# Heartstopper star Joe Locke celebrates his West End debut in gay play Clarkston



Joe Locke [pictured front], who you'll know for his breakout role in the gay hit Netflix series Heartstopper, is celebrating his professional West End stage debut in Clarkston, a new play by Samuel D Hunter. The playwright, best known for his work on The Whale—which inspired the Oscar-winning film—offers audiences a dense, emotionally charged narrative set in a small American town. The production runs until late November 2025.

In Clarkston, Locke portrays Jake, a young CostCo employee grappling with a recent diagnosis of Huntington’s disease, a degenerative illness that severely limits his lifespan. The play centres on Jake’s search for purpose and connection in the face of this crushing prognosis. He forms a complicated bond with Chris, played by Ruaridh Mollica, a fellow worker also wrestling with personal issues, including a fraught family relationship and internalised homophobia. Sophie Melville completes the trio as Trisha, Chris’s mother, who is battling long-term addiction. The triadic relationships establish a somber exploration of isolation, vulnerability, and the yearning for human connection amid life’s hardships.

Clarkston is characterised by a persistent bleakness that refuses to offer easy comfort or sentimentality. The characters’ flaws and difficult decisions unfold visibly on stage, creating tense, often uncomfortable moments. The play does engage important themes for LGBTQ+ audiences, notably the struggles of being openly gay in a conservative small-town environment and the barriers to emotional openness when one fears further hurt. The narrative invites reflection on how people attempt to find meaning even when their futures feel irrevocably limited.

Despite these ambitions, critical reception reflects a mixed response regarding the play’s emotional impact. Reviews consistently acknowledge Joe Locke’s strong and nuanced performance, highlighting his portrayal of Jake’s fragile but resolute spirit. The chemistry between Locke and Mollica has been noted as a central strength, capturing the complexities of male friendship and platonic love within a constrained social context. Locke himself has spoken about the challenges and excitement of his West End debut, emphasising the delicate task of portraying a character with a degenerative condition and bringing authenticity to the dialogue about friendship and illness.

However, some critiques point to shortcomings in the play’s execution. Several reviewers describe the dialogue as overly explicit and predictable, detracting from the emotional depth the material aspires to convey. The staging, reliant on a largely static set with minimal scene changes, and dialogue-heavy interactions, has been seen by some as limiting the production’s dynamism and engagement. While the play’s themes are undoubtedly poignant, the storytelling texture and pacing have occasionally failed to fully resonate with audiences, leaving a sense of detachment rather than catharsis.

Clarkston thus emerges as a challenging piece that spotlights important LGBTQ+ and broader human issues without the cushioning of lighter moments or facile resolutions. It is a meditation on loneliness, resilience, and the search for companionship amid adversity. Though it may not entirely satisfy those seeking an emotionally transformative theatre experience, it remains a noteworthy addition to the West End, especially for showcasing Joe Locke’s expanding range beyond his acclaimed screen work. Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.gaytimes.com/performance/heartstoppers-joe-locke-makes-west-end-debut-in-new-queer-play-clarkston-review/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-66412345> - Joe Locke, known for his role in 'Heartstopper', is set to make his West End debut in the play 'Clarkston'. The production, written by Samuel D. Hunter, follows two young men who bond while working night shifts at a warehouse in a rural US town. Locke expressed excitement about portraying flawed characters and highlighted the play's exploration of male friendship and platonic love. The production is scheduled to open in a West End theatre this autumn, though specific dates and venue details have yet to be announced.
3. <https://www.londontheatredirect.com/news/clarkston-first-look-production-photos> - New production images have been released for 'Clarkston', currently playing at the Trafalgar Theatre in the West End. The play stars Joe Locke, Ruaridh Mollica, and Sophie Melville, with direction by Jack Serio. 'Clarkston' tells the story of Jake, a young man heading west in search of purpose, who meets Chris while working a night shift at a Costco in a quiet American town. The production runs until 22 November 2025, with tickets available for booking.
4. <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/clarkston> - A review of 'Clarkston' at the Trafalgar Theatre, starring Joe Locke as Jake, who has been diagnosed with Huntington's disease and relocates to Clarkston, Washington. The play explores themes of isolation and human connection as Jake forms a bond with Chris, portrayed by Ruaridh Mollica. The production is noted for its dense and dour atmosphere, with performances that effectively convey the characters' struggles. The review suggests that while the play lacks lighthearted moments, it offers a poignant exploration of human relationships.
5. <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/clarkston-trafalgar-theatre-review-b1249795.html> - A review of 'Clarkston' at the Trafalgar Theatre, featuring Joe Locke as Jake, who has Huntington's disease and moves to Clarkston, Washington. The play delves into themes of isolation and human connection as Jake meets Chris, played by Ruaridh Mollica. The review criticizes the play for its clichéd dialogue and predictable plot, describing it as 'pure American cheese'. Despite this, Locke's performance is noted as competent, though the review suggests the production lacks depth and emotional resonance.
6. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/joe-locke-clarkston-interview> - An interview with Joe Locke discussing his West End debut in 'Clarkston'. Locke shares insights into his character, Jake, a young man diagnosed with Huntington's disease who relocates to Clarkston, Washington. He discusses the challenges of portraying a character with a degenerative illness and the nuances of male friendship explored in the play. Locke also reflects on his journey from the Isle of Man to the West End, expressing excitement about the opportunity to perform in front of a live audience.