). I remember hearing something happened at the track meet that day, but, whatever, I wasn't into sports.

VALORA (*to us*). So I lane up for the 800 meter.

NERI. I'm in the stands with my dad. My mom is at work, but my dad *never* misses a meet.

VALORA. Eight of us.

NERI. We all know if Valora's racing, everyone else is in a race for second place.

VALORA. The call: "On your mark" ... the pistol—

NERI. BANG!

VALORA. And I'm flying. I'm saving my super-speed for the end, but it still feels like I'm flying.

NERI (*to the crowd around her*). That's my sister, that's my sister!

VALORA. We round the first turn, I'm in lane three, and there's this girl. She's fast too, she's really pouring it on early, and I'm like, "She'll have nothing left for the end—"

NERI. GO VALORAAAAA!

VALORA. But she's in lane four, and she makes this move, in front of me, trying to get to the inside lane—

NERI. My dad's screaming too, he never raises his voice, but he's screaming too—

VALORA. And she trips. The girl passing me trips—

NERI. Wait—

VALORA. And she goes down—

NERI. What—

VALORA. And I'm jumping over her, she's right in front of me, I'm jumping over her—

NERI. Valora—

VALORA. And my foot catches on her legs—

NERI. Valora—

VALORA. And I go down.

NERI. Valora!

VALORA. I land right on my knee, and the same way I hear my footsteps and breath, I hear my knee, I hear this ... snap.

NERI. VALORA!

VALORA. And I'm rolling over and over, and the other girls are dodging around me ... and I feel this lightning bolt shoot up my leg through my whole body. I can't breathe, and I'm gonna throw up and ...

(Pause.)

NERI. That's the moment. With my time machine, that's the day I'd go back and figure out a way to keep her from being on that track at that second.

(Pause.)

KAL. So it was a Saturday. Ramiro got invited to a party, and me and Jeremy crashed it too, and I heard someone talking about Valora Carlisle, the school superstar, how she got hurt that morning. But, I'm sorry, she's never had anything to do with me, I never had anything to do with her— (*Gestures high and low.*) She's here, I'm here—I don't get that hyped up.

But what I do get hyped up about is someone brought a lot of beer to this party. So me and Jeremy and Ramiro are sitting on the floor in the corner of the living room by the speakers—and the music's not that great honestly—but we're laughing at it, and Jeremy's trying to do these dance moves— (*Awkwardly does one.*) but he bumps the wall and ends up with his foot in this big planter with this tree thing. His shoe comes off, and we're losing it, and this guy, I think he's Martin's brother, he's like seventeen, and he's like, "Man, you guys wanna get *really* wrecked, you gotta try this." and he hands us this joint he's smoking. And I never smoked pot, and I *know* Jeremy and Ramiro haven't either, but he's like, "You guys never blaze before?" and we're all like, "No, man, we have, we were just, like, not hitting it tonight." But he's like almost forcing the

joint into Ramiro's mouth, laughing, like, "Bruh, you're gonna get so wrecked. Try it." And like ... you can *feel* the moment happening in the air, like our life is about to seriously change, not like an anti-drug ad, like we're suddenly gonna go crash my mom's car or something, but like ... we've leveled up in fun. And we're all like ... "OK."

(VALORA is on crutches.

NERI watches her closely from another space.)

VALORA (*takes a deep breath, to us*). So they put my knee back where it belongs. And of course there's all the talk about how many surgeries I'll need, how many *years* of physical therapy I'll need, how patient I need to be, how this is where my true championship spirit will be tested ... but what nobody tells me ... is that I'll ever be able to run full-out again. Ever.

(NERI approaches VALORA.)

NERI. Val?

(VALORA turns away from her.)

KAL (*picking occasionally at his guitar*). I don't remember a lot about the party. What I remember is the *feeling*. Like ... everything we said was funny, and there was, like, *space* for us, if that makes any sense. Like we had all the time and space we needed for the rest of our lives. And I'm not gonna lie—I came up with, like, six different songs in my head that night. I just wish I wrote 'em down, you know?

(NERI continues watching VALORA.)

VALORA. And they tell me to take these pain pills *before* the pain gets bad, and only take 'em for two weeks, 'cause they're opioids and "you don't want to risk getting hooked," and I take them but they don't even do anything except stop the pain in my leg. My brain still feels like a thousand needles going—(*Pokes viciously at the air.*) "What's your big dream now? You thought you were so special, now you can barely walk to the bathroom. Nice work, dummy."

NERI. This was when I think my mom and dad started murmuring? Like there was just this new note of *worry* in the air all the time.

VALORA. And I go back to school, and everyone's so sorry and nice. They made this big poster and videos for me, but I'm still like ... you all don't get it. Your lives are just going on the same way as last week. I will *never* be the same.

KAL. So then I'm like this whole new guy. Ramiro and Jeremy are just their usual numpty selves, and I'm like, "Bruh, we gotta find Martin's brother. Can you imagine getting high in Ramiro's garage? Like if I had my guitar with me at the time, and could start working on the new songs right as I think of them?" And Jeremy and Ramiro are into it, so we started this, like, quest.

VALORA. And after about two weeks, I do notice that not just my knee stops hurting when I take the pills, but like my mind finally calms down. Like all the raging scared needles just get sucked up in this warm pillow, and I'm like, "You know what? I think I *am* gonna be OK." And of course, this is right when the doctor says we gotta scale back your medications.

KAL. That's when we fully hooked up with Martin's brother. His name was Ledger, but he told us to call him "The Ledge."

VALORA. I mean, they keep me on painkillers, but they're just like strong Tylenol or something. I'm not gonna lie, I

miss my warm cloud blanket. But I can't tell my mom and dad 'cause they just want this all to be over and for me to be the old me again.

And then I remember that Cherisse's mom had hip surgery last year and was bragging about how she didn't need all her pain meds, and I ask Cherisse if she can check out the medicine cabinet and if there are some Percocets or Vicodins could she snag a few for me. Just in case I need 'em.

KAL. And Ledger—he has the *goods*.

VALORA. And Cherisse comes through.

KAL. I have some money that my grandma gave me for my birthday, and I'm like, she gave me this to be happy, right? So this hybrid weed Ledger sold us—that made me happy.

VALORA. I didn't get that many pills, so I have to space 'em out. I only take one half at night. And there it is ... the warm cloud blanket. So good.

NERI. Valora's ... like, calming down. She's still limping and using crutches sometimes, but—

VALORA (*to NERI*). C'mere, you little weirdo. C'mere, c'mere, c'mere. (*They hug.*) I wasn't mad at you, I was mad at the world.

NERI. You're gonna get through this.

VALORA. I am. I totally am.

NERI (*to us*). You could finally see a little light in the darkness.

KAL. Every Friday, we light up. And like, all the pieces of life—they finally just *fit*, you know? *I fit*. The only downside is I can't remember any of the guitar chords I dream up. So I try to record 'em on my phone at the time, but like the next day they just sound like, "Plink, plink, plink, I'm stoned."

VALORA (*sets her crutches aside*). But then there's this one Monday, of course it's a Monday, where Cherisse is like, "I'm so sorry, I gotta stop. If I keep going and my mom ever checks,

she'll see how many pills are gone and think I'm getting high." And I'm like, "Do you think *I'm* just getting high?" And she's like, "No no no, you need them, I know that." And I'm like, "I don't *need* them. I *want* them. When my knee's 100%, I'll quit. But in the meantime what am I gonna do?"

KAL. So I use up my grandma's birthday money, and for a week or two, Jeremy and Ramiro chip in, but then they're like, "This is too expensive, man. We're just going back to beer." And I'm like, "Are you kidding me? We've been flying in a private jet and now you're like, 'The Greyhound bus is cool too.' If I'm the only one with real taste here, *I'll* get the money, *I'll* get the pot, *I'll* get the high. By myself." And they're like, "OK. Whatever."

NERI. And my life is changing too. For a little while I can coast by on everybody being all, "It's so sad what happened to your sister," but after a while that fades away, and then people aren't talking to me again, and I don't really know how to talk to them, and Valora's not going out as much or taking me with her—

VALORA. Now the pills are beginning to wear off by mid-morning. So I'm sitting in geometry and my palms are starting to sweat, I'm breathing a little fast, I know the pain is only gonna get worse, so I start taking a pill at lunch too, just a quarter of a dose, that keeps me going. But that means I'm gonna run out even faster, so after school I go to the park where I know the *real* stoners hang out. These are guys I never talk to, and you can see they're all like, "Are you for real?" But I tell them I need more Oxy or Vicodin for my knee and the doctor isn't giving me any. They say they know a guy named Ledger can get some, so all I have to do is come up with the cash.

KAL. So last summer I had a job working in the back of a grocery store, just unloading boxes and restocking shelves and stuff, and the boss liked me, so sure enough he's up for

rehiring me nights and weekends. Which makes my mom happy 'cause she's all like, "If I know where you are, I know you're not getting into trouble" and I'm like— (*Winks and gives a thumbs-up.*)

So now I have cash, I have a source, and my mom leaves me alone on Friday nights. I'm like, "DING! Winning!"

VALORA. You know how you know which parent to ask for what? I knew my mom would close the money pipeline pretty dang fast, but I've always been Daddy's little golden girl. Plus, straight up, Dad was there and saw me bust my knee, so he's doing everything he can to smooth over *that* memory. So I tell him I need money for movies with Cherisse and Amber, or to get a hamburger after school or go shopping, and he's like so eager for me to feel good again, the wallet just opens right up. And yes, I'm lying to him, but not really, 'cause I *am* using the money to feel good, and it's just till I don't need the pills anymore. So I have cash, I have a source. My warm cloud blanket is secure.

(*NERI approaches her sister.*)

NERI. Hey, Valora.

VALORA. Yeah, Neri-Neri?

NERI. You told Mom you were out with Amber—

VALORA. Yep.

NERI. 'Cept I saw Amber after school at choir practice.

VALORA. So?

NERI. I just ... didn't know why.

VALORA. Are you calling me a liar?

NERI. No.

VALORA. Are you snooping around checking up on me?

NERI. No!

VALORA. Then maybe you should just try to find some friends of your own and leave mine alone.

(NERI walks away.)

KAL *(to us)*. So I'm cruising along, life's good, and I'm like, if my best night is Friday night, why not feel that good *every* night? I got the supply, right? So I light up out back of our apartment before bed every night and sometimes when I get back from school, but it's like ... not getting me there every time, you know? And I'm like, "I think The Ledge is selling me inferior stuff now," you know? So I get up my nerve and I ask him what's going on, and he's like, "No, man, your body's just too used to the normal stuff. You're like a connoisseur," he called me. "Like you used to be happy with mac and cheese 'cause you didn't know any better, but now you need filet mignon." I don't know where he learned all this French, but he did. He's like, "You need the top-of-the-line stuff. The only downside is it's way expensive." And I'm like, "I can get the cash, you get me the good stuff."

VALORA. I used to think my schedule was pretty intense—school, track training, volleyball, homework, piano lessons, social life—but now it's like ... all that *plus* I have to time exactly when to take my pills. I can't just take 'em and go, 'cause right after I down 'em I just want to sit and be mellow, you know, so I have to allow time to take them, chill, refocus, *then* do my daily stuff, but then take them *again* before they start to wear off. *And* do all that without letting anybody know so they don't freak out. It's like it's almost more exhausting keeping calm than it was when I was stressing.

Something's gotta give ...

(She looks at her running shoes, which may or may not be on her feet now.) Who am I kidding? I'm gonna be in

physical therapy for the rest of my life ... (*She picks up her shoes and holds them.*) a mile in three minutes, forty-three seconds ... what a stupid kid's dream.

(She drops her shoes in a large box. They're gone.)

NERI. OK, so I watch too much science fiction and horror films, but you know how the alien or evil spirit enters someone's body, and they look like themselves and sound like themselves, but you just know they're *not* themselves? I feel like I'm trapped in one of those movies.

KAL. And The Ledge is right. He gets me top-of-the-line weed and it *works*. But it's also *expensive*. I do the math and unless I quit school and work full time there's no way I can keep paying for this. So The Ledge is like, "You know what can get you really buzzed but costs like half as much? Vicodin or Percocet." And I'm like, "Bruh, aren't those like Oxy?" And he's like, "Exactly like Oxy." And I'm like, "Dude, that's what's killing everybody, it's like super addictive, right?" And he's like, "Not if you have a good dealer who gets you the good stuff and then you do it right." I'm like, "But I like pot, 'cause I can quit when I want." And he's like, "You know who you should talk to?"

(KAL turns to VALORA who is walking away.)

KAL. Hey, um, 'scuse me.

VALORA. Yeah?

KAL. Hi, um. Can I, like, talk to you for a second?

VALORA. OK.

KAL. My name's Kal.

VALORA. OK.

KAL. And you're Valora. I mean everybody knows that.