# Sticks and Bones Study Guide

## Sticks and Bones by David Rabe

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# Introduction

*Sticks and Bones* is one of several plays playwright David Rabe wrote about the Vietnam War and its effect on those who fought in it. In this play, a black comedy/drama, Rabe focuses on David, a physically blind veteran who has returned home to his morally blind family. He is alienated from them because he has changed and they cannot understand or accept him and what he has experienced. The tensions surrounding David reveal problems with each member of the family. Rabe emphasizes the denial common to many Americans who were stateside during the war by parodying an archetypical American family Some of the characters' names come from a popular television sitcom family of the 1950s and 1960s, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* Rabe uses many varied writing styles, ideas, and symbols in the play. Critics were divided over the play, Rabe's writing, and its effectiveness.

A Vietnam veteran himself, Rabe wrote *Sticks and Bones* while he was a graduate student at Villanova University in the late 1960s. The play made its debut there in 1969 After the off-Broadway success of another Vietnam play of Rabe's, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* in early 1971, *Sticks and Bones* also opened off Broadway at the Florence Sutro Anspacher Theatre in November of 1971, *Sticks and Bones* later transferred to Broadway's John Golden Theatre in 1972 and ran for a total of 366 performances. The play won numerous accolades, including the Elizabeth Hull-Kate Warriner Award from the Dramatists Guild in 1971, the 1972 Antoinette Perry Award (Tony Award) for best play, and the Outer Critics Circle Award.

# Author Biography

David Rabe was born on March 10, 1940, in Dubuque, Iowa, the son of William Rabe, a high school teacher turned meat packer, and his wife Ruth (nee McCormick), a department store employee. Rabe received his education at Loras Academy and Loras College, earning his B.A. in 1962. Several years after graduation and severaljobs later, Rabe entered Villanova University for graduate training in the theater in the mid-1960s. Rabe only attended for a year or so before dropping out. After he left school, he was drafted by the United States Army for service in the ongoing conflict in Vietnam.

For two years, from 1965 to 1967, Rabe served in the Army. The last eleven months of his tour was spent in Vietnam doing construction with a hospital support group. Though he did not experience combat first hand, he witnessed the effects of war on young soldiers. The experience changed his life and later inspired several plays, including *Sticks and Bones* (1969). After his discharge, Rabe briefly returned to Iowa before completing his master's degree at Villanova, graduating in 1968. During his time there, he wrote *Sticks and Bones*, which made its theatrical debut at Villanova in 1969. Rabe became an assistant professor there in 1970.

Rabe came to widespread public attention when another of his Vietnam plays, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1969), received many critical kudos during its first run off Broadway in early 1971. In late 1971, while *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* was still running, *Sticks and Bones* also opened in New York. Rabe left his assistant professorship at Villanova in 1972, though he remained a consultant to the school. Rabe had mixed success with his subsequent plays in the 1970s. *The Orphan* (1973), based on Greek myths of the Trojan War, had two short runs. His *Boom Boom Room* (1973), which focused on a female protagonist, did slightly better at the box office, although critics were underwhelmed. Another play about the Vietnam War, *Streamers* (1976), received more accolades, including several awards, than the rest of his work

The 1970s proved to be Rabe's most professionally productive decade in the theater. Though he continued to write plays in the 1980s and 1990s, only two plays were really successful- 1984's *Hurlyburly* and *A Question of Mercy* in the mid-1990s. Rabe also wrote in other mediums, including novels, shorts stones, and screenplays. Rabe's screenplays brought him some acclaim. In 1983, Rabe wrote the screenplay for the film version *of Streamers*, directed by Robert Altaian. He also wrote the screenplay for another Vietnam film, *Casualties of War* (1989), as well as other movies Rabe continues to work in all these mediums in the twenty-first century.

# Plot Summary

## Act I

*Sticks and Bones* opens with a slide show of family pictures. The offstage voices of an adult couple explain who are in the slides to the voices of children.

The scene moves to a home headed by parents Ozzie and Harriet By phone, Ozzie learns that the government is sending their elder son David home from serving in the war in Vietnam. The family is excited by the prospect. Ozzie and Harriet share memories, some negative, about David Ozzie also discusses his experiences in World War II, justifying his non-combative role to his younger son Rick; though Ozzie was not a soldier, he played an important role building war vehicles

A Sergeant Major delivers the now-blind David to his family. The family is uneasy about David's disability and appearance David is also uncomfortable and wants to leave. The sergeant will not let David come with him. He has other soldiers to deliver to their families. After the sergeant exits, David remains upset. As his parents look for something to calm him down, the Asian Girl appears in the doorway. Harriet cannot see her and slams the door shut on her.

Later that night, the Asian Girl enters when Ozzie opens the door to check on a noise. He also cannot see her. Harriet knocks on David's bedroom door, insisting that he had called her. Harriet talks at David without listening to him. When she leaves, the Asian Girl enters. David can sense her presence.

During the afternoon, Ozzie tries to watch television, but the sound does not work. His attempts to fix it are interrupted by Harriet. She is worried about David, who has been uncommunicative. David comes downstairs and mentions an old friend of Ozzie's, Hank Grenweller. After sharing memories of him, David contradicts what Qzzie remembers about Hank. Harriet enters and changes the subject. She and Ozzie ask David about his talking in his sleep. David tells them that he was not asleep but speaking to a presence he felt in the room, Ozzie becomes angry when David talks about the Asian Girl. His parents call her names. To make an ill Harriet feel better, Ozzie suggests that David ask her to make him food. When Harriet suggests they go to church, David goes to his room, not eating anything.

Despite Ozzie's disapproval, Harriet decides to ask Father Donald to talk to David about the Asian Girl. Rick comes home and his parents immediately brighten up. They return to superficial conversation. As Rick becomes impatient waiting for Harriet to serve him food, Ozzie becomes upset over David's relationship with the Asian Girl as well as over his own lost youth. Ozzie tells the audience about how he used to be a good runner in his day. David returns and reminds Ozzie that those days are over.

At night, the family gathers to watch home movies shot by David. Before the film begins, Rick sings a song and plays the guitar that he has carried throughout the play. David wants to sing as well, but his parents insist that only Rick can sing. David calls Rick selfish and tries to grab the guitar. They get in a tug-of-war that David wins. Harriet and Ozzie are upset over David's actions.

After everything calms down, David turns on the projector. The movie is nothing but a flicker. David describes disturbing incidents from his time in Vietnam, mostly concerning the Vietnamese. Harriet pulls the plug. David is upset and uses his cane to knock things over. David strums the guitar and comes to a realization about his situation. He goes to bed. with the Asian Girl following him. Harriet tries to keep her subsequent conversation with Ozzie on superficial topics, but she loses her temper and exits the home. Ozzie is angry and confused. He calls the police and uses a fake voice to inform them that there are odd happenings at his home. Ozzie expresses his frustrations with his own life, past and present.

At a later time. Ozzie is asleep on the couch. A disturbed David whispers in his ear that he can see the Asian Girl sometimes. When Rick is present, David tells Rick that he hates him and wants to see him die. Upon Harriet's return, Ozzie wakes up and tells her about a horrible dream, in which David whispered in his ear. David denies doing this. The conversation turns superficial, until Ozzie loses control of himself again. He yells at David, informing him he never wants to hear about the Asian Girl again. After Ozzie slaps David, David can see the Asian Girl and holds her so she will stay.

## Act II

The act opens with another brief slide show, primarily featuring Father Donald, discussed by the offstage voices.

In Ozzie and Harriet's living room, Father Donald assures them that he can help David. While Father Donald is in the bathroom, Harriet informs Ozzie that the police came by earlier. Ozzie accuses his sons of calling the police. Father Donald makes his way to David's room and tries to be supportive. David uses his cane to hit the pastor and asks him to leave. Father Donald does not, but continues to talk at David. When he tries to bless him, David strikes him repeatedly with the cane until the pastor runs back to the bathroom in fear. When he leaves, Father Donald does not tell the couple what happened.

Later at night, Ozzie enters David's room. He toes to express his frustrations to his son. David talks more about the Asian Girl, much to Ozzie's discomfort. David leaves the room. Ozzie tells Harriet about the conversation. He worries about having someone who murdered people living in their home. Harriet realizes it was Ozzie who called the police. When Ozzie finally admits it, Harriet is sickened by his actions.

In the afternoon, Harriet is cleaning, when Ozzie comes home upset. He was deliberately hit by an egg thrown out of a car. Ozzie wants to tell David, but he is not in

his room Instead, Ozzie tells some story from his past athletic glories to an uninterested Rick. When David appears, Ozzie accuses him of throwing the egg. David soon retreats to his room after Ozzie becomes more upset. Harriet tries to comfort Ozzie, reminding him that they will be a family again soon

Late at night, Harriet enters David's room. She tries to discuss their expectations for him, but he can only talk about the things he saw in Vietnam Harriet denies those incidents occurred. As Harriet expresses racist opinions about the Vietnamese people, David uses his cane to harass his mother. She runs out of the room, and he follows. Harriet accuses him of only wanting to hurt them. She tells him she does not know who he is. When Harriet leaves, David talks to the Asian Girl.

Ozzie comes home and designates the living room furniture as members of his family. He tells them how much they are worth Ozzie sees the Asian Girl after his speech. Harriet enters and tells him how upset she is about David. They pray together. When Kick enters, he is distraught at the scene. He accuses David of driving their parents crazy. David wants the truck carrying veterans to come back and take him away. There is a knocking at the door, but no one answers it. The sound on the television now works.

Rick tells his brother how much they all hate him and bangs his guitar on David's head hard enough that he passes out. The Asian Girl finally speaks Ozzie chokes her to death and hides the body. The conversation between Rick, Ozzie, and Harriet returns to the superficial. When David regains consciousness, Rick tells him that he should kill himself. Rick offers a razor, and Harriet and Ozzie encourage him It is implied that the deed is done, with the help of Rick.

# Act 1

## Act 1 Summary

*Sticks and Bones* is the story of a family's struggle to adapt their lives upon the return of their son who was blinded in the Vietnam War. The play opens in the suburban home of Ozzie and Harriett, where slides are being projected onto a movie screen. Images of family members dressed in clothing from the 1900s appear, with faceless voices trying to determine the names of those on the screen.

Amid all the black and white images is interjected a color shot of Ozzie, Harriet, and Father Donald, who holds a basketball. A bright light that reveals the full interior of the suburban home illuminates the stage. The three characters stand in the living room just as they did in the photograph and suddenly come to life bouncing and passing the ball to each other.

The phone interrupts their play and Ozzie listens as a government clerk informs him that his son, David, will be returning home from war. The news delights Harriet and Rick, their younger son, and the family spends some time reminiscing about David and how good it will be to have him home again.

Their conversation prompts Harry to remember his own wartime experience in World War II building trucks and jeeps. Although he never saw any fighting action, Ozzie feels he did his part for the cause in contributing the skills he had. His restlessness belies his discomfort at David's homecoming. A knock at the door reveals an army officer who has accompanied David home.

Surprised at his arrival so soon, Ozzie and Harriet are even more shocked to find that their son has been blinded. Adding to their dismay is David's disoriented behavior and apparent lack of recognition of his family and home. Ozzie feels more comfortable with the officer and tries to engage him in conversation or some refreshments, anything to avoid the necessity of addressing his son.

As Harriet tries to soothe David, the front door blows open with a strong gust and a small Vietnamese girl enters, although Harriet can't see her. The stage goes black and then lights again as Harriet lights a candle. The girl is still in the house and Harriet still cannot see her even though the child follows the woman upstairs. Pausing at David's bedroom door, Harriet speaks to him. David is aware not of his mother's presence but that of the child, and he calls her name, Zung.

The next morning, David resists Harriet's efforts to acclimate him back into the family's life. Because David refuses to acknowledge that he talks in his sleep, David must admit that he sensed the presence of someone in his room the night before. Ozzie's suggestion that it was the spirit of war buddies irritates David, who tries to explain that his preparations for meeting horror in Vietnam were confused by the presence of a girl

he had met there. Ozzie vulgarly speculates on David's activities with the girl until the rage takes the shape of accusations and the inferiority of the "yellow people." Unable to take the violence between her husband and son, Harriett vomits and they all fall still.

In an attempt to right the situation, Ozzie suggests breakfast and Harriet offers to cook anything David would like. David is not interested and retreats to his room. Harriett phones Father Donald seeking intervention and counsel for her family.

Alone in the other room, Ozzie launches into a monologue about the trials he suffered during the Depression, which left him drifting from town to town as a runner for gamblers. His pride is that he was the best there was. Unbeknownst to Ozzie, David heard everything his father said. David tries to convince Ozzie that he is fine now, but Ozzie insists that even though he has left those towns, the towns are still with him.

The stage goes black and then fully illuminates to reveal Harriet and Rick carrying snacks for the movie Ozzie is cueing up on the home projector. They speculate about the film David has shot, expecting beautiful scenery and travel images. This could not be further from the truth. The imagery is blurred from underexposure, but David narrates the horrors of mutilated bodies and human slaughter that is not visible to them but seen explicitly in the mind's eye.

Stunned by David's descriptions of the atrocities in Vietnam, the family passes off the film as David's way of purging the nightmare he has lived through. David retires for the evening and for the first time since his homecoming, Harriet rages at Ozzie for having taught their son sports and fighting when he was so young. Her rage at the destruction of her boy needs to find a place, and it seeks out her husband.

The stage goes black again and then illuminates the living room of the home, where Ozzie sleeps on the couch. David whispers to his father about how much he hates him and his prejudice against Vietnamese people. Ozzie eventually awakes with a huge jolt and flies into a rage, accusing David of the outrageous possibility that David could have presented his parents with yellow grandchildren.

The front door blows open and Zung steps inside as she did the first time on the night David returned home. Speaking only to this imaginary girl, David promises warm clothes and love and a home where even Ozzie and Harriet will come to accept her one day. As the girl backs away from him, David is wracked with grief as he acknowledges that he had cast her aside on orders from others and that he faces a life of nothingness without her. Zung turns to leave but David makes another plea to get her to stay. At that moment, Rick snaps a picture and the door slams shut, trapping Zung inside.

Ozzie's distressed face appears on the movie screen as the stage fades to black.

## Act 1 Analysis

The theme of isolation and alienation courses through the play, as shown by the family's inability to communicate, especially now that David has returned with perspectives and

experiences that are foreign to their own. The family's white, middle-class lineage is showcased in the faces projected at the beginning of the play, foreshadowing a stalwart position on racial prejudices.

To further strengthen the concept of the mediocrity of middle-class America, the author gives the characters the names of a popular television program, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet,* meant to portray typical suburban life.

David has returned with both physical and emotional wounds, neither of which the family members address. Their outlet comes in the form of outrage and angry attacks on each other because they are unable to fight the source that has ruined their son and now their entire family.

Ozzie's inability to reach his son is complicated by his own feelings of insecurity about not having served in the fighting action in the war. He searches for anything in his past to bolster his self-esteem and comes up with his success as a numbers runner during the Depression. However, he knows this is not the noble calling he would have preferred. The conflict between father and son will rage until Ozzie can come to terms with his own service as it measures up to that of his war-hero son.

The technique of making Zung visible only to the blind David is quite effective to show her lingering presence and influence over his life. His reaching out to her symbolizes his attempt to recapture the world he knew with her as opposed to the world of his boyhood, which is now foreign territory.

# Act 2

## Act 2 Summary

Father Donald has arrived to speak to David about his emotional and spiritual distress, but David hits the priest with his cane and orders him out of his room. Blessing him anyway, Father Donald retreats from the room, not returning despite Harriet's later pleas.

Ozzie's patience with David has reached a point of no return after he discovers razor blades sewn into David's cap. Living with someone who has killed people has unnerved the couple and they discuss the need to have his room searched for more weapons. Ozzie admits to Harriet that he had anonymously called the police about the potential threat that David poses and leaves Harriet with the problem.

The stage goes to black. When the lights come back up, Ozzie has returned in an exhilarated mood, having been hit by an egg thrown from a car window. The indignity of the act pales in comparison to his being the object of someone's attention. His passion for fighting has been roused and Ozzie paces the house, recounting the days of his youth when he and his friend were the terror of the neighborhood.

His enthusiasm waning, Ozzie retreats to the couch and thinks aloud about the times he wanted to leave the family. He no longer feels any sense of reserve on the issue. Harriet's impatience with his rambling erupts into disgust for Ozzie's lack of tolerance for anyone who is not like him.

In an attempt to set her family right again, Harriet enters David's room to give him a sponge bath in an attempt to soothe him. However, David rebuffs her ministrations and attacks her with his cane until she leaves the room.

Zung has reappeared and watches as Ozzie arranges three chairs in the living room, each seat representing a member of the family. Distributing papers equally among the chairs, Ozzie talks to himself about the symbolism of this act; the stacks of paper in his arms delineate the items for which he has paid along with the corresponding price. To Ozzie's way of thinking, these items represent the sum total of the man and what he has provided for his wife and children. After Harriet confides to Ozzie how David attacked her, the couple silently commit to ridding their home of this new threat.

Suddenly, David appears dressed in combat fatigues with Zung following behind him. Rick has now assumed the dominant role in the family and warns David about keeping his distance from the rest of the family. David doesn't stop, so Rick stops him by breaking a guitar over his head. Meanwhile, Ozzie subdues Zung, who is now visible to them. He strangles her and lets her lie on the floor.

The family tidies the room as if nothing is wrong, while Rick takes it upon himself to see the plan through and convince David that suicide is the only release for his misery. Rick

produces the razor blade while Harriet brings bowls and towels. With some help, David slits his wrists. In his last moments, David tries to make them understand that it was his job to kill all of them, not the other way around. Finally relieved that David seems happier in his weakened condition, the mood of the family lifts and Rick plays some lively music on his guitar.

## Act 2 Analysis

An important theme throughout the piece is the lack of communication that now exists in the family. His experiences in Vietnam have changed David, but no one in his family will address the changes. Instead, they try to communicate in the same way they always have. Ever since his homecoming, David has been met with nothing but bigotry and hatred. The characters are so reprehensible in their prejudices that even David, a blind man, can see the poison in middle-class America during this period in time.

Ozzie's waning virility, challenged by one son's war wounds and the other's musical prowess, rises pathetically with the egg-throwing incident. David continues to garner more of Harriet's attention so Ozzie must destroy the thing that threatens his own security even if it is his own son. However, Ozzie doesn't have the courage to do it himself and baits Rick into taking the onus of eliminating David from their presence.

Annihilating all possibilities of an Asian threat, Ozzie symbolically kills Zung. The callous behavior shown by the family shadows America's indifference to the fate of the Vietnamese people who were victimized in their own homeland.

Shockingly, the family is willing to sacrifice their own son for their middle class mores, whether it happens on a battlefield in Asia or on the couch in their suburban living room. Their lineage of bigotry must be preserved at any cost, no matter who pays the ultimate price.

# Characters

## Asian Girl

The Asian Girl is a physical manifestation of a woman David was involved with in Vietnam She may or may not be dead m real life When she first enters the house, only David can sense her presence. At the end of act I, he can see her and touches her so she will stay with him. David needs her more than he needs any member of his family. Ozzie, Harriet, and to some degree Rick hate her and what she represents to David. In act n, Ozzie and the others can see her. Near the end of the play, Ozzie strangles her and then hides her body. The family feels relief after she, and what she represents, is gone.

## David

David is the center of the play. He is Ozzie and Harriet's older son and Rick's older brother. David has returned to his family's home after serving in Vietnam. He is now blind and traumatized by the things he saw and participated in during the war. He also misses a Vietnamese girl he was involved with and left behind, Zung. David first senses, then sees, a physical manifestation of this woman during the play. David has a hard time adjusting to his life with his parents and brother. They do not want to hear about his experiences in Vietnam especially about Zung rather, they want everything to go back to normal. David's physical disability and mental anguish disturb Ozzie, Harriet, and Rick's superficial existence, causing each member to act out in his or her own way. He challenges them too much, and he hates them. In the end, David's presence cannot be tolerated. Rick suggests that David kill himself With the family's help, it is implied that David's suicide takes place.

## Father Donald

Father Donald is the entire family's spiritual mentor, though his most faithful follower is Harriet. It is she who calls him to talk to David about his involvement with the Asian Girl. When Father Donald attempts to comfort him, David uses his cane as a weapon that he physically attacks the priest with and drives him out of the home. After the experience, Father Donald does not return Harriet's calls.

## Harriet

Harriet is the mother of David and Rick, and wife of Ozzie. She is a stereotypical suburban mother. Her primary functions are cooking for and serving her family, cleaning the house, and supporting her men. Harriet looks to Father Donald for moral and spiritual guidance. Her world is turned upside down when David returns from Vietnam and has been changed by the experience. Harriet cannot understand why David finds

her home so intolerable. She tries to reach out to him, but every time she does, it is not to understand him but to make him understand what she and the family want from him. Harriet is especially appalled by David's involvement with the Asian Girl. Using racial epithets, Harriet repeatedly expresses that she finds it unacceptable that David touched someone she describes as "yellow" and a "whore " Ozzie's increasingly disturbing behavior also bothers her, but Harriet finds it much easier to communicate with him. She is ultimately most comfortable making sure Rick has his fudge and other snacks. In the end, Harriet supports Rick's effort to get David to kill himself. She brings pans and towels to put under David's wrists so he will not make a mess on her carpet.

## Ozzie

Ozzie is the head of the household, Harriet's husband, and David and Rick's father. Like Harriet, Ozzie is also greatly disturbed by David's physical and mental state on his return home. It reminds him of his experiences in World War II in vehicle production as well as of his own lost youth. Ozzie cannot understand what David went through or what he is feeling. He also shares Harriet's racial prejudices against the Vietnamese woman that David was involved with. Though Ozzie shares Harriet and Rick's desire to live in an orderly, superficial family, his anger and frustration often come through, sometimes in disturbing ways. These emotions are heightened by David's continuing presence. Like David, Ozzie engages in some odd actions. For example, Ozzie calls the police about his own home and son, pretending to be someone else. He claims everyone m the house is strange. Later, Ozzie strangles the physical manifestation of the Asian Girl when he finally is able to see her. At the end of the play, he supports Rick's effort to get David to kill himself.

## Rick

Rick is the younger brother of David and the son of Ozzie and Harriet. Like his parents, Rick is disturbed by David's presence and attitude upon his return, though it is more out of annoyance, if not jealousy, than any kind of real concern. Rick is self-centered and selfish. He is about seventeen years old and good-looking. He plays the guitar, which he carries everywhere, and sings. Rick is also an avid photographer, taking pictures of everyone, usually at bad moments. Nearly every time he enters the room, he wants his mother to serve him food (fudge, ice cream, soda, milk, etc.). Family issues are of secondary importance to Rick, something he handles with superficial conversation. Rick's selfishness reaches a climax at the end of the play when he first knocks David unconscious by bashing him on the head with his guitar, then convinces David to commit suicide. Rick offers David his own razor to commit the deed and helps him along.

## Zung

See Asian Girl

# Themes

## Communication

The inability of David, Harriet, Ozzie, and Rick to communicate with each other is one of the play's central themes. The most obvious communication problem is between David and the rest of the family. When David returns from Vietnam, the family tries to communicate with him the same way they did before he left. This does not work because David has been profoundly changed and had experiences that they find distasteful (i.e, involvement with the Asian Girl). At the same time, David does not want to communicate with them on their terms and can only express his angry feelings toward them in destructive ways This standoff ends when Rick, Ozzie, and Harriet convince David to commit suicide and help him complete the act. There are communication issues in the play between the other members of the family. Superficial conversations are what makes everyone but David most comfortable. Ozzie and Harriet do not communicate well with each other Ozzie tries to talk with his family about his lost youth, frustrations, and problems, but no one really listens Rick is primarily concerned with himself He does not listen to his parents' real concerns, only his own needs. But when David's continued presence starts interfering too deeply with the cozy life the family has constructed, it is Rick who makes the first move toward making him go. Instead of solving the problem through improved communications, the problem (David) is eliminated.

## Alienation

One concept that also plays a significant role hi *Sticks and Bones* is alienation. David is both estranged and alienated from his family. From the moment he enters his family's home, David wants to leave. The suburban life they lead is now alien to him because of his experiences in Vietnam. He cannot relate to his home or the people who live in it. At one point, he tells both his brother and father how much he hates them This hostile barrier grows because of the family's communication problems and their racist attitude towards the only person David holds dear, the Asian Girl David's alienation increases and the hostile barrier becomes larger throughout the course of the play. One way David shows his alienation is by spending much of his time in his room. When there is an uncomfortable scene in the living room, David goes there. He becomes violent with both his mother and Father Donald when they invade it. David's alienation throws his family's ordered life into disarray, contributing to their decision to get rid of him. David is not the only character who suffers from alienation. Ozzie is also alienated from the family on some level Like David, he tells both Rick and Harriet at different points how much he hates them.

## Racism and Disgrace

One secondary theme in the play is related to racism. Harriet and Ozzie are disgusted by the fact that David was involved with Asiaa women, particularly the Asian Girl, while in Vietnam. They believe that this relationship was disgraceful and brings dishonor to the family. They cannot accept it on any level. Both Ozzie and Harriet often refer to the Asian Girl and her race as "yellow." They, as well as Father Donald, call the Asian Girl a "yellow whore" and believe she had to be diseased. The couple work themselves up over the possibility that they could have had "chinky" grandchildren. At one point, Harriet tells Ozzie that the Bible says something negative about Asians. But when Ozzie goes off on the subject, Harriet reminds him that they are all God's children, the only moment someone other than David defends the Asian Girl

# Style

## Setting

*Sticks and Bones* is a black comedy/drama set in the time contemporary to when it was written, the late 1960s in the United States. Though no city is specified, stage directions and reviews indicate the play is probably set in suburbia. All of the action is confined to the family home of Ozzie, Harriet, and their two sons, David and Rick. The home is modern in design and decoration As the stage directions indicate, it looks like something out of an advertisement. Much of the action takes place in the living room and kitchen, rooms that families relax m together as well as go into and out of often. Some of the action takes place m David's room, his retreat from the problems that he faces in dealing with his family. The use of these rooms underscores the dramatic tensions in the play as well as its themes

## Symbolism

The play is full of different kinds of symbolism. In a way, each character is a symbol The Asian Girl is most obviously a symbol because she can only be seen by certain characters at certain times. When she is killed by Ozzie, her death is a symbolic killing of what the family has grown to hate about David. David is a symbol of what Vietnam did to young Americans who served there His physical blindness is also a symbol, which is contrasted to his family's moral blindness Another physical symbol includes the increase in the number of plants in the home during the play. This evolving symbol suggests a growing jungle-like atmosphere, reminiscent of David's recent experience in Vietnam.

# Historical Context

The United States became involved in the Vietnam conflict in the 1950s, m part, because of Cold War policies. The Cold War was a post-World War n development in international relations. It involved a standoff between the United States and the USSR, as well as their respective allies, over nuclear armaments and the spread of communism France, an ally of the United States, had occupied much of Indochina, of which Vietnam was a part, before World War II and again after the war ended. In the 1950s, a communist independence movement in Vietnam led by Ho Chi Minh came into conflict with the French-supported nationalist forces. In response, the United States gave financial aid to France's fight against Minh and his forces The United States wanted to ensure that Vietnam did not fall into the hands of the communists.

The battle in Vietnam had reached a stalemate in the mid-1950s. The French colony of Indochina was divided into three distinct countries. One of these, Vietnam, was split into two parts, one communist in the north and one under French control in the south Elections were scheduled to take place to decide what political direction the rejoined Vietnam would take. Instead, a war broke out, and the United States got more and more involved in it. The Communists fought for control of all three countries, and America became involved in each conflict.

American troops, as military advisors, were first sent to Vietnam in 1961 by President John F. Kennedy. Though the American government wanted to get out of the situation as soon as possible, the number of troops and advisors as well as the amount of funding managed to increase throughout the decade as the situation in South Vietnam became more unstable In 1965, American troops became involved in active combat. By the end of the year, over 180,000 American troops were there, by 1968, over a half million American troops were in the country As more American soldiers were sent to Vietnam, their average age became younger and younger, until eighteen- to twenty-year-old soldiers were common. Though negotiations to end the Vietnam War had been ongoing since 1968, in 1969 President Richard M. Nixon escalated the war.

In the United States, anti-war sentiment had been growing throughout the decade, especially since 1965. There were also such sentiments within the government, even before this time period. In the late 1960s, resistance to the draft became more common. By 1969, only thirty-two percent of Americans supported war. The antiwar movement was very vocal by the end of the decade. In 1969 a quarter of a million demonstrators marched on Washington, D.C., to protest the war. One reason many had strong opinions about the war was that it was the first truly televised war. Graphic images of the war were broadcast into American living rooms each evening, allowing the public to see for themselves the brutality of the conflict.

# Critical Overview

In its original productions, *Sticks and Bones* received mixed reviews from critics. While some found the play to be an original and powerful portrayal of Vietnam-related themes, other critics had problems with the way Rabe juggled the many symbols, themes, and writing styles, arguing that he did not keep all these elements under control.

A critic who liked the play, Douglas Watt of the *Daily News* writes, "It is a play written out of rage over what Rabe .. considers our widespread complacency about the events in Indochina. But it has not been written La rage. It is, instead, a beautifully controlled and even poetic work of the imagination that becomes almost unbearably moving as it unfolds." While Martin Gottfried of *Women's Wear Daily* generally praises the play, he has reservations that are shared in principle by many critics. He argues, "The writing is strong enough not to need such crutches as blindness.... It is prone to stretches of poetry that ring artificial and pretentious. These flaws can be easily corrected. Rabe is a playwright of profound power."

One topic of debate among cntics is Rabe's complex symbolism, and his use of it While many like it, others do not beh'eve symbols are used effectively. A symbol that some critics enjoyed and others did not understand is the use of the names from the *Ozzie and Harriet* sitcom. Critics like Richard Watts of the *New York Post* do not comprehend why Rabe made this choice. On symbols, Clive Barnes of *New York Times* writes, "[a]t times he is kicking the hell out of soap operas, at other times he is throwing around inflated but always effective symbols as if they were medicine balls, and elsewhere he seems to be evoking ghosts from classic drama." Stanley Kauffmann of *The New Republic* takes a more negative view, looking at the symbols as ineffective ironies. He writes, "A stung of ironies runs through the play, each of them trite, the blind man is the one who can really see, the 'healthy' people are really sick, the priest is really un-Christian." As Jerry Tallmer of the *New York Post* argues, "*Sticks and Bones*, for all its force, has every watermark of a first work."

# Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

# Critical Essay #1

*Petruso is a freelance author and screenwriter, in Austin, Texas. In this essay, she looks at how the concept of isolation pervades* Sticks and Bones.

Much of the action and thematic concerns *of Sticks and Bones* are related to the idea of isolation. To be isolated means to be set apart from others or alone. Throughout the play. David, the blind Vietnam veteran, grows increasingly isolated from his family after he returns home from the war. But David is not the only character to feel isolated. Ozzie also suffers from isolation to a greater degree than Harriet, Rick, the Asian Girl, and Father Donald, though they are all isolated from something or someone in their lives. Indeed, the very home the play takes place in is isolated. The home is a sanctuary from reality for Ozzie, Harriet, and Rick, isolating them from the events of the ever-changing world that David has come from. Inuusive visitors from the outside world are not welcome. This essay looks primarily at the parallel individual isolations of David and Ozzie, and to some degree. Rick.

David is the most obvious example of isolation personified in the play. From the moment he enters the home, he is alone, though his whole family is there. During the war. David was blinded. This visual disability sets him apart from his family who are, at least on the surface, perfectly normal. When the Sergeant Major delivers David to the home, the family is caught by surprise at this development. Ozzie and Harriet had no idea that David was blinded, and, at first, they have a problem even accepting that he is their son. David, as well, is aware that there is a problem. He tells the Sergeant Major who delivered him. "there's something wrong; it all feels wrong.- and "1 AM LONELY HERE!" These feelings only grow over the course of the play.

David will not or cannot it is never made clear which leave the home: he is trapped in an isolated and isolating place. Because Ozzie and Harriet, and for that matter Rick, only try to communicate with David on their terms and in their way of understanding the world (through the filler of the home), David feels all the more isolated. Harriet, and to some degree Ozzie. are aware of David's feelings. But their remedy is not to change their approach but to continue to treat him in the same way. For example, Harriet wants to ply him with food. Rick responds to this kind ofaimmimication well, but David has a different kind of hunger that eating fudge will not satisfy.

For his part, David makes some attempts to communicate his pain and to break through the isolation but to no avail. Early in act I, for example, he tells his father about meeting with one of Ozzie's old friends, Hank Grenweller, while in boot camp. David contradicts Ozzie's memory of a physical problem with one of Hank's hands and tells him that Hank is dying. Ozzie denies what David is saying about the problem and doubts that David even saw Hank because, as far as Ozzie knows. Hank resides in Georgia, while David was stationed in California, Ozzie can only accept his version of reality the one formed in the home increasing David's feelings of isolation. These kinds of incidents pile up over the course of the play and occur not just with Ozzie but also with Harriet, Rick, and Father Donald.

The only place where David can escape to be both physically and mentally isolated from his family and their way of life is the sanctuary of his room. When Harriet and Father Donald invade it, they suffer the consequences: fear and physical pain. Yet he is not alone in his room. It is there that David senses the presence of the Asian Girl, the ghost-like representation of a woman he was involved with while in Vietnam. She is the only thing in the play that decreases his isolation. But Ozzie and Harriet's total rejection of David's experience with her only increases his isolation.

Like David, Ozzie is extremely isolated from his family, though he has buried his feelings of isloation much deeper. David's physical isolation his blindness contributes to keeping his emotional isolation on the surface. Ozzie is his home's figurehead, the stereotypical father. As has already been mentioned, the home over which Ozzie ostensibly rules is isolated from outside realities, like David's experiences in Vietnam. Ozzie's isolation takes on a different form than David's. He is not constantly openly hostile to Harriet or Rick, though he becomes that way with David and has moments of hostility toward the other two.

One way Ozzie reveals his separateness is through several monologues he delivers when he thinks he is alone During his first monologue in act I, he says, "They think they know me and they know nothing." He goes on to tell the audience about his true feelings primarily via stories of past glories. Ozzie also tries to connect with Rick on occasion, and this failure to get through to his younger, "normal" son leaves Ozzie feeling more isolated. One example of this happens near the end of act I. Ozzie asks Rick to teach him how to pick up and play the guitar. In awkward fashion, Ozzie toes to explain his emptiness and isolation to Rick, but Rick does not understand his father's ramblings at all. In Actn, after one of Ozzie's stories, Rick tells his father, "I've got to get going.... you're just talking nonsense anyway."

Like David, as Ozzie grows more and more isolated, he becomes violent and irrational. For example, at the end of act I, he becomes angry, insults his wife, and he repeatedly slaps David. Ozzie later admits to David in a long, monologue-like speech, "I am ... lonely. I mean, oh, no not exactly lonely, not really. That's a little strong actually. "By late in act n, Ozzie seems to have lost any connection he had to his family. Alone in the living room, Ozzie arranges three empty chairs and addresses them with the names of other members of his family. He tells this captive, though nonexistent, audience how he will now define himself, by the value of his material possessions. This inventory gives Ozzie a sense of purpose, but it also shows how empty he really is.

At the end of the play, the problems faced by both of these isolated men have reached a climax. Yet they nearly break through and connect in the last pages *of Sticks and Bones* David wants to bring all the disabled veterans from the trucks to the house, stack them along the walls, and have his father embrace the Asian Girl. David tells him, "They will call it madness. We will call it seeing " Ozzie can almost handle it but believes he will "disappear." When Ozzie cannot deal with David's suggestions any longer, he asks for Rick's help in the matter. It is Rick who takes over and restores proper order in the home. He knocks David out with his guitar. Ozzie then kills the physical manifestation of

the Asian Girl and hides the body By doing this, Ozzie has physically killed something that he has finally realized has been haunting him and contributing to his isolation.

When Rick convinces David to kill himself, and helps him do it with the aid of Harriet and Ozzie, Rick reveals how isolated David and Ozzie's words and actions have made him feel throughout the play. Rick has completely accepted the emotional isolation from the outside world that his parents and their home have prepared for him. He enjoys constantly being served fudge, soda, and chips by his mother and having superficial conversations about baseball or the movies with both of his parents, without ever being close to them or understanding them. During the course of the play, Rick leaves whenever his father tries to open up to him or his brother is acting in ways that make him uncomfortable. Because his mother does not express any of her feelings of isolation to him, Rick counts on her the most to ensure he is fed the superficial treats he prefers without any more substabtial contact.

By the end, Rick's only real purpose becomes to ensure this way of life where he is the golden boy who plays guitar, sings, and takes snapshots continues, and his unwanted feelings of isolation, caused by his brother's return from Vietnam, end. When the opportunity presents itself, Rick takes matters into his own hands From Rick's point of view, David's continued existence and the demands on the family made by David's isolation could not go on any longer, so he tells his brother that he must kill himself and that he should have done so at an earlier time Ozzie goes along with Rick's plan because then Ozzie can stop exploring his own isolation and get back to being the man of the house. How long this isolation from reality can last is uncertain, but as Ozzie says after the deed is done, "We're all happier."

**Source**: A Petruso, Critical Essay on *Sticks and Bones*, m *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2001.

# Critical Essay #2

*In the/allowing essay, Christy recalls his introduction to* Sticks and Bones *as a first-year theater professor at Villanova, where Rabe was developing the play.*

My most vivid memory of the play that became *Sticks and Bones* was my first reading of it. I was in my first year of teaching theatre at Villanova and David was on a Rockefeller grant finishing up his studies there after his time in Vietnam. There was talk around the department that David was at work on two interesting projects having to do with his Vietnam experiences, but I had not yet read any of his work. David asked me to read one of his new plays in an early draft. I settled down to it at my desk there with some anticipation, but also with that sense of duty that often accompanies the reading of a new script.

Within moments of the first Ozzie and Harriet sequence (Fr Donald did not originally appear at the opening), I was intrigued by the power and mystery of the language; when Ricky came in with his "Hi, Mom' Hi, Dad!" stuff, I roared, but I was nonplussed by the inconsistency of tone. I remember a thrilling sensation at the political intensity of the Sergeant's speech on delivering the soldiers all over the country. Gradually, I got a sense of the weird combination of humor and horror arising from the juxtaposition of the world of Ozzie and Harriet and the Vietnamese War. David's speech at the "party" on the death of the two hanging peasants made me experience such a real and present fear that by the end of the first act, I had to stop reading and take a walk to pull myself together. I had gone well beyond my initial hesitancy to a certainty that this was a strong, new and necessary voice. When I finished, I remember thinking that this play would become known and that it would be the most significant serious play on the American scene since *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? It was a very intense experience. I have not had it with a new play since.

Villanova at that time was an interesting place to be. Richard A. Duprey had founded a small graduate M. A. program in 1959, dedicated to the development of the original script and to the examination and presentation of the new theatre of Europe which was then dominated by Brecht We had a tiny black box theatre seating about eighty and did six to eight plays year Much of the work was by the seat of the pants, but student, faculty and other playwrights got opportunities to work on their plays in a committed performance context, relatively free from box office concerns. David came to the program around 1962, I came as a student in 1964. We overlapped about a year, but I did not know him well then. He was the department's premier angry young actor and had a quiet, but somewhat brooding presence, at a party he would be in a corner in intense discussion with one or two other serious minded types. He was writing at this time, but I did not know his work.

David entered the service in 1964, and returned to Villanova in 1967 on a Rockefeller foundation grant that supported his writing of plays for two years. It took some time to schedule the production of *Bones*; I let David know I thought the play extraordinary and would be more than happy to do it. However, there were concerns about its tone,

language, and subject matter that had to be negotiated politically The Theatre Department had a reputation for being avant, especially in its enthusiasm for Brecht, but Villanova was and still is a conservative Catholic institution, and the fierce language and political aggression of the play were problematic. Bob Hedley, another faculty member in the department, handled this aspect of things and eventually we were given the go ahead for the next season, 1968-69. Whatever worries existed, there was no interference or censorship in the process of production. People were, indeed, shocked, but the overwhelming moral purpose of the play overrode any petty criticism in most minds.

The process of production was exciting. We all knew we were doing something extraordinary, and as university theatre people we felt we were participating in the great social protest that was exploding all over the country. David had a full draft, but was actively working on it all the time, trimming sequences, transposing, adding a wry irony here, inventing a strong detail there. We all experienced the process of an artistic and moral sensibility defining itself more clearly, making more and more trenchant the balance between satire and moral tragedy in the play. Those dizzying changes of tone make up much of the uniqueness and difficulty of the piece. Almost all of the production process was concerned with getting the right balance between black humor and political drama, between the real and the surreal in the play. Casting, setting, staging, and music all attempted to address these questions.

The student cast we were able to assemble was excellent. The pivotal role of Ozzie brought up the tonal problem most acutely. For the play and the character to work properly, Ozzie must have a vast latent strength which he has let go dormant; if he is really a weakling, there can be no formidable conflict with David and no real awful victory We had a student actor of about 23, Brian Morgan, who had been an undergrad at Villanova and had been playing the heavy for a long time. We had no question that Brian could be powerful in the dramatic dimension of the play; he was large and mature looking and carried a smoldering anger that was very arresting. He was at the time the kind of actor who was so serious about his acting that the suggestion of humor could be an insult. After a number of readings and much talk about the importance of comic irony to David's vision, he began to see the point and to highlight Ozzie's comic impotence. Brian succeeded excellently in this balance and became in fact the strong center of this production. Ricky was played by Bill Hickey, a young seminarian of cherubic, blonde good looks; he had the manner of an earnest Eagle Scout. We were a bit worried whether Bill would see the comedy since he was so earnest himself The fear proved unfounded and the sweetness of his methodical wrist-slitting at the end was chilling. We had no Hispanic actors, so what had been Sgt. Hernandez became simply Sergeant and was played by an excellent actor, Walter Delegall.

The set designer was a graduate student in the department, Jim Andrews. We followed the stage directions, "an American home, the present, very modern and yet homey, a quality to it of brightness. All must be extremely natural." We used the idea that the abstract and fantasy elements would be introduced solely by light and sound and that the house would be as real as we could make it The published stage directions mute the idea of naturalness, "There is naturalness, yet a sense of space." Just this season,

the Theatre Department moved from our 60 seat black box into Vasey Hall, a converted lecture hall seating about 250; we now had the capabilities of a modest proscenium house to create illusion The set had three major playing areas: the living room (center and stage nght), a dinette area with counter to the kitchen (stage left), and David's bedroom aloft at the top of stairs from the living room. It was all cream colored walls and bright, nice, department store furniture, which we managed to borrow from Strawbridge and Clothier's. Because of the bedroom and the screens for the slides on each side, the scale was a little out-sized, giving the "American home" a larger than life, almost archetypal presence.

For the memory/ghost sequences, the whitish walls picked up the green jungle gobos well, transforming the space into David's memory. Another strong effect was the first appearance of the Sergeant. When he appeared, the door flew open to a strong wind sound, and he was seen outlined against blowing jungle greens; the house, so securely located in the American suburbs was for that moment (and at his second appearance in Act Two) located in a jungle. Nevertheless, I think that a completely realistic set limits the visual resonance of the play which must be able to flow easily between internal and external realities; on the other hand, too abstract a design can undermine the irony of the seemingly benign solidity of the nice suburban home It is a difficult balance to achieve.

The play was called at the time simply *Bones*, and I have always liked that starkness For a while after our production, it was called *Aspirin Makes Your Stomach Bleed*, emphasizing the satirical aspect of the play. Possibly, this was in response to the heaviness of our production which, while it had its black humor, bordered on the portentous. The New York title has a nice double quality of irony and violence. Bones were a significant image for David; the play which later became *The Orphan* was originally a one-act called *The Bones of Birds*.

One of the most difficult issues in the rehearsal period was the "Do we actually call them Ozzie and Harriet'?" problem We were not at all sure that it was legal to use the famous quartette of names and we went back and forth a number of times about what to do About ten days before opening we decided that it would be better artistically and legally not to use the names We came up with clever alternatives, my favorite being "Hazzie and Oriette " Finally, we settled upon Andy and Ginger as real but cutely ideal names The only problem was that by this time it was so late that it presented problems to the actors who were used to Ozzie and Harriet This resulted in one or two slip ups m which the character Ginger was suddenly addressed as Harriet. I never did find out what the real Ozzie and Harriet thought of it all when the play became famous. Another name question was the obvious coincidence of David, the character, and David, the playwright. I have always thought that the coincidence had something to do with David's choice of the TV family, but at the time he was concerned that people would read that into the play. In the publicity for the project, the poster, and the program, he had himself listed as D. William Rabe so that people would not read the play as biography.

There were a number of drafts between ours and the published script and I cannot claim any special knowledge of David's developmental process. While the overall outline and

much of the scene order is the same, there are some large differences and thousands of small cuts and emendations. During our production process David would meet with me and the cast regularly giving cuts and rewrites, making the script leaner and sharper

This is a section of a speech from a sequence between Ozzie and Harriet at the opening which is not in the final script The original draft was as follows:

HARRIET And why don't you play the guitar1? Ricky does, Ricky plays beautifully, but you don't play at all. It's your fingers I've known about it always, that lacking m them That chill locked into them I remember when in the night... you would reach out., to touch me , , like ice or stones. I remember And you were afraid, too. Trembling like a mouse

Our performance script begins the same, but was revised as follows:

HARRIET I've known about it always That chill locked into them. I remember when you would reach out .. to touch me your fingers like ice And you were afraid Trembling like a mouse

The rhythm is tauter, the tone more direct, David was constantly editing his own poetry.

There were hilarious additions also. Near the end of Act One when things are really backing up on Ozzie and he is searching for his "explanation," Harriet asks what is wrong and Rick suggests that he thinks Dad's hungry. Originally, Ozzie went on to question David here. David added a line where Ozzie wheeled on Ricky and yelled, "PIECE OF SHIT, SHUT UP! SHUT UP!". The effect of the sudden true feeling cutting through Ricky's fatuousness added a absurdly vicious humor to Ozzie's emotional dilemma.

The major changes between our production and the New York script tilted the play more in the direction of irony. Our production, both in the playing and in the writing, was very conscious of its own moral seriousness, and the bitter irony, while often powerful, seemed less integral to the basic vision than it does in the finished play The opening scene is substantially different. Instead of the brief Fr Donald basketball sequence, the play began with an extended Ozzie and Harriet scene after the phone call in which Ozzie is sitting staring out the window confused and Harriet tries to get clear what the phone call said; she says Ozzie looks "Like a mournful little puppy dog; a mournful little animal." She criticizes him for quite a bit about his weakness (the speech quoted above is from this sequence) until he threatens her with throwing her down on the floor and follows that with an intense speech remembering his premonition of David's death when he left for the army and her fierce response. She follows with the suggestion that they go to the movies sometime. This is the first suggestion of the comic disjunction so typical of the play. The mood is heavy with premonition and recrimination for about four pages before Ricky's first entrance. The finished script moves with TV rapidity at the top so that we barely register the seriousness of the phone call and the regrets in the relationship are left till later.

Another large difference in the scripts is the use of the symbolic character, Hank Grenweller. In the New York version, he is significant mostly in the first act. He is associated with the athleticism of running, and the question of whether his deformity is congenital is discussed; there are three or four other incidents mentioned in which he has been influential on family history. While he figures symbolically in the finished play, as an American athletic dream of malehood congemtally deformed, his role was considerably reduced from the original.

In the Villanova version, Hank carried a lot more weight and was a more mysteriously symbolic character. Ozzie and Harriet have a long argument about whether Hank was or was not present when David was rescued from the icebox. Ozzie maintains that he was dead before David was born. He is associated with the lyrical aspects of their youth, but, later in the act, when Ozzie says that Hank would not find Harriet attractive now, she says, "There's never been any such person m this world as Hank Grenweller and you know it."

In Act Two, he became more crucial. In the New York script, David's speech about his paradoxically contradictory feelings for Zung comes at the end of Act One. In a more extended version of this speech in Act Two of the Villanova version, David narrates a violent encounter that Hank, David and Eeeeeung (her name at Villanova) have in Vietnam She is being forced to leave a room, David wants her to stay, Hank physically abuses David and is the speaker of lines similar to those that David speaks in the final version:

DAVID. I was reaching out with my hands in the air I couldn't see her I don't know where she was; and he took hold of my fingers and broke them, each of them She's shit, he said You're crawling after shit She's all of everything impossible for you made possible,

David blacks out and when he can see again, Hank is raping her in the dust

Near the end of the Villanova version Hank figures prominently again. Ricky tells his appalling story of throwing the cement bags at elderly Vietnamese men. In our version it was Ricky who had thrown them, not a friend. As he guides David's hand to make the second cut of the wrist, David says:

DAVID. I WANT . TO KILL HANK GRENWELLER' I WANT TO KILL HEW I want to get the power from him. over him... the power to make HIM need only what I can give him and then I will not give it, though he came to me on his knees "

This is the dialogue that in the New York version David says about the family: "I wanted... to kill" you ... all of you," etc. Instead of using Hank as a symbol here, David speaks directly of his desire to kill the family. Similarly, in the Villanova version, Ozzie tells David, "We can't kill him, Dave. We can kill one another, but not Hank, that isn't what happens. He kills us is what happens." In the New York version, Ozzie says simply, "We kill you is what happens." The symbol has been eliminated and the truth of fundamental intention is more directly spoken.

David, the cast, and I had many discussions of the meaning of Hank Grenweller centering on the American male sexual and aggressive myths that generate erotic energy as well as vicious violence, cruelty, and destruction. At the stage of development of the script during production at Villanova, David must have felt the need for an informing symbolic character to convey his larger meaning It is revealing that both these important uses of the Grenweller character have been internalized in David and the family in the later script.

There are numerous smaller changes. Our first act ended with Ozzie crying out the cartoon word mentioned earlier in the act as typical of a drowning character, "GLUUBBBBBBBB!" an effect I miss in the newer version. In our Act Two there was character called, "Man" who was a detective responding to Ozzie's phone call to the police The who's-where sitcom business that surrounds Fr. Donald's exit in the New York version was more elaborately developed with the detective and Donald and Ozzie yelling at each other from different parts of the house, the elimination of the character mutes some of the zany, eerie qualities early in Act Two, Later, when David is dnving Ozzie mad with the vision of Eeeeung, the Sergeant reappears at the door with a body bag; Ricky takes out a rifle and shoots David which dispels the appearance of the Sergeant. The double death of David was redundant and was rightly eliminated.

The most interesting variation between the productions was in the handling of the ending. The bloodletting took place at a breakfast table in a down left dinette area with a counter opening to an offstage kitchen. While the dialogue was basically the same, there was in our version more discussion of orange juice and breakfast as a return to normalcy. During Ozzie, Harriet and Ricky's ghoulish reassurances, each got up and started to clean up the mess of the pans and blood, the men sat down to breakfast as Harriet went to the kitchen for orange juice. After the gruesome drama of the last half hour, the restoration of a sitcom happiness including David at the end was chilling Normalcy had reasserted itself totally. Of course, the New York curtain with everyone focused on David's drained body and removed sunglasses has its own power, with a more tragic, rather than ironic afterglow.

Aside from conferences on the text, David did not come to many rehearsals till towards the end This was by mutual agreement since we both felt that the cast and I needed time to find our own way through the script. I think all of us were a little overawed by the power of the text and benefitted by being let alone. We were in constant contact and he saw the run throughs. The first dress rehearsal was a very moving experience. We had not had much rehearsal with the Asian woman who was a student at Bryn Mawr. She was very beautiful and effective in the role, costumed in the *ao dai* specified in the script David had not seen her before. After the dress rehearsal, he was clearly disturbed. We had never discussed any autobiographical significance of the Eeeeung character and never have. After this rehearsal, he talked about wanting to change the ending so that the character, David, reasserts his power and continues to fight; he said that the blood was not drained from David, that he could still resist Ozzie and Hank. We talked late into the night and I asked him to consider that the original impulse for the play had centered about the fact of reassimilation and that any further resurgence was an

impulse for another play. The next day he changed his mind. We were all aware how passionately close to him this material was and it made us all wish to do it justice.

We had a preview which went quite well, but for the fact that I had invented a grisly piece of business in which Rick pumped David's hands slowly as the blood drained, this was going too far and got us some undesired titters We cut it for the opening. There was a tremendous excitement and nervousness, much more than at most openings because of our sense of the importance of the event. David showed up with a bottle of gin, and during the show he and I paced the lobby together and finished up most of it. As a result, we felt the play went very well and in any event were prepared to face anyone's reaction. This method of getting through openings has stood me in good stead ever since.

At our opening, as in New York, much of the effect was of stunned upsetment at the confrontation with truths too awful to face, and this, while the war was still raging and dissension at its height Some people walked out, some left at intermission, and others stayed to talk and argue One time a woman got up to leave during the bloodletting; I saw her coming up the aisle and opened the door only to have her faint in my arms. The weird power of those last moments is undeniable.

While the local counterculture paper at the time left at intermission and the campus paper could not fathom the mixed tone, we did get the benefit of some good critical support. Up to that time Villanova was not reviewed in the Philadelphia newspapers. I wrote to Ernie Schier, the critic for the now defunct *Bulletin*, telling him how I was sure that the play had a significant future and that this would be no typical college production. He came and wrote a very favorable review which began, "Because university theatre has only rarely succeeded in making contributions to the mainstream, I traveled to Villanova over the past weekend with small expectations. I am glad I went because I believe "Bones" is the best American play to come out of the war m Vietnam and because I think its author, 28-year-old, D William Rabe, is a poet-playwright with a future. " The review praised Villanova for its courage, and did much to increase the interest and prestige of the production. We had a sold out last weekend.

David was very pleased with the production, especially Brian Morgan's Ozzie, and liked the sense that its reception was both controversial and exciting It is a difficult and strange play and in some ways so raw that its exposure was hard on him. Nevertheless, it was his largest scale production to date and, I like to think, did much to build his confidence in himself as a playwright with a significant voice.

It was a almost two years until David received his first New York production of *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. By that time David was teaching at the University. I was to do a production of *Pavlo* with the undergraduates, except that Joe Papp's theatre was looking at it. As it turned out, I never got to do *Pavlo*, but I was very excited by the success of the Public Theatre's production. David was at the University for only one more year, but during that time we had the premieres of *Orestes and the EMC Squared*, later known as *The Orphan* and a wonderful production of *In the Boom Boom Room* I have always been proud that our Theatre Department had the foresight to encourage

and produce David's early work and that in this case University theatre made a significant contribution to American theatre.

**Source**: James J Chnsty, "Remembering *Bones," in David Rabe: A Casebook*, edited by Toby Silverman Zinman, Garland Publishing, 1991, pp 119-30

# Critical Essay #3

*In the following essay, Cooper explores Rabe's technique for presenting social criticism in* Sticks and Bones

For David Rabe, the Vietnam war has been a source of artistic inspiration and creativity. His political and social consciousness, fused with his command of dramaturgy, produces taut expositions of the encounter between the American psyche and a war which assaulted some of the most traditional American values. His "Vietnam Trilogy" is clearly based on knowledge gained at first hand: he spent two years in Vietnam with a hospital support unit and later tried to return there as a war correspondent This personal experience of the war is central to Rabe's career A Fullbright Fellowship then enabled him to complete the first two plays of the Trilogy: *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*

Rabe worked on both plays simultaneously he wrote several drafts of *Pavlo* while developing the early versions of *Sticks and Bones* When *Pavlo* was finally produced, it brought Rabe the favourable attention of critics, and this success spurred him to revise and complete *Sticks and Bones*. It appeared in 1971, produced by Joseph Papp for the New York Shakespeare Festival Public Theatre. The second play in turn won its fair share of critical approval. The influential John Simon praised Rabe's "ability to satirize fiercely without losing a residue of sympathy and even compassion." Simon accurately pinpointed one source of the play's power: its energetic combination of savage anger and pity. Joseph Papp dubbed Rabe "our greatest play wnght today."

*Sticks and Bones* proved strong meat for audiences, however, and remained unpopular for its run of 225 performances. Papp retained his faith in the play, despite considerable financial losses sustained by the Public Theatre. He commented' "It's hard for audiences to deal with. They resist it. It disturbs them. But good plays are not easy." He resolved to rework it into a television film, collaborating with Rabe and film director Robert Downey on a censored and radically altered film script After much bickering amongst themselves and clashes with network requirements, the (no finally completed the film in 1972, but it was never released It was a travesty of the original play, yet Rabe helped to create it and saw it through almost every stage of production. His motivation is unclear, perhaps he sought in television the widest possible exposure for his anti-war ideas. But it remains ironic that a play which attacks the values of the media so relentlessly should itself have become an aborted television movie.

Rabe completed the Trilogy in 1976 with *Streamers* Although the three plays are generally respected by critics, Rabe has received comparatively little scholarly attention, perhaps because of the nature of his subject-matter. The Vietnam war is at the heart of *Sticks and Bones*, and is simultaneously the source of its potency and of many of its weaknesses. Writing with a kind of controlled fury, Rabe draws on the perennial, pnmitive, emotional power inherent in his material: war, and the feelings of dissent and revulsion which it engenders If such rage gives the play the tuneless quality of protest, *Sticks and Bones* is also a product of its time, perhaps even locked into its moment in

the early 70s by the passage of the Vietnam war into history. Today the play has lost the power it once drew both from the exhaustive media coverage which the war received throughout its duration, and from the climate of growing public indignation.

Although Rabe tries to widen the reference of his play by never naming the war from which David has returned, he can no longer count on the peculiarly receptive audiences made sensitive by exposure to constant footage of combat and of political debate Such lack of an immediately relevant historical context muffles the impact of the play for a contemporary audience, creating a vague sense of misplaced intensity, the over-energetic exploration of slightly *pass£* issues. It is easy but misguided to patronize the play for these reasons, overlooking the rigorous intellectual control Rabe maintains over his material, and the serious attempt to bring the discipline of the playwright's art to bear on an explosive moral and political event. In fact, both *Sticks and Bones* and *Pavlo* helped effectively to reclaim Vietnam from the journalists and give it back to the artists. Robert Asahma comments:

Vietnam was the first televised war the journalistic mode of communication quickly came to be regarded as possessing a nearly exclusive access to the reality of Vietnam . the task of making some sense of [it] had been shifted from the artist to the reporter

Rabe replaces the implicit moral neutrality and potential sensationalism of media coverage with his own deeply moral and highly-wrought vision. The play itself contains an ironic and satirical comment on the ability of journalism to tell the truth. David's "home movie," with its supposed atrocity footage, is only a blank screen with green flickenngs. Rabe implies that the camera's impersonal lens has no true revelatory power. It is a tribute to Rabe that in this sequence, and indeed throughout the action, he never has recourse to sensationalism, preferring to control and defuse his volatile material through language. *Sticks and Bones* is verbally austere rather than visually lurid. David as film-maker, and hence potential journalist, can produce nothing like thorough media coverage, for he cannot look on his war experiences with the reporter's dispassionate eye, So David's intense verbal description of a couple hanging by their wrists from a tree replaces any vivid technicolour picture; whereas the journalist's camera would have risked an invitation to a cheap thrill, David's narrative representation of the atrocity is fraught with an awareness of pain and guilt Even his monotonous delivery suggests the moral shock-waves he has been forced to absorb:

They hang in the greenish haze afflicted by insects; a woman and a man, middle aged. They do not shout or cry. He is too small Look he seems all bone, shame in his eyes; his wife even here come with him, skinny also as a broom and her hair is straight and black, hanging to mask her eyes

This scene depicts emblematically Rabe's own act of choice, he prefers the role of the artist-narrator-playwright who interprets from his own sense of moral outrage, to that of the journalist, who presents without representing and offers his audience no moral guide to what they see.

Profound mistrust of the media pervades *Sticks and Bones*: Rabe attacks the "instant culture" generated by television, comic books, popular magazines and the supermarket The prop list reads like a retail store's inventory catalogue: camera, T.V., telephone, film projector, flashcubes, cigarettes, copies of *Popular Mechanics* and *Psychology Today* These objects help to shape the dramatic action as surely as they condition and direct the lives that action describes. Their symbolic function is to signify a consumer society, built on various forms of quick and easy gratification. The play is a critique of this society: Ozzie's family is a microcosm of the American capitalist culture which has bred the media, the journalists, ultimately the war itself. *Sticks and Bones* pivots on that point at which middle America, with its facile codes of supply and demand, meets the wreckage created by its sanctioning of the war in Vietnam.

This clash and its consequences are embodied most powerfully in the play's language. Rabe's conception of dramatic action depends on the cen-trality of words: "The stage is extraordinarily limited in what you can do visually . , [It] is a verbal medium. Once I learned that, I could write plays. Before that, when I thought it was visual, I couldn't." The specific linguistic style which dominates the play is the cliche. Rabe works out both content and characterization through a series of verbal cliches, which he constantly varies, explodes and counterpoints Thus he names his family after characters from a television situation comedy: Ozzie, Harriet and Rick Nelson. This is characterization by shorthand, for the names are automatically redolent of cliche. They suggest the hackneyed values of the "typical American family," the banalities of television itself, and the sentimental attitude to family life apparent in situation comedy. By this simple act of naming Rabe sets up his double target: television and its products When Ozzie and Harriet appear they are already typecast in the audience's mind as products of a society fed by and dependent upon television and related forms of instant communication. The television set is "glowing [and] murmuring " before Father Donald speaks his first words in Act One, and just four lines later the telephone rings. David's arrival is announced via a medium which separates people physically even if it links them verbally and aurally.

Significantly, David is brought first into the "T.V. room." The main family room of the home which he cannot see is described for him in terms of its dominating and defining feature. David's question- "Whatroom is this?" and Ozzie's broken reply: "Middleroom, Dave. T.V. room. T.V's in 1' suggest the role of the television as a substitute for human communication and as an escape from reality. Later, when David begins to establish himself as a strong alien presence in the house, Ozzie tries frantically to mend the broken set. Its breakdown is symbolic, signalling David's implicit moral stance in opposition to its values. In Act Two, when the "conquerer" David has taken possession of the house and Ozzie's desperation is unbearable, he "scurries to the T.V." and turns the channels wildly: "I'll get it fixed. I'll fix it Who needs to hear it? We'll watch it". But David's weapons are words His blindness embodies his independence of visual stimuli; in the context of the play this implies his emancipation from the power of television and his reliance upon language as primary means of expression. David's assault on his family and his gradual usurpation of the father-role from Ozzie drain the television set of its symbolic potency, weakening its ability to impose stereotypical values on the household. The indirect "murder" of David by parents and brother is an attempt to reinstate those values.

Rabe shows that the language of television advertisement is the medium of value. Both Ozzie and Harriet appropriate the jargon of advertising. Intent on cleaning Ozzie's stained lapel, Harriet rhapsodizes: "Meyer Spot Remover, do you know it? It gives just a sprinkling . . like snow, which brushed away, leaves the fabric clean and fresh like spring". Ozzie's description of cigarettes and smoking sounds like sales-talk, a weird combination of science and fantasy:' "The filter's granulated. It's an off-product of com husks. I light up I feel like I'm on a ship at sea. Isn't that one hell of a good tasting cigarette? Isn't that one beautiful goddamn cigarette?". Such language is inseparable from the characters' conception of themselves as grain-fed American parents. As the self-immolating mother figure, Harriet embodies a pernicious clich6 of maternity. Her consumer values are shown in her obsession with food. She plies David strenuously with offers of food:

Oh, no, no, you've got to eat To get back your strength You must Pancakes9 How do pancakes sound' Or wheat cakes? Or there's eggs7 And juice' Orange or prune' or waffles I bet it's eggs you want Over, David? Over easy? Scrambled1'

If Ozzie evades reality through television, Harriet's escape from trauma is food On a superficial level, the act of feeding is the commercial mother's shallow expression of love. More profoundly, Rabe suggests that it is a substitute for the love that is really unfelt. David signals his recognition of food as false index of affection by stubbing out his cigarette in a grapefruit.

Such detail carries much of the comedy in the play, a bitter, dark humour based on the grotesque and disproportionate, which Rabe uses to undercut "the elaborately self-deceiving ntuals of domestic existence." Thus Rick projects an image of David smearing the guitar strings with cake; David's slashing cane forces Father Donald into the ludicrous position of blessing without raising his hand; David envisages the house furnished and carpeted with corpses; Ozzie is assailed, in an absurd mock-assassination, by an airborne boiled egg. In *Sticks and Bones* food kills. Harriet's attempts to feed David are wittily appropriate given the play's ending: she is trying to fatten her prey for the kill. The note of black comedy culminates in David's enforced suicide, where Rabe parodies family togetherness and concern in a scene of ritual murder which is both gruesome and cozy. Harriet's fussmess becomes the bustling of a punctilious executioner she bngs "silver pans and towels with roosters on them". Rick's enthusiasm is savagely cute: "You can shower; put on clean clothes I've got deodorant you can borrow. After Roses, Dave." Such bizarre and grotesque effects, set against the naturalistic elements of the play's style, deepen its satiric and parodic force.

By taking cliche as the basis of the characters of Ozzie, Harriet, and Rick, Rabe probes the relationship between American values and the Vietnam war. Harriet's conception of her sons' futures is hackneyed and conventional. She answers David's sense of existential *angst* with the trite advice of a second-rate Ann Landers: "So the thing I want to do I just think it would be so nice if we could get Dave a date with some nice girl". For David and Rick, she envisages the kind of suburban paradise promised in advertising campaigns:

That's all we've ever wanted, your father and me good sweet things for you and Rick ease and lovely children, a car, a wife, a good job. Time to relax and on holidays all the children and grandchildren come together, mingling .. turkey Twinkling lights'

This is life as euphemism, and the banality of Harriet's language expresses the poverty of her moral and imaginative vision.

With devastating truthfulness, Rabe exposes the hostility beneath the conventional domestic routine. In the crisis occasioned by David's return, Harriet's ability to use language as a cushion from reality breaks down temporarily and she screams with "primal rage" "WHAT DO YOU WANT? TEACHING HIM SPORTS AND FIGHTING ... WHAT ... OZZIE .. DO YOU WANT?". Rabe identifies the connection between the violence of war and the American ethos of competition and sanctioned belligerence. Harriet perceives this link for a moment but she retreats from her own insight, escaping to the comfortable values of the supermarket: "Anybody want to go for groceries? We need Kleenex, sugar, milk". And as she provides her family with instant physical gratification, Father Donald provides her with instant spiritual gratification. Harriet's consumerism easily encompasses both body and soul. The priest's involvement in "[o]rganized sports activities" associates him with the competitiveness which is encouraged on the playing field and hence in the larger context with the savagery of war. In Father Donald's encounter with David, Rabe suggests the impotence of religion: Donald's reliance on popular magazine psychology is exposed as an attempt to revivify decrepit spiritual forms through a facile modernity He thus becomes a suggestive symbol of the etiolated power of the institution in American life. Even Harriet is ultimately without faith. She compares Father Donald to Jesus: "You never hear from him"

Despite their easy escape routes, neither Ozzie nor Harriet can find a refuge from their own suppressed hatred, expressed in the play as a violent and visceral racial antipathy. David's parents begin to reject him when they realize that he has had a liaison with a Vietnamese woman. Both try to formulate their son's sexual and emotional life into the comfortable terms of cliche. When David first mentions "a girl to weigh no more than dust", Ozzie and Harriet set up a desperate choral antiphony:

HARRIET A nurse, right.. David'

OZZIE No, no, one of them foreign correspondents, English maybe or French

Silence

HARRIET Oh, how lovely i A Wac or Red Cross girl"..

DAVID No.

OZZIE Redhead or blonde, Dave'

When Harriet realizes the truth, she vomits. Psychological revulsion finds physical expression, she has no words to cope with David's experience of Zung, and her cliches are stripped of their protective power. Having effectively reduced family life to supply

and demand, consumption and excretion, her reaction is appropriate. She responds to shock by regurgitating food.

The deep-seated racial hatred of both parents takes the form of superstitious terror, itself a cliche Ozzie sweats: "Dirty, filthy diseases. They got 'em. Those girls Infections. From the blood of their parents into the very fluids of their bodies.. There are some who have the plague. He touched them. It's disgusting" The presence of David as lover of "a yellow whore" forces them to confront their submerged hostility toward "the other"; metaphorically it brings "the plague" into their own home. The presence of Zung on stage as symbol of this threat underlines the point. The lurid racial cliches of Ozzie and Harriet suggest one cause of the Vietnam war, manifesting itself in the very heart of the American family.

By the same token, Ozzie's neurotic dwelling on congenital disease as a racial characteristic is ironic, for the play exposes his own home, and the society it represents, as the true source of illness and plague. The moral and emotional poverty of the Nelson family is a kind of spiritual disease: for David the disease is terminal, and culminates in his destruction. The symbolic representation of cultural and familial sickness in the play is the shadowy figure of Hank Grenweller. His rotting hand is an emblem of congenital weakness, despite Ozzie's assertion that "his parents were good fine people" Through Grenweller, Rabe signals the rottenness of a powerful, mythologized ideal of American manhood: athletic, healthy and strong. Ozzie has idolized Hank and turned him in imagination into the perfect comrade: "He was a big man .. His voice just boomed .. a good fine friend, ole Hank". There is also a suggestion that Grenweller has been the architect of the Nelson marriage. Early on, Ozzie remarks to his wife "I remember when he showed me you". Later he recalls a joyous moment when he turned "to see [Hank] coming, Harriet young and lovely in his hand" and he called to his friend. "'Bringher on... I'mready"'. Grenweller's physical decay marks nun as the contaminator of the very marriage he helps to create: the illness which Ozzie fears wells up from within his own most intimate relationships. The corruption in Grenweller's flesh suggests his falsity. He stands for a concept of masculinity which is radically out of touch with the reality of experience, and which is reflected in Rabe's handling of Ozzie, another archetypal American male.

Both the parents speak in euphemisms and advertising jargon, but the character of Ozzie is also realized through another kind of cliche. He speaks repeatedly in the language of stereotyped machismo. ,.

Although Ozzie's language is designed to cloak and deflect his inner violence, it repeatedly bursts out. Almost hysterical, he imagines taking brutal revenge on the jokers who have pelted him with an egg: "The filthy sonsabitches, but I'm gonna find 'em .. I'm gonna kill 'em. I'm gonna cut out their hearts!". Through such barely controlled invective, Rabe suggests the moral kinship between Ozzie, the apparently bland and boring "typical father", and the G.I.s capable of flinging razor-lined caps and fifty-pound bags of cement at civilians in Vietnam. The savagery of me war is bred on the American hearth.

Such violence surfaces in David himself, whom Ozzie has observed "put a knife through the skin of a cat" when he was a boy, but its ripest and fullest expression is found in Rick, whose moral degradation is both farcical and horrifying. Rick exists at the lowest level of human life which is also, in Rabe's terms, the lowest level of linguistic usage. He is the quintessential consumer: a virtual eating machine. His language combines the triteness of Harriet's utterance with the debased slang formulae of Ozzie's-the song he sings at the "party" is banality perfected, and sex is having "the greatest piece a tail ... a beautiful piece a ass" in the back seat of a car. Throughout the play linguistic repetition captures the ritualized quality of domestic routine. But Rick's repetitive discourse has a specifically psychological function: it defines his imaginative, moral, and emotional retardation The intermittently perceptive Ozzie sees this: "He is all lies and music, his brain small and scaly, the brain of a snake forever innocent of the fact that it crawls" Rick's usual way of greeting his parents is through a bitterly amusing and brainless chatter:

RICK Hi, Mom, Hi, Dad

HARRIET Hi, Rick'

RICK Hi, Mom

OZZIE Hi, Rick

RICK Hi, Dad

Rick's mindlessness is apparent in his lack of grammatical control and his abandonment of syntactical structure In a long speech to David at the end of the play, the sparse punctuation indicates a mind both disordered and underdeveloped

It's just really comical because you thirik people are valuable or something and, given a chance like you were to mess with 'em, to take a young girl like that and turn her into a whore, you shouldn't, when of course you should or at least might . on whim you see'

Rick is another ambulatory cliche: the teenager of situation comedy whose spiritual home is the refrigerator. But again, the apparently bland and trivial masks the actively pernicious. Rick is a study in smug and casual cruelty. If David is capable of butchering animals and sewing razor-blades into his hat, Rick can savage his own family in the comfort of his own home for the sake of his own convenience Wars begin in the living-room.

David is set against his family in a position of almost visionary enlightenment. His phantasmagoric, poetic style jars with the multiple cliches of his parents and brother. The symbolic force of David's language is weakened, however, by its self-consciousness. Meant to be lyrical, it is often embarrassingly limp. "The seasons will amaze you, Texas is enormous. Ohio is sometimes green. There will be time We will learn to speak". Yet the stilted formality, the deliberate formulation of images, and careful grammatical constructions suggest David's search for a new and appropriate vocabulary to express the reality of experience- "We will learn to speak" a language

viable as human communication. The language and values inherited from parents and society have not equipped David to cope, either with war or with self-discovery. Language is a defunct medium, a means to evade reality and stave off introspection. In undermining his family's language, David erodes its complacency and attacks the very roots of its life.

He embodies the threat of exposure to reality, and is the living expression of his parents' own repressed guilt, hatred, and hostility. As the invader who becomes a victim, David has both a symbolic and naturalistic function m the play. Through him, Rabe extends the metaphor of battle to the home-front his power struggle with his father is war in the domestic arena He almost succeeds in transferring to Ozzie his own mode of perception, based on the recognition of violence and the confronting of self. Ozzie often slips into David's lyrical style of speech. His rhapsodic, nostalgic reliving of the past and its wasted potential contains a further important element m the imaginative structure of the play:

I lived in a time beyond anything they can ever know- a time beyond and separate, and I was nobody's goddamn father and nobody's goddamn husband 11 was myself1 And I could run In the fields and factories they speak my name when they sit down to their lunches If there's a prize to be run for, it's me they send for It's to be the-one-sent-for that I run

Ozzie's sense of personal loss is emphasised by his tendency to slip into the present tense at these moments of recollection. This strange, parabolic mode, like the black comedy and David's poetic vision, interacts with the exaggerated stock situation to give the play a weird, kaleidoscopic force.

Ozzie struggles to give birth to the articulate, vital self suppressed within him. His need for creativity and self-assertion is shown in his desire to play the guitar and to build a wall He tries to communicate his sense of alienation to his son: "Do you understand? There's no evidence in the world of me, no sign or trace... My life has closed behind me like water. But I must not care about it I must not Though I have inside me a kind of grandeur I can't realize . But I can't make you see that". The ambivalent psychological interplay between father and son saves the play from becoming over-simplified or merely didactic. It also distributes the sympathy of the audience more evenly David himself is too ambiguous to be either a hero or martyr. We are aware of his self-righteous frigidity, and the suffering he inflicts on his parents is genuine. There is a grain of truth in Ozzie's words: "You're phony, David phony trying to make up for the thousands you butchered, when if you were capable of love at all you would love us, your mother and me ".

David, like Oedipus, Samson, and Gloucester, has achieved moral insight in physical blindness, but also retains illusions He refuses to confront fully his desertion of Zung. She is a symbol both of his projected desires and his failure of nerve, her absence is paradoxically represented by her physical presence on stage. David has not resolved the cultural, racial, and moral conflict which informs the play and lies at the core of his psychic life. Without resolution and stricken with guilt, he can only reiterate the

contradictory statements which express this conflict: " 'She's the thing most possibly of value in my life'... 'She is garbage and filth and I must get her back if I wish to live'". Paralysed by the forces of social conditioning on the one hand and the discoveries of mind and spirit on the other, David can only act destructively, and his insights lead him to a nihilism which opens the way to despair and death: "that's what I am a young ... blind man in a room ...ma house in the dark, raising nothing in a gesture of no meaning toward two voices who are not speaking.. of a certain... incredible .. *connection* '" David's existential nightmare is his discovery of identity as nothingness, a hole: "when you finally see yourself, there's nothing really there to see ...". Ozzie approaches this perception and frantically distributes inventories of his possessions to prove that he exists. But he prefers to live by the "fraud which keeps us sane". His insights enable him to see Zung, but his dependence on life-lies forces him to kill her. The shift at this point to a purely symbolic level of action signals the spiritual death of Ozzie and foreshadows the "murder" of David The end of the play confirms David's moral irresolution. Ozzie and Harriet sanction and promote the suicide, which represents the triumph of blindness, deception and moral irresponsibility. Even then they deceive themselves about their own actions. Ozzie comforts himself: "No, no, he's not gonna die, Rick He's only gonna nearly die Only nearly". Rabe implies that the fault lies with David as well as his family, with the individual as well as society.

Given the emphasis on language in the play, the significance of the title and the "play within a play" device becomes clear. The title suggests the children's rhyme: "Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never harm me." Rabe gives the verse ironic effect, for it disclaims the power of psychological violence which the play affirms. In fact, Rabe explores the tendency of psychological violence to issue not only in verbal abuse, but also in physical brutality, first within the family and then in the international arena of war. Through a suggestive re-arrangement of its words the title of the play invites us to question the truth of the rhyme, and it affords a clue to the major stylistic strategy of the play itself.

This strategy is also signalled by the set, which physically presents domestic cliche in the Nelson home: "very modern ... this room, these stairs belong in the gloss of an advertisement". Zung introduces another level of reality into this setting; her appearance represents the multiple conflicts of the theme as it questions the adequacy of naturalistic theatre. The split-level set depicts and reinforces the play's two major dramatic modes: realism and symbolism. The downstairs set is fully realistic; the upstairs floor which focuses on David's bedroom as a kind of retreat is more expressionistic, a place where people can move through walls. Zung moves between both floors: she seems to be both a metaphor and a literal reality.

The "play within a play" provides a framing comment on the dramatic action of the whole. The slides function as alienation devices which distance the audience. The brief set-pieces which open the two Acts represent the triumph of the visual image over the spoken word the journalistic, cinematic mode is dominant while the verbal interchange of the unseen watchers is reticent and banal. Ironically, Rabe reveals the outcome of the play the victory of Ozzie and Harriet at the start and reiterates it half-way through. But these two vignettes take the ending a step further- the stage is empty, the voices

disembodied, and only the images of the slides visible, suggesting that David's defeat at the hands of his family leads finally to the extinction of viable human personality. The watching family of second-generation Nelsons is just a collection of voices. We are left then, with the sense of historical determinism implied in the content of the slides, and recall that the child David was once accidentally locked in an ice-box. His alienation from and isolation within consumer society seems almost like predestination.

Despite its rather limiting topicality, *Sticks and Bones* is a powerful play, attracting the audience through its symbolic resonances and the nakedness of the emotions it explores Rabe's commitment gives his work dignity; the nature of his material has explosive impact. When the play first appeared, Rabe's concentration on language signalled a healthy swing away from the emphasis on visual effects and spectacle which influenced theatre in the 60s. *Sticks and Bones* is a far cry from Megan Terry's *Viet Rock*, But Rabe's symbolism and his use of expressionistic and absurdist techniques show that he did not simply retreat into old-fashioned or moribund theatrical modes The play combines visual intensity with forceful manipulation of language In its dramatic execution and choice of subject-matter, *Sticks and Bones* presents drama in suggestive conjunction with historical documentary.

**Source**: Pamela Cooper, "David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet," in *Modem Drama*, Vol XXIX, No. 4, December 1986, pp 613-24

# Adaptations

On August 17,1973, CBS aired a controversial and radically different version of *Sticks and Bones* The production was directed by Robert Downey Sr.

# Topics for Further Study

Find and view episodes of the television show *The Adventures ofOzzie and Harriet* (available on video). Compare and contrast the television sitcom characters to the characters in *Sticks and Bones*. How do Rabe's characters stereotype the show and contribute to the element of parody in the play?

Research the effects of the Vietnam War on the common soldier, focusing on how veterans were received when they returned to the United States. How does David's attitude and experience compare to other soldiers' stones?

How could the family in *Sticks and Bones* have avoided their desperate situation by the end of the play' Explore ideas like communication.

Research the history of the Vietnam War, focusing on how the war was portrayed and perceived on the home front. How did a typical American family view the war? How did their opinion change over time.

# Compare and Contrast

1969: The United States is deeply involved in the Vietnam War, though many Americans do not believe their country should be involved.

Today: Because of the outcome of the Vietnam War (the communists won), the United States has avoided becoming involved in long-term, large-scale wars.

1969: As would happen for some years, many U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War return home to a country that does not understand them and often rejects them

Today: The Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C., ensures that Americans will not forget the sacrifice of American soldiers in Vietnam.

1969: While a few authors/veterans like Rabe are writing about their experiences in and impressions of the Vietnam War, their number is relatively small.

Today: Numerous movies, books, and plays about the Vietnam War are in circulation. The experience has been explored from many angles, and new projects appear regularly.

1969: The American family is undergoing a radical transformation as the average age of marriage increases, divorce becomes more common, and the feminist movement spreads, changing many women's lives.

Today: Many radical changes from the late 1960s are commonplace social trends today, though the average age of marriage continues to increase, the divorce rate remains high, and many women work outside the home.

# What Do I Read Next?

*The Basic Training ofPavlo Hummel* (1969) is another play by Rabe that explores the Vietnam experience. It focuses on a soldier's experience in the army.

*The American Dream* (1961) is a play by Edward Albee. It focuses on the emptiness of family life in America

*Bom on the Fourth of July* (1976) is a memoir by disabled Vietnam veteran Ron Kovic, focusing on his experiences during and after the war.

*Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956) is a play by Eugene O'Neill that features a family dynamic similar to the one depicted in *Sticks and Bones*.

# Further Study

Karnow, Stanley, *Vietnam A History*, Viking Press, 1983

This history of the Vietnam War provides a balanced explanation of events, considenng all sides

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A section outlines various productions of and critical response to *Sticks and Bones*, including international stagings Santoll, Albert, ed., *Everything We Had, An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It*, Random House, 1981

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This book includes an interview and nineteen articles that cover many of Rabe's plays, including *Sticks and Bones*.

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**Introduction**

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, DfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of DfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of DfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in DfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by DfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

DfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Drama for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from DfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from DfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Drama for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of DfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Drama for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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