Streamers Study Guide

Streamers by David Rabe

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Contents

Introduction

Although David Rabe has repeatedly denied that *Streamers* was conceived of as such, many commentators view the work as the last piece in a Vietnam War trilogy that also includes *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1970) and *Sticks and Bones* (1972). Like most of the playwright's works, *Streamers* had a rather involved composition history from its initial conception to its final form. It started out as a one-act play under the working title "Frankie" and was actually begun before Rabe started working on either *Basic Training* or *Sticks and Bones*, but it was not completed and staged until both those works had been produced. According to the dramatist, the one-act "contained, in an abbreviated form, the first act of *Streamers*."

Rabe knew the one-act was not ready for production and in 1969 refused an offer for an Off-Broadway staging. Instead, when he went to work as a journalist in New Haven, Connecticut, he developed the play into a full-length work, first by adding the stabbing of Billy and then by expanding the roles of Sergeants Cokes and Rooney. It was finally ready for production at the end of 1975.

The full-length version of the play was premiered at the Long Warf Theater in New Haven, where it opened on January 30, 1976. Under the direction of Mike Nichols, the main players included Michael-Raymond O'Keefe as Martin, Peter Evans as Richie, Joe Fields as Carlyle, John Heard as Billy, Herbert Jefferson, Jr. as Roger, Dolph Sweet as Cokes, and Kenneth McMillan as Rooney. Nichols also directed the play's restaging in New York at the Mitzi Newhouse Theater, Lincoln Center, where it was produced by Joseph Papp and opened on April 21, 1976. Some of the original cast reprised their roles, but changes included Michael Kell as Martin, Dorian Harewood as Carlyle, Paul Rudd as Billy, and Terry Alexander as Roger. In New York, it ran for over 400 performances and was enthusiastically received by many important critics, including Rex Reed, Christopher Sharp, Edwin Wilson, and Martin Gottfried. A few demurred, including John Beaufort, who, in a review for the *Christian Science Monitor*, argued that the work was too sensational and was devoid of new insights.

Despite its crude content, for many *Streamers* remains Rabe' s best work. Its violence and vulgarity may continue to offend some, but the play is certainly the most accomplished part of the so-called trilogy, upon which Rabe's high reputation to some measure still rests. The genius of *Streamers* was clearly recognized when the play was first staged. Among other awards, it was named the Best American Play for 1976 by the New York Drama Critics and received a Drama Desk Award. It is still the most often staged play in Rabe's dramatic canon.

Author Biography

David William Rabe was born on March 10, 1940, in Dubuque, Iowa, son to William and Ruth McCor-mick Rabe. His father was a high-school teacher who eventually left teaching to take a job at a meatpacking plant shipping dock, while his mother contributed to the family income by working in a department store. Through their efforts, David was able to attend two Catholic schools in his home town, Loras Academy and Loras College, where, in 1962, he earned a B.A. degree in English.

After graduating from college, Rabe found odd jobs, briefly working as an egg carrier, bellhop, parking-lot attendant, and substitute teacher, but he soon started work on a graduate degree in theater at Villanova University. He dropped out of the program before completing his degree, however, and, in 1965, was drafted into the Army. He spent the next year on a tour of duty in Vietnam, which profoundly affected his subsequent career as a writer. Although he was assigned to a hospital group and was not directly engaged in combat, he was greatly disturbed by the sacrifice of young Americans in what increasingly seemed to be a pointless war.

After returning to the United States, he re-entered Villanova and finished his M.A. degree in theater in 1968. He then started writing about his Vietnam experiences and began working as a journalist, serving as a feature writer for the *New Haven Register* in New Haven, Connecticut. After marrying Elizabeth Pan in 1969, he returned to Villanova University as an assistant professor and playwright in residence. His marriage soon failed, and he did not marry again until 1979, when he wed actress Jill Clayburgh.

In 1971, Rabe gained his commercial success as dramatist when his play *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* was staged by influential producer Joe Papp on Broadway at the Newman Theatre. Although it was Rabe's first New York-produced play in his often dubbed "Vietnam Trilogy," it was the last written. *Sticks and Bones*, which opened in New York later in the same year, had been written and published two years earlier, and *Streamers*, produced in 1976, had begun as a one-act play with the title "Frankie," a work in progress before the playwright even began writing *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel.*

Although Rabe has repeatedly disclaimed being an antiwar playwright, throughout his career he has consistently been viewed as an uncompromising, angry, and trenchant critic of misguided or errant public policy shaped in the Vietnam War era. In other major works, including *The Orphan* (1973), *In the Boom Boom Room*, (1974, a revision of the earlier *Boom Boom Room*), *Hurlyburly* (1984), and *A Question of Mercy* (1998), Rabe deals with the deterioration of values both during that War and in its aftermath.

Rabe's drama is noteworthy for its intensity. In his plays, the vulgar and obscene become lyrical, as they do in much of the work of Chicago playwright David Mamet (*Glengarry Glen Ross*). Bordering on the surreal at times, Rabe's work is also rich in symbol and nightmarish violence, and it is also distinctive for accurate rendering of the distinct voices of its diverse characters, which is one of the most significant features of a

play like *Streamers*, and for its experimentation with structure and technique. He is a highly regarded dramatist as well as a writer of screenplays and fiction. Although written early in his career, *Streamers* is still singled out as the most polished piece in the playwright's Vietnam War trilogy if not the most accomplished work Rabe has written for the live stage.

Plot Summary

Act One

Streamers takes place in a large cadre room in one of the barracks on an unidentified U. S. Army base located in Virginia near Washington, D.C. It is about 1965, during the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, and it soon becomes clear that the soldiers quartered in the barracks, some fresh from basic training, are transients awaiting orders that will most likely send them to Vietnam. The cadre room houses three soldiers: Richie, Billy, and Roger.

At rise, Richie is trying to calm down another soldier, Martin, who has made an aborted attempt to kill himself by slitting one of his wrists. Richie is intent on hiding Martin's attempt from the other soldiers, but Martin is distraught and can only talk about how much he hates the Army and how he wants to get out.

The two men are interrupted by Carlyle, a restless black soldier dressed in grease and sweat-stained fatigues. He is looking for Roger, the black barracks mate of Richie and Billy. Martin immediately tells Carlyle of his suicide attempt, much to Richie's dismay, but Carlyle seems completely unfazed by the disclosure and leaves. Billy enters, and Martin also informs him, again explaining how much he hates the Army. After they all leave, Roger enters and starts doing pushups on the floor. Billy returns and talks with Roger about the Army and the "ole sarge," Rooney, a demolitions expert and veteran of World War II who now shakes so badly from alcoholism that he cannot light his own cigar. The two friends banter about the "regular" Army, the "real" Army that Roger wants to be in or be shorn of the military altogether not headed for Vietnam or Disneyland, where the "ole sarge" is going "to be Mickey Mouse." Billy, after asking Roger whether he would rather fight a war in the freezing cold or a place where there were lots of snakes, talks of his experiences at home, before he was drafted.

When Richie comes back in, he tells Roger about what Martin had done. It is soon clear that Richie, openly attempting to establish his homosexuality, enjoys teasing and flirting with Billy, much to Billy's annoyance. When Richie goes to take a shower, Billy and Roger discuss his effeminate behavior. Roger is convinced that Richie is not really gay, but Billy is not so sure. The friends then prepare to clean the room. Billy goes off to get wax, and Roger opens Richie's locker to look at a pinup hanging inside the door, his proof that Richie is really a heterosexual just putting on an act. Carlyle enters, demanding to know why Roger is looking at a picture of a white woman. He then invites Roger to take a slug from a pint of whiskey he carries and explains why he sought Roger out. The base is, he says, "a little short on soul," and he is looking for a companion, someone who is not "pale" and "boring." Obviously on edge, he tries to talk Roger into going with him to the enlisted men's club or into town, but Roger refuses. Carlyle, who hates the army and all its "jive," is almost frantic at the thought of being shipped off to Vietnam.

When Richie returns from the showers, Carlyle leaves. Billy then comes back and the three men prepare to mop and wax the floor. Billy wants Richie to convince Roger that he actually is gay, and he also wants him to stop his "cute shit," his homosexual flirtations. Roger, somewhat embarrassed, asks Richie if he really has engaged in "fag stuff," and Richie admits that he has. Roger, still not willing to accept Richie as a "screamin' goddamn faggot," talks about his home neighborhood and the murder of a gay man. The three then gab about their common fears their likely combat assignment in Vietnam and the notorious barbarism of the Viet Cong but Roger, still not convinced about Richie's homosexuality, once more asks him if he is "really into it." Richie again explains that he is, but Roger concludes that Richie joined the army to "get away from it," something Richie himself is not sure about.

At this point the "ole sarge," Rooney, and his buddy, Sergeant Cokes, make an inebriated entrance. The two airborne veterans, in their fifties, are loud and boisterous. They are also both sad and funny. They are full of bluster and contempt for the young, inexperienced soldiers, the "buncha shit sacks," but Cokes is also very scared, for he has been diagnosed as having leukemia and is in a kind of drunken denial. Rooney calls Cokes a hero, with jungle boots to prove it. The pair leap around like parachutists preparing for a jump, and Cokes tells two stories, one about a trainee at Fort Bragg who was killed trying to catch a parachute he prematurely released before hitting the ground, and a second about a "gook" in Korea that he trapped in his spider hole by sitting on its lid, then killed by blowing him to bits with a grenade.

Cokes and Rooney next sing "Beautiful Streamer," a song that a man jumping from a plane supposedly sings when he discovers that his parachute is not going to open. Shortly after that, Cokes passes out, and when he regains consciousness, he and Rooney grow angry and bitter, verbally assaulting Billy and the others before turning out the lights and, with arms around each other, slipping out the door.

In the darkened room, Billy tells Roger about a kid named Frankie whom he grew up with, a boy who experimented with homosexual relations and one day found that he was "hooked." Then Carlyle, also drunk, crawls into the room, imitating battle sounds. He explains that he is practicing, getting ready to be killed in Vietnam. He slips to the floor, curls up with his bottle and prepares to go to sleep. The others give him blankets and let him stay. At taps, Roger speculates on the fate of Cokes, betting that he will kill himself. Richie covers Carlyle with another blanket and pats his arm familiarly, earning Billy's disapproval. Roger suggests that Richie does not know why he does such things, which Richie confirms as the act ends.

Act Two, scene one

It is late afternoon, presumably of the next day. Roger convinces Billy, who is vaguely unhappy, to go to the gym to work out, but before leaving their cadre room Billy attempts to explain why he had once thought about becoming a priest. He also talks about getting an off-duty job at a bar and his interest in a girl who works there. The pair also relate how they became friends, then begin doing pushups in preparation for their gym

workout. Richie enters and suggests in innuendos that their physical exercise is some sort of ersatz gay sex. Billy, again irritated with Richie's behavior, throws a basketball at him, knocking a bottle of cologne from his hand, and then heads for the door. Richie douses Billy with some cologne as Roger and Billy exit.

Richie, alone, starts to read on his bed, but Carlyle enters and breaks his concentration. Richie informs him that Roger is out and learns that Martin is going to be shipped home. Richie closes the door to the room and offers Carlyle a cigarette. Quite aggressively, Carlyle begins suggesting that Richie, "a punk," wants Carlyle to show him his "rope." Richie, sensing Carlyle's barely repressed violence, begins fending him off, unwilling to get in too deeply. Carlyle becomes alternately abusive and friendly, and he eventually settles down on Richie's bed. However, he is irritated by his perpetual K.P. duty and becomes annoyed with the fact that Richie has never been on K. P. With a final explosive insult, he drives Richie out of the room into the hall.

Billy enters, startled to find Carlyle on Richie's bed. Carlyle asks him if Richie is the "only punk" in the room, but Billy, who is growing physically sick, denies that Richie is gay. Then Richie re-enters and immediately insults Carlyle as "one of them who hasn't come down far out of the trees yet." Carlyle, shifting his mood, attempts to be friendly again. He tells Billy and Richie that he was just "jivin'" when he called Richie a punk.

After Carlyle leaves, Richie asks Billy whether the story he had told about Frankie was really a story about himself, an allegation which infuriates Billy. He tells Richie that his brain is "rancid." The encounter between the two is interrupted by Roger, who enters dressed in civilian clothes. He is planning to go out on the town with Carlyle and wants to borrow some money, which Richie provides. Although he has many reservations about Carlyle and his ideas, when invited by Roger to go along, Billy agrees to accompany them, but Richie declines. They talk of going to a brothel, which Richie finds "disgusting." Carlyle then enters, and informed that Billy is going with him and Roger, finds it "beautiful" because they will all be friends. When Richie asks about his part in the new friendship, the other three stare at him momentarily, then depart, leaving him to his solitude.

Act Two, scene two

It is night. Taps is being played while the four soldiers Billy, Richie, Roger, and Carlyle lounge about the room. Richie tells of his father's desertion of the family when Richie was very young, prompting Carlyle to speak of his father, a butcher who never even acknowledged his paternity. Richie then recalls seeing a television documentary about the homeless in San Francisco, and seeing a "bum" he knew was his father. Carlyle talks of the new friendships, what will become "one big happy family," but almost immediately antagonisms surface. Richie informs Billy that Carlyle is going beat Billy's time with him because Carlyle is decisive. Billy gets furious with Richie, but he lightens up when they all begin talking about school.

Richie, hoping to make Billy jealous, tries to get Roger and Billy to leave so that he can serve Carlyle's desires, but Billy wants no part of providing an opportunity for Carlyle and Richie to engage in sex. He calls Carlyle an animal, and Carlyle pulls out a knife and has to be placated by Roger, who tells Billy that they should just turn away and let Richie and Carlyle do what they want. Both heated and aroused, Carlyle starts ordering Richie to get on his knees and perform oral sex on him. Now convinced of Richie's homosexuality, Roger says that Richie only wants Carlyle as an animal and disgustedly leaves when Carlyle refuses to go outside with Richie.

Carlyle turns out the light, but Billy turns it back on and throws a sneaker at Carlyle and Richie, who is kneeling before Carlyle. Furious, Carlyle goes after Billy with his knife. He orders him to hold out his hand and slashes his palm, annoyed because Billy ruined his "mood." Billy responds by grabbing a razor, but throws it down and begins verbally assaulting both Richie and Carlyle, calling the one a "faggot queer" and the other "Sambo."

Roger returns just before Carlyle knifes Billy again, stabbing him in the gut. First staggering around, bouncing off lockers, Billy finally drops to his knees, mortally wounded, although unaware of it. Roger and Richie are both solicitous of Billy, who begins to panic and sends the hysterical Richie off to get help, then begins spitting blood as Roger tries to comfort him. Billy, falls to the floor, asks for a blanket, and after covering him with one, Roger runs out shouting for Richie. Carlyle crosses to Billy, who pats his hand and asks him not to stab him again.

Sergeant Rooney then enters, looking for Cokes with whom he has been playing hide-and-seek. He sits on Billy's bed, spots Carlyle, and asks who he is, just as Richie rushes into the room and tells Rooney that Carlyle has stabbed Billy. Rooney is at first confused, even slow-witted, but he blocks Carlyle's escape and threatens him with a beer bottle. When Carlyle lunges at Rooney with his knife, Richie runs out again. Rooney screams an eagle yell and breaks the bottle, intending to use it as a weapon, but cuts his hand and just stands dumbfounded as Carlyle stabs him in the belly. Rooney drops to the floor and dies as Carlyle repeatedly hacks at him with his knife.

Roger comes in and pulls Carlyle off Rooney's body, but Carlyle, now whimpering, frees himself. Roger crawls under Billy's bed. Carlyle tells him not to tell anyone what he has done, but when Roger starts talking "weird shit" to him, he flees from the room. Roger then goes to Billy and again tries to comfort him, cradling him in his arms.

A Military Police lieutenant enters and, at gun point, forces Roger to spread eagle against the wall lockers. Then Richie and PFC Hinson, also an M.P., come in. Richie tries to explain that Roger is the wrong man, but the officer just tells him to shut up. Then a third M.P., PFC Clark, enters, shoving Carlyle, handcuffed, before him. Richie immediately accuses the blood-stained Carlyle of the knifings. Another M.P. enters. Hinson checks the bodies of Rooney and Billy and announces that they are both dead.

Carlyle tries to convince the M.P.s that he is covered with chicken blood, but the lieutenant tells the others to sit him down and make him shut up. Richie and Roger then

give the officer a breathless account of what happened, after which Carlyle stands up and demands that his cuffs be removed and that they get him a bus ticket home so that he can leave the "jive-time army." The lieutenant again tells him to shut up, but Carlyle says that he has quit the Army. The officer calls in Hinson and Clark and orders them to take Carlyle away.

After the M.P.s have taken the bodies of Billy and Rooney out on stretchers, the officious lieutenant gives Roger and Richie forms to fill out and informs them that they will have to report to his office the next morning. He then marches out. Left alone with Richie, Roger begins to mop up the blood on the floor, much to Richie's horror. He protests that it is Billy's blood, but Roger responds with recriminations, blaming Richie for what happened.

Drunk and very chummy, Cokes enters, carrying a wine bottle. He is looking for Rooney, but Roger tells Cokes that they have not seen him. Cokes sits down on Billy's bed and rambles on about the adventurous day he has spent with Rooney, how they got in four accidents and fights and "got out clean." Then, after moving to sit on Richie's footlocker, he discovers that Richie is sobbing and wants to know why. Roger tells Cokes that it is because Richie is queer. Cokes, explaining that leukemia has given him a new perspective on things, tells Richie that there are worse things than being a homosexual and begins a discursive monologue on life and the "little gook" that he killed in Korea, likening the episode to a Charlie Chaplin movie.

Cokes then asks if he can doze where he sits, and Roger turns out the lights. Roger asks Cokes whether the enemy soldier that Cokes killed was "singing it," meaning "Beautiful Streamer," and Cokes confirms that he was. As the play ends, he begins to sing a mock version of the song in pseudo-Korean, which, by its end, has become a mournful "lullaby, a farewell, a lament."

Act 1

Act 1 Summary

In the opening scene, Martin, a private in the American Army, slits one wrist in an aborted suicide attempt. His friend, Richie, finds him and talks him into going to the infirmary. Carlyle, a stranger, appears in the doorway looking for Roger who is not home at that moment. Billy, yet another private, comes into the room and is concerned for Martin, though Richie tries to distract Billy and get rid of him. All three friends leave the room, presumably heading for the infirmary to get treatment for Martin. This is the last the audience will see or hear of Martin.

Roger enters the room with his laundry and begins putting it away. Billy returns to the room and the two men discuss the "ole sarge" who is going to be deployed to Vietnam as a Demolitions Specialist. Richie returns to the room, playful and teasing, making jokes about being in love with Billy, which annoys Billy and makes him angry. When Richie leaves to take a shower, Billy and Roger discuss whether he might really be gay or is just pretending to be gay. Billy leaves to retrieve some cleaning supplies to mop the floor, leaving Roger alone.

Carlyle enters the room again, still looking for Roger. This time he introduces himself and tells Roger he has just arrived and he has not yet been given a special assignment. He appears volatile and angry when he asks Roger about racial relations in the company. Richie returns from the shower and Carlyle leaves. Billy returns with the floor wax and as he and Roger clean the floor, they confront Richie about his sexuality. Richie is defensive and secretive, never really giving them an answer. Conversation eventually returns to a discussion of the war in Vietnam.

Sergeant Cokes and Sergeant Rooney enter the room, drunk. They brag about their missions in two previous wars, particularly the Korean War. They sing a song, "Beautiful Streamer," for which the play is named. When they have finished singing, they demand lights out and leave.

Carlyle enters, returning from his trip to town. He is drunk which intensifies the fear and craziness resulting from thoughts of being sent to war in Vietnam. In his confusion, he settles to sleep on the floor, wrapped in Richie's blanket. Taps sounds; lights go down.

Act 1 Analysis

Streamers is a two-act play that takes place at the beginning of the Vietnam War. The main characters are four soldiers and two sergeants in the American Army. Every scene of this play takes place in the barracks, which houses three of the soldiers: Richie, Billy and Roger.

The theme that runs throughout this play is the idea that conflict, both internal and external, is the result of humanity's inability to accept others who are different- a different color, a different sexual orientation, a different race. The downfall of every one of the characters is caused by their inability to accept differences in the other characters and their willingness to buy into the prejudices that they have been taught.

In the opening scene, the minor character, Martin, has just slit one of his wrists in a suicide attempt because he does not want to be in the Army any more. Richie is with him, advising him and caring for him. This is the only scene in which Martin appears. Richie takes him to the infirmary and the audience never sees or hears from him again. His primary functions in the play are to demonstrate Richie's nurturing, feminine nature and to foreshadow the knife fight at the end of the play. Martin's suicide attempt illustrates from the very beginning of the play that conflict leads to violence. Martin's internal conflict, resulting from the difference between what he expected things to be like in the Army and the reality of being in the Army, has led him to believe that suicide is his only way out.

In Act 1, all of the main characters are introduced. Roger is a streetwise, black man. He is the most stable and least conflicted character in the story. When Billy questions him regarding their roommate's sexuality, Roger brushes it off and suggests a basketball game or some pushups. Roger consistently avoids confrontation, thus avoiding conflict, throughout the entire play.

Billy is good friends with Roger. He is a white man from the Midwest. He is very concerned that his roommate, Richie, might be gay. As he becomes increasingly certain of Richie's sexual preference, he becomes less tolerant and more violent towards Richie. He is also intolerant of Carlyle, a new, black soldier, though in Act 1 it is difficult to determine why Billy does not like him. Billy seems to dislike Carlyle because he is black, though so is Billy's best friend, Roger. However, no other explanation for the intolerance is indicated in this Act.

Carlyle is the most isolated and violent character in the play. His pathological behavior embodies and reflects the mood and the conflicting opinions of the American people during the Vietnam era. Carlyle is a black man who seeks out Roger to find out about racial relations on the base. It is clear that he is expecting racial tension and unjust treatment because of the color of his skin. Although he enlisted in the Army voluntarily, Carlyle is frightened and crazed by thoughts of actually being sent to the war in Vietnam.

The fourth soldier, Richie, is an effeminate, white man. He comes from a wealthy family and is used to getting what he wants. Richie's character is the most conflicted internally. Though he acts feminine and makes sexually suggestive comments to Billy, he denies being gay and has a picture of a girl in his footlocker.

Sergeant Rooney and Sergeant Cokes are the only characters in the play that have actually experienced physical warfare firsthand. They brag about their exploits,

embodying the concept of American pride in the nation's accomplishments during the Korean War and World War II.

The play's title, *Streamers*, originates from the song sung by Rooney and Cokes in Act 1. The lyrics are darkly humorous and tell of a parachute that does not open ("Streamer" is military slang for a parachute). Ironically, the song is sung to the tune of "Beautiful Dreamer," a sweet lullaby.

Although there is not a lot of physical action in Act 1, all of the story's conflicts have been set up for the audience. The characters are well defined and their differences are clear.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

As this scene opens, Billy and Roger are talking. Billy is feeling insecure about his tendency to "complicate situations unnecessarily." He is referring to his inability to get along with people different from himself without confronting them or causing conflict. Roger suggests that they play a game of basketball to help Billy get his mind off his troubles. Richie enters the room, dropping sexual innuendos, especially to Billy. Billy throws the basketball at Richie very hard in his frustration and intolerance. Richie tries to lighten the mood by spraying both Billy and Roger with cologne. Billy and Roger leave to play basketball.

Carlyle enters the room and makes a sexual pass at Richie; propositions him. Richie gets frightened by this and leaves Carlyle alone in the room. Billy returns to the room as Carlyle is telling an off-color, homosexual joke to himself. Carlyle asks Billy if he and Roger are gay too. Billy claims that Richie is not gay, just feminine. Richie returns and sends Carlyle away, with Billy there to back him up.

Roger returns and borrows ten dollars from Richie to go into town with Carlyle. Billy and Richie try to warn Roger that Carlyle is trouble, but he does not listen. Roger instead invites them to go to town with him and Carlyle. Billy accepts the invitation to not be left behind alone with Richie. Richie declines the invitation.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

In Act 2 Scene 1, Carlyle, the most conflicted character both internally and externally, sets up all of the conditions for the climax that will occur in Scene 2: the knife fight. His blatant propositioning of Richie forces Richie to accept and claim his sexuality although Richie has mixed feelings about his sexual identity.

Carlyle's homosexual joke reflects society's prejudice towards homosexual behavior. It is difficult to understand Carlyle's intention in this scene. On one hand, he propositions Richie, indicating that he too is gay. On the other hand, his joke seems to ridicule gay men.

In a scene offstage, Roger has agreed to go into town with Carlyle. Dramatic irony occurs as the audience realizes that Carlyle is creating conflict among the three men who, before his arrival, have been friends. Whether Carlyle is that tricky, or whether Roger is acting according to his own racial bias, Roger fails to recognize what Carlyle is doing to him and his friends. Billy's decision to accompany Roger and Carlyle into town can be seen as an attempt to maintain Roger's friendship in spite of Carlyle's interference, or as fear of being left alone with Richie, whose different sexual identity makes Billy uncomfortable. It can be seen as an attempt to keep what's "normal" in his life, and an attempt to avoid anything different.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

As this scene opens, the soldiers are lounging in the barracks with Richie after returning from their trip to town. Richie is telling the others about a dream he had about his father leaving when he was five years old. Carlyle tells about never knowing his father even though he knew who he was.

Richie and Carlyle criticize Billy for being educated. They begin flirting with each other. Billy notices the flirting and is frightened because he does not know how to handle the situation.

Richie and Carlyle ask Roger and Billy to give them some time alone. Roger rolls over to go to sleep; Billy refuses to sleep or to leave the room. Roger tires of the ruckus and leaves the room altogether.

Billy and Carlyle get in a fight. Billy throws a shoe at Carlyle in frustration. Carlyle pulls a switchblade and cuts Billy's hand. Billy pulls a razor on him and begins insulting and threatening Carlyle. Roger returns to the room as Carlyle stabs Billy in the stomach, killing him. Richie runs to look for help.

Sergeant Rooney enters the room, drunk, looking for Sergeant Cokes. Richie returns long enough to tell the sergeant what has happened. Roger leaves to find help. The sergeant confronts Carlyle. Carlyle stabs him repeatedly, killing him.

Roger returns to the room and is holding Billy's body as the military police arrive. At first, they mistakenly arrest Roger as the black man who is stabbing everyone. Richie testifies that it is Carlyle and not Roger, so Carlyle is arrested and the bodies of Billy and Sergeant Rooney are removed. Roger mops the blood off the floor, as Sergeant Cokes appears looking for Sergeant Rooney. Roger and Richie do not tell him what has happened, as he is too drunk to understand it anyway. They all settle in to sleep for the night and to wait for Rooney. The play ends with Sergeant Cokes singing "Beautiful Streamer" in fake Korean.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

The opening of this scene seems to be a harmless discussion about fathers among friends. However, these men are not truly friends. It is interesting to not, that as part of the play's prejudice against homosexuality, that both of the gay men have had absent fathers. The suggestion seems to be that men who grow up subjected to poor fathering will turn gay.

In this scene, the characters' emotional inability to cope with each other's differences becomes a physical conflict. Billy challenges Carlyle for being homosexual. Carlyle

refuses to accept Billy, a white man, having control of his activities. Richie, whose conflict is so deep that he does not know who he is or how he fits in, is completely ineffectual in resolving the conflict.

In this scene Sergeant Cokes and Sergeant Rooney each serve a unique purpose. As the only characters to have experienced extreme physical conflict, they are symbols of the results of such conflict: waste, degradation and denial. They are drunk all of the time, continually talking about "the good old days" when they blew up everything in their paths: countries, villages and people. Both sergeants arrive too late to effectively diffuse the situation.

Sergeant Cokes' appearance signals the end of the play. His final rendition of "Beautiful Streamer" is sung in pretend Korean, an indication that Cokes has assimilated at least a minimal measure of compassion for the Korean man he blew up in the Korean War. The familiar American lullaby, sung in pseudo-Korean is a reminder that all humans, regardless of race, creed, color or religion are more like us than they are different from us. The key to our survival as a species is to accept differences and focus on similarities.

Characters

Carlyle

Fresh out of basic training, Carlyle is streetwise black who is both bitter and angry about his situation. Like the other new soldiers, he is awaiting orders that will probably send him to Vietnam. Meanwhile, his aggravation is fed by his demeaning K.P. duties and his isolation. He has carried a lot of racial luggage into the army, and he feels cut off from fellow blacks, those with "soul." He hopes to remedy that by teaming up with Roger.

Carlyle is the most volatile character in the play. He is also a rather complex young man. His moods run from what seems to be gratuitous violence to contrition and remorse and from innocent charm to assaultive brutality. Also, for all his "jive" and street smarts, he is almost childish. He is, for example, extraordinarily naive, believing at the end that he can cashier himself out of the army and go home, as if his murder of two men has been some sort of game for which he need pay no penalty.

PFC Clark

The other named M.P., he captures Carlyle after he finds him covered with blood and running away from the barracks. He cuffs him and brings him into the cadre room. Like Hinson, he has no developed character.

Sergeant Cokes

Cokes, like Rooney, is a veteran paratrooper in his fifties and a heavy drinker. He has been diagnosed as having leukemia and is trying to come to terms with that knowledge. When he and Rooney first appear in the cadre room, they are raucous and clumsy. They are sentimental and affectionate drunks who stumble around the room, swapping stories and acting out a Screaming Eagle parachute jump while deprecating the younger soldiers.

Cokes tells two significant stories, one about a paratrooper in training who dives to his death when he fails to catch a parachute he releases before reaching the ground and another about an enemy soldier he killed during the Korean War. He trapped the soldier in his spider hole by sitting on its lid, then blew him up with a grenade.

Cokes returns to the barracks at the end of the play, looking for Rooney, with whom he had been playing hide-and-seek after an extraordinary day of mishaps from which the pair had escaped unscathed. Though still drunk, he becomes quieter and more reflective when Roger tells him that Richie is a homosexual. He remains unaware that Rooney has been killed as, at the play's finale, he turns "Beautiful Streamer" into an oddly haunting monody made up of mock-Korean, nonsense words.

Richie Douglas

Richie, barracks mate with Billy Wilson and Roger Moore, is a self-confessed homosexual, though at first he has a difficult time convincing Billy and Roger that his flaunted effeminacy is anything more than an act. Richie seems to have adjusted to army life as well as the other two and certainly a lot better than either Martin or Carlyle. He even tries to protect Martin and help him coverup his failed suicide attempt.

However, it is Richie who sets the violence of the play in motion. He openly flirts with Billy, who becomes annoyed and finally disgusted with him. When Billy does not respond positively to Richie's flirtatious kidding and sexual innuendos, Richie changes tactics. He tries to make him jealous by flirting with the far less benign Carlyle, who is perfectly willing to let Billy perform oral sex on him and, in the last scene, even orders him to do it. When Billy vents his disgust by throwing a sneaker at Richie and Carlyle, Carlyle cuts him with a knife and eventually stabs both Billy and Sergeant Roon-ey to death.

PFC Hinson

Hinson and Clark, plus one other unnamed enlisted man, are M.P.s under the command of the lieutenant. Hinson is the first enlisted man to follow the officer into the cadre room. He also becomes a stretcher bearer when the bodies of both Billy and Sergeant Rooney are taken out.

Lieutenant

The unnamed M.P. officer is in charge of the enlisted M.P.s who appear on the scene after Carlyle stabs and kills Billy and Sergeant Rooney. He is very officious but somewhat inept in his attempts to discover what has happened. He at first assumes that Roger is the killer, despite Richie's efforts to straighten matters out. His no-nonsense, abrupt manner seems cold and mechanical, sharply contrasting with the bonding affection of the two drunks, Cokes and Rooney. He seems uninterested in the feelings of Roger and Richie, telling them only that they must appear in his office the next morning at 0800 sharp.

Martin

Martin, an enlistee, is a desperately unhappy soldier. When the play opens, it is revealed that he has made a botched effort at suicide by cutting one of his wrists. Richie tries to help him through his confusion and attempts to hide his actions from the others, but Martin is not interested in disguising what he has done and tells both Carlyle and Billy of his suicide attempt. He disappears almost immediately, and it is later learned that he had been sent home, unfit for military duty.

Roger Moore

The other black soldier in the play, Roger has made a much better adjustment to the Army than Carlyle. He has befriended Billy, and together they share an idealized vision of the Army that does not entirely square with their experience, but they are doing their best to be good soldiers.

Roger is compulsive about keeping the cadre room spotless. He is also neat in person, an obvious contrast to Carlyle, who, when first seen, is covered with grease and sweat. Roger is also concerned with keeping physically fit, thus he expends his restless energy in harmless ways, unlike Carlyle, whose restlessness explodes into violence.

Roger is so compulsive about cleaning up that, after his friend Billy is killed, to Richie's horror, he begins mopping up Billy's blood, cleaning up the mess that he holds Richie responsible for the deaths of both Billy and Rooney. He obviously bears some guilt himself, for he was very slow to accept the fact that Richie's homosexuality was real, not just some act he was putting on.

Sergeant Rooney

Cokes's drinking buddy and chief non-com in the barracks, Rooney is a World War II veteran who, presumably from alcoholism, has the shakes so badly that he can not light his own cigar. He is a demolitions expert and has received orders that would take him to Vietnam, a place that Roger describes as a "Disneyland" where Rooney, the "olesarge," will play Mickey Mouse, if he does not blow himself up.

Rooney becomes Carlyle' s second victim when he inopportunely appears in the cadre room looking for Cokes after Carlyle has stabbed Billy. He is almost in a drunken stupor, ineffectually waving a bottle around and threatening Carlyle, who kills him by repeatedly stabbing him in the stomach.

Billy Wilson

Billy, like Roger and Richie, is an enlisted man trying his best to adjust to Army life, the reality of which does not measure up to what he and his friend Roger believe should be the ideal. He is the object of Richie's unsolicited homosexual overtures, which greatly annoys him. He repeatedly tries to warn Richie off, often insulting him, but Richie simply deflects the insults and persists.

Billy has the makings of a career Army man. Like the others, he has fears about Vietnam, but, like Roger, he is determined to be a good soldier. The Army has given him a place and an identity that he did not find in his hometown, where he had largely felt isolated and alone. He had wanted to be a priest, with a mission of helping others, and the Army has provided a viable alternative. Although he seems inclined to a chaste life,

he goes with Carlyle and Roger to a whorehouse less from desire than to convince Richie once and for all that he is "straight."

Billy eventually becomes victimized by his disgust with Richie when he vents his feelings by throwing his sneaker at Richie and Carlyle when the two are about to engage in sex. The explosive and violent Carlyle responds to Billy's interference by knifing Billy and eventually killing him.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

A major focus of *Streamers* is the impact that the army and war has on men, its disruptive influence on their lives. Some, like Billy and Roger, are able to make the adjustment, but others, like Martin, and especially Carlyle, cannot.

In Carlyle's case the results are devastating. He is a black man with an angry social consciousness; he feels like an outcast in a world dominated by white authority. When first introduced, he is on a mission to locate another soldier with "soul," that is, another black. He is lonely and jittery, ready to explode, partly to vent his anger at his situation and partly because he knows no other way to cope with his anxiety. Like Martin, Carlyle seems unfit for the Army. Unlike Roger, he has no secure and mature sense of self that will permit him to adjust to the homogenizing demands of military life without feeling like he is surrendering his identity.

Anger and Hatred

Anger is most evident in the complex makeup of Carlyle. It is a non-specific rage that lies close to the surface of his character, ready to erupt at any moment no matter how slight the provocation. His is an impersonal anger, however. He does not target characters as intended victims, making his actions in the course of play seem both arbitrary and almost gratuitous.

Carlyle can not funnel his anger at the impersonal, all powerful bureaucracy of the army. It has taken him from his street world of "jive" and "soul," where he could cope, and put him in an environment where regimentation and authority threaten, metaphorically speaking, to emasculate him, forcing him to surrender that identity. Threatened with such a loss, and under the pressure of the distant war in Vietnam, Carlyle explodes into violence.

Culture Clash

The diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds of the characters are an essential source of the tension among the soldiers in Streamers. The military requires a period of adjustment to its culture, a closed society that neither recognizes nor rewards diversity. Instead, it attempts to impose order, discipline, and a sense of duty that for many of the recruits involves a regimen either too rigorous or too demanding. One of them, Billy, seems to make the adjustment easily, largely because his civilian life had given him no firm self identity. An adjustment is also made by Roger, even by Richie, despite his the social stigma that comes with his homosexuality. This adaptation is not made by Martin, who is driven to attempt suicide, nor, in a more extreme case, by Carlyle.

The Army does promote a comradery, such as that exhibited by the two veterans, Sergeants Roon-ey and Cokes. Such a comradery seems to be developing between Billy and Roger, whose different cultural backgrounds do not bar their kinship. In sharp contrast to Carlyle, Roger and Billy carry no heavy racial chips on their shoulders, and though both are critical of actual army life, they share a common understanding of its ideals and of good order and discipline.

Death

The murders of both Billy and Rooney seem gratuitous, almost, in fact, pointless. Their deaths are the result of Carlyle's inability to adjust to his situation, one that threatens his fragile identity. In the aftermath of their murders, Carlyle reveals a stupefying immaturity in his apparent belief that army life is some sort of game from which he can somehow walk away when it threatens or no longer amuses him. He simply does not seem to comprehend that there is a penalty attached to killing people. It is that which gives his killings their devastating impact. They awaken no remorse in him, no guilt, no sense of having morally transgressed.

Duty and Responsibility

Military order and discipline have always demanded a sense of duty and responsibility from soldiers, even those enrolled in the ranks through conscription rather than voluntary service. Part of basic training involves inculcating that sense into draftees and recruits, but such indoctrination is not always successful. The army attempts to winnow out those who can not make an adequate adjustment, recruits like Martin, who is discharged after his attempted suicide. A young man incapable of acquiring a mature sense of duty and responsibility may be missed, however, especially a loner like Carlyle, and, as Rabe depicts in his play, the results can be devastating.

Although Carlyle can not be absolved for the murders in *Streamers*, some blame falls on the system and the society that sanctions a military and warlike culture. Carlyle is virtually amoral. He has run free all his life, restricted only by the realities of the streets, not by some inner moral compass. The life the military attempts to impose on him is much too restrictive, too suffocating, particularly because he is unable to see the point of it, only its threat. He is unable to develop a sense of duty and responsibility because life has provided him with no meaningful models of such personal qualities.

Friendship

Roger and Billy are the two characters best able to adjust to army life and accept its rigorous demands of good order and discipline. In fact, they approach an ideal in that both are able to think critically but also accept a sense of duty that requires a submerging of their individualism under the surface of military homogeneity. They are not, in short, mindless and robotic recruits, not mere canon fodder. They are also good friends, quietly developing a sense of esprit de corps that is, perhaps, the military's

greatest personal reward. They have a common cause, giving them a bond that Carlyle looks for but can not find on the terms expected by military authority.

Identity

Streamers is a play about a crisis of identity in the lives of its major characters. Each, willingly or not, is attempting to adjust to life in the army. Adapting to it requires a sacrifice of some part of self that new soldiers like Martin and Carlyle are unable to make. Roger and Billy have succeeded, however, even Richie, though in his case the situation involves a sort of "outing." He flaunts his homosexuality, not because he wants to escape from the Army but seemingly to prove that his sexual orientation is no impediment to being a good soldier. His need is to maintain an honest identity in the face of traditional attitudes that morally condemned him and other homosexuals and deliberately excluded them from military service.

Race and Racism

As Rabe demonstrates, the army by the time of the Vietnam War had largely become color blind. In fact, it was much more of a melting pot than society at large, in which, despite such civil rights advances as the desegregation of public schools and the market place, people could and did chose to remain socially segregated. The new demands placed on Carlyle are simply too much. He harbors deep resentments towards whites, which, though certainly in large measure justified, gnaw at him as he is forced to comply with what he perceives as white authority. His "safe" world had been the inner-city ghetto streets, despite the crime and violence associated with them. At least there he had an identity, one that the army is forcing him to sacrifice, something, *Streamers* argues, he can not successfully do.

Sex

Part of the intensity of *Streamers* arises from sexual needs. Richie's homosexual desires are directed towards Billy, who grows increasingly angry over Richie's overt flirtations, perhaps because Billy really is not all that secure about his sexual identity. In his disclosure to Roger, he reveals that at one point in his life he had considered becoming a priest, which argues that he was willing to adopt celibacy. In any case, Richie's flirtations include annoying hints that Billy is masking his true sexual preferences, which may be a major reason why Billy accompanies Roger and Carlyle to a bordello, attempting to prove his masculinity and heterosexuality.

Meanwhile, Carlyle, unlike Billy, is willing to use Richie's homosexuality as a way of releasing some of his pent up energy, and perhaps, too, as a way of dominating Richie, a representative of the white race against which he bears angry grudges. For all his brutal directness, Carlyle's motives for his sexual assault on Richie are complex, as is revealed in his emotional lurching between playful affection and violent behavior.

Violence and Cruelty

Violence is endemic in *Streamers*. It principally takes the form of Carlyle's violent reactions, his brutal knifings of Billy and Sergeant Rooney. His actions verge on the inexplicable, which makes them doubly distressing. Carlyle seems to act almost like a cornered animal, enraged and extremely dangerous and unpredictable. Neither Billy nor Rooney does anything to warrant Carlyle's violent responses. On the other hand, Carlyle does not seem to be deliberately cruel. He has no vicious or evil blood lust. His reactions are spontaneous and devoid of anything other than momentary malice, engendered by Billy and Rooney's invasion of his emotional territory.

War and Peace

War lies in the background of *Streamers*, functioning as a kind of catalyst that ups the emotional ante of the play. That the young soldiers may be facing a one-way trip to a distant, Asian "Disneyland " preys on their minds. It is a fact that contributes to the emotional instability of all of them, especially Carlyle, who has a sense of being used by white men to fight in a war in which he has nothing at stake.

The Vietnam War plays no direct part in the action, however. In fact, there are hints of the "guns and butter" sense of it as a distant, aberrant activity occurring in what is really a time of peace at home, where few sacrifices were being made to pursue the *War* with vigor *and* moral certitude. The pointlessness of the struggle is as destructive of the men's morale as is its threat to their lives.

Style

Anti-hero

An anti-hero is a character who contradicts the traditional concepts of heroism; this character type is often employed in realistic literature as a means of satirizing or debunking the hyperbolic, "can do no wrong" myth of the hero. Like many ultra-realistic modern works, *Streamers* diminishes the heroic concept to a virtual zero. All of the play's central characters are ordinary humans, at best confused or troubled by their situation. The two veterans, Sergeants Rooney and Cokes, both combat survivors, seem more like drunken clowns than sage role models. Cokes's principal "heroic" achievement was to have trapped an enemy soldier in a hole and blown him apart with a hand grenade. Even that rather sordid episode resulted from luck rather than Cokes's courage or cunning. Only in his apparent acceptance of the fact that he has leukemia does Cokes reveal a traditional sense of nobility.

Meanwhile, some of the insecure, untested soldiers are not even able to adjust to what little the Army demands of them. Martin is a minor example, but Carlyle is the main one. His failure has dreadful consequences: the meaningless deaths of two men. In Richie, too, there is a sort of anti-heroic inept-ness, revealed, for instance, in his inability to convince Roger that he is gay. Even for Billy and Roger, those who seem able to adjust, the Army seems to involve a pointless routine of busy work, of cleaning the cadre room and latrine. The distant war is merely a kind of grotesquely comic threat that offers neither glory nor honor.

Conflict

Streamers is a play that creates conflict by bringing together and intertwining the lives of men with very diverse backgrounds and needs. These are realistic representatives of the civilian world from which the Army must draw men to mold into soldiers willing and able to adjust to its rules and regulations.

The play's situation is fairly complex. Carlyle and Richie, two focal characters seem on a collision course towards a crude sexual episode, driven by very different motives. The real target of Richie's desire is Billy, but since Billy repeatedly rejects Richie's homosexual advances, Richie tries to arouse some jealousy in him by encouraging Carlyle. Carlyle, who seems perfectly willing to use sex as a way discharging his pent-up fury, also hints that part of his willingness to exploit Richie carnally involves a predatory need to express his power over his real or imagined adversary and persecutor, a white man. Rather than seduction, his sexual aggression towards Richie is savage, more like rape than mere lust. It is from this situation that violence erupts and ends in the deaths of both Billy and Sergeant Rooney.

Empathy

One relationship that is victimized as a result of Carlyle's fury is that between Roger and Billy. These two characters mesh. Despite their disparate background and racial differences, they develop an empathetic relationship and thereby reveal that the military has the promise of providing a context for overcoming such differences. The two work well in tandem, as a team, and are firmly on the way of becoming good friends when Carlyle destroys their bond by killing Billy.

Mood

The mood of *Streamers* is both erratic and explosive, reflective of the troubled and conflicting attitudes of the men, particularly Carlyle, who throughout the play is both angry and unpredictable. His mood swings run through an emotional gamut from savage aggression to child-like bafflement and contrition, making him seem the most complex of the characters.

The distant war in Vietnam has a catalytic effect on the play's mood; it looms like a dark spirit over the play's events. Although the action takes place stateside, the specter of Vietnam is a tangible presence that fuels the men's anxiety, fear, and despair. The men are all aware that the Asian conflict is a threat to their survival, a fact which fans the emotional fire in each of them. All of them are on edge because of it.

Motif

Certain motifs play a significant part in *Streamers*. The dominant symbolic motif is the streamer, the parachute that fails to open and sends it user plummeting to death, which is more fully discussed as a symbol. Also important is the nearly obsessive need of Roger and Billy to clean and polish their surroundings. They are the best adjusted soldiers, willing to engage in routines that reflect two of the Army's guiding principles: that order and discipline must control the soldier's habits and that the habits must be so deeply ingrained in the soldier as to become almost instinctive. The personal hygiene of Billy and Roger contrasts sharply with the slovenliness of Carlyle, whose greasy and stained fatigues seem to blatantly signal his dangerous maladjustment to Army life.

Naturalism

Although it is hardly documentary in method, *Streamers* has a "slice of life" quality to it. Like life, it does not seem shaped to fit the needs of a dominate theme, and it lacks the clear causality of the typical thesis play in the realistic tradition. Its characters, largely anti-heroic, do not line up on some side of an ethical dilemma. In fact, there is no central figure, no consistent protagonist. It is impossible to say exactly whose play it is, although it is clear that Carlyle comes closest to serving as the dominant plot driver.

Naturalism tends to examine life clinically, particularly life in its lowest forms. It comes closer to replicating life rather than merely imitating it. While Rabe's play is not about society's dregs, it does unmask some unsavory qualities in fairly average people, the savage and crude needs of Carlyle, for example. No "polite" restraints bar its honest portrayal of its characters' needs, no matter how seamy. Nor is there any restraint on their vulgarity.

Setting

The barracks cadre room in which all of the action of *Streamers* takes place, though large enough, is a very confining space psychologically. It plays an important part in creating the claustrophobic, "no exit" atmosphere of the drama, the sense of entrapment that is particularly unsettling for those characters unable to adjust to Army life, notably Carlyle. It is also a space that can be interpreted as a microcosmic representation of the larger world beyond, an American society that at the time was wracked by such stressful and discordant problems as racial unrest and the anti-war movement.

Beyond the cadre room and the unidentified Army base, there is the Vietnam War, what Roger and Billy cynically refer to as "Disneyland," a nightmarish and extremely dangerous fantasy world where Sergeant Rooney will be playing "Mickey Mouse." It threatens each of the characters. Billy, for example, fears its jungle setting because he is terrified of snakes. For all, the War is an intrusive presence that for the soldiers seems to lie just outside, like a lion at the gates.

Slang

One of the most compelling features of *Streamers* is its frank language. It is a cauldron of jarring voices that reflect the different heritages and personal histories of its characters. Much of the dialogue is crude and slangy, full of obscenities and inarticulate verbal ravings that come perilously close to leaving clear sense behind though not the emotional mood of the speaker.

Sharp distinctions are made between the speech characteristics of the different soldiers, of Richie and Carlyle, for example. The former's talk is generally quieter and more coherent. It is also more bookish, grammatically "correct" and rational. The latter's is much more energetic, far less rational and controlled, and loaded with "jive" slang and sudden mood shifting that make it at times seem barely under mental control; Carlyle's explosive speech patterns are a clear representation of his anguished, enraged psyche.

Symbol

Much has been made of the symbolic import of the titular reference of *Streamers*. In their inebriated antics, Sergeants Rooney and Cokes put on a mock airborne exercise, a parachute drop, and doing it sing what may be viewed as the play's coda, "Beautiful Streamer" (sung to the tune of Stephen Fos-ter's "Beautiful Dreamer"). A streamer is a

parachute that does not open correctly and plummets its victim to death. At the end of play, in a mock oriental threnody, Cokes sings the song again.

Symbolically, the parachutist may be perceived as a kind of everyman. If his chute opens, he survives the fall to earth, but if it does not, he perishes. There is a terrible arbitrariness to the jumper's fate, outside his ability to control. Similarly, the young soldiers are "dropped" into a situation that they can not control. They may or may not land softly on their feet, making the adjustment necessary to survive Army life.

Historical Context

Although *Streamers* was not staged until 1976, it was started several years earlier, in 1969, when the Vietnam War was still in progress. The period of Rabe's own service (1965-1967) is the referent time, a point at which the country was being divided over the efficacy and morality of that war. Lyndon Johnson was then president, having succeeded John F. Kennedy, who was assassinated on November 22, 1963.

The 1960s were an exciting decade, a period of great turbulence and change, some of it violent. Advances in civil rights were undertaken by Johnson and a compliant Congress, completing programs begun by Kennedy to create what became known as the Great Society. Arising at the same time was a movement known as the Counter Culture, prompted by such gurus as Timothy Leary, who advised America's youth to use mind-expanding drugs like LSD and to "turn on, tune in, and drop out." The Counter Culture was also comprised of people motivated by ecological concerns, the antiwar movement, and ideals that contradicted the 1950s concept of the American Dream, which focused on homogeneity and status quo.

Violence in America took acute forms in the 1960s, including assassinations, race riots, and brutal murders. Leaders felled by assassins included President Kennedy, his brother Senator Robert Kennedy, civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and militant black leader Malcolm X. Racial tensions in the South escalated as the federal government began enforcing desegregation of schools and other public institutions, leading to riots such as that in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963. Violence would erupt in northern cities as well, notably in the wake of the murder of Dr. King. The worst outbreak occurred in the Watts area of Los Angeles over a five-day period in 1965. Less clearly motivated by racial tensions were other notable crimes of violence, like the 1969 Polanski-Tate murders committed by Charles Manson and his "family."

At the beginning of the 1960s, the "Baby Boomers" (the many children born during the economic boon following World War II) had come of age. In that year, four million of them were matriculating at American colleges and universities. Only some took Leary's advice, trekking to the drugculture Mecca, the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, or other flower-children Edens. Most reconciled themselves to the values of the older generation, despite some necessary soul searching prompted by the war in Vietnam and the civil rights movement at home. Some were caught up in different kinds of revolutionary change, from such cultural phenomena as the Beatles to exciting advances in technology, which, by the end of the decade, landed American astronauts on the moon, less than a decade after John Glenn took the first American space craft into the earth's orbit. It was during the 1960s that the time-sharing computer was invented, the "pill" or oral contraceptive was introduced, and communication satellites, in effect, began a much more rapid shrinkage of an already shrinking world.

And there were other changes that would have an equally significant impact on America, including the striking down of anti-abortion laws by the Supreme Court and the growing militancy of the feminist movement, which in 1968 began taking a graphic form

in its bra-burning demonstrations against the Miss America contest, a pageant that feminists felt objectified women and reduced female merit to superficial appearance.

The decade of the 1960s was both an exciting and unsettling time. It ushered in a new permissiveness suggested by the catch phrase "doing your own thing." Authority was openly challenged, not just over the war in Vietnam but also over such things as student rights. In the arts, among other things, permissiveness took the form of beating down the barricades of censorship. Throughout the decade, films like *Midnight Cowboy, Easy Rider, Bob and Carol* and *Ted and Alice*, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* openly and graphically dealt with issues and themes that a decade earlier would have been taboo. By 1968, when the "tribal-love rock" musical, *Hair*, used a nude production number and "dirty" language, hardly anybody even seemed shocked. It was a decade of rapid and extraordinary change, the consequences of which are still being debated.

Critical Overview

Streamers is the third and last play of what has been termed Rabe's "Vietnam trilogy." By the time it was first staged at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, on January 30, 1976, the playwright's reputation as a harsh and uncompromising critic of the War was already well established. At the time the play opened, the War had already been over for three years; in a sense, the work seemed like a painful post mortem. However, *Streamers* is not really about the War per se; it is about men trying to adjust to life in the Army at a time when that adjustment is exacerbated by the certainty that the country is going to put their lives on the line in Southeast Asia. The War is like an unseen presence, a threat that increases the stakes for each of the principal characters and makes the situation extremely unstable.

In light of the fact that much of America was trying to bind up the War's wounds and relegate the "conflict" to the past as an unnecessary, shameful, misguided, and divisive policy blunder, the play's success seems almost extraordinary. The New York production of the work ran for over 400 performances and was greeted with several enthusiastic reviews. It also garnered for Rabe important awards, including a Best American Play citation from the New York Drama Critics in 1976. Most critics recognized that the play had much less to do with the War than with the interrelationships of young, citizen soldiers, and that, in fact, it imposed serious questions about the efficacy of military discipline and order in a democracy that by the time of the Vietnam engagement had extended individual freedom to lengths previously unknown in American history. As *Newsweek's* Jack Kroll noted in his review of the New Haven staging of the play, the cadre room in which all the action occurs is "a microcosm for some of the most explosive tensions in today's society racial, sexual, social."

That idea, that the barracks room is a small-world, partial replica of American society under duress is repeatedly sounded in the commentaries on *Streamers*, even in reviews and interpretations by hostile critics like Stanley Kauffmann in the *New Republic*, who found the work badly flawed and its world not so cunningly made. Kauffmann, one of Rabe's detractors, argued that "two stories of homosexual tension, of black disquiet are arbitrarily pushed together, as if there were some real relation between psychosexual drama and racial bitterness," and further complained that they "are hurriedly married at the end by a sheerly insane violent act, unfounded in character."

Yet most of the play's early critics recognized that it is precisely the dangerous and arbitrary commingling of psychologically unsteady and barely mature men that military service occasions, providing a heated crucible for dramatic tension and violent energy. As Kauffmann himself pointed out, that the action occurs during war time is what is important, not the specific conflict involved. The situation develops into what Harold Clurman referred to in the *Nation* as a " 'universal' inference," a world depicting humanity as "poor forked animals caught in a trap of which they can never understand the exact identity or the way out."

For some critics, Rabe was sort of an *enfant terrible* (defined as a person who stirs up controversy in an unconventional manner) in the American theater, crude but unrelentingly honest, a writer unwilling to compromise his art for the more delicate ears and stomachs in his audience. His language is raw, often obscene, and highly charged with emotion, and his action is sometimes savage. Some critics found the savagery and frank sexuality excessive, and even very favorable reviewers like the *Saturday Review's* Henry Hewes warned that "many in the audience may find the unpleasant combination of overt homosexual activity and gory violence too strong to take."

Few could fault Rabe for his honesty, however, a quality for which most critics praised him. And despite the rawness of the play's language and its crude violence, many critics agreed with Hewes that *Streamers* was "the most beautiful play" that Rabe had by that time written.

Hewes's assessment may seem odd given the content of *Streamers*, but it is a judgment not about the themes and overt violence of the play but rather the artful qualities of the work. It sums up the longstanding judgment of most critics, that *Streamers* is the best of the three plays in the Vietnam trilogy and possibly the best play that to date Rabe has written. It is certainly the work for which he remains best known.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Fiero is a Ph. D., now retired, who taught drama and playwriting at the University of Southwestern Louisiana and is now a freelance writer and consultant. In this essay he examines the interplay of characters in the drama and the work's paradoxical theme.

David Rabe's *Streamers* is a play without a hero, even, perhaps, without a protagonist in any classic sense of that term. Of a play it is usually a helpful question to ask "whose play is it?" But in the case of *Streamers,* there is certainly no ready answer. Normally, the protagonist is also the plot driver, the character who has the most at stake and propels the action towards a climax and resolution. More than a character, it is the situation in Rabe's play that seems to move things on, a situation that is entirely outside the abilities of the characters either to direct or control but only to respond to as personal needs and desires direct.

Somewhat like the characters in Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*, the characters in *Streamers* are placed in a confining space and proceed to torment each other because their needs and personal histories are out of sync and at critical moments antagonistic. Beyond the walls defining their space there is a powerful force in control of their lives, a force that is impersonal and demanding, a force that to some degree strips each of them of their former identities. All of the young recruits are its victims, even the predatory Carlyle, whose personal history and sense of identity make him more an outsider than the rest. For him, the Army can not become a home, as it seems to be becoming for Billy and Roger and had long ago become for Sergeants Rooney and Cokes. Even Richie is trying to make it his home, although he is clearly trying to do it partly on his own terms. He parades his homosexuality and openly flirts with Billy with a troubling and ill-fated insouciance that the U. S. military then as now would not tolerate once it is discovered. Richie, consciously or not, is a candidate for a "Section 8," an article of the military code that mandated the discharge of homosexuals, the mentally ill, and others deemed unfit for service.

The major characters most at odds with what the Army demands and expects are Carlyle and Richie. Billy and Roger, on the other hand, are having far less trouble adjusting to military life. Although they are critical of the Army and fearful of their fate, of being sent into Vietnam, they know what it means to be "standin' tall" to be neat, orderly, and proud of their soldiering. It becomes almost an obsession for both of them, as is evident near the end of the play, when, much to Richie's horror, Roger begins swabbing up the murdered Billy's blood.

Although Roger remains sensitive to his ethnic heritage, in Billy he has found a companion who has made him see that friendship can transcend racial barriers. He tells the belligerent Carlyle when he first meets him that some whites "got little bit of soul," that there are a "couple real good boys around this way." The white authority that gnaws at Carlyle's innards does not bother Roger. He points out to Carlyle that the first sergeant is black, calmly hinting that things, albeit slowly, are changing for the better.

Carlyle, however, has no patience. He profoundly resents the Army's intrusion into his psychological and emotional space, and he is almost frantic in his need to escape its claustrophobic pressures. He is desperate to find another black to identify with, another man with soul, one who shares his views and his desire to be free, someone with whom he can talk the talk with empathetic understanding . He is both extremely unstable and dangerous, a man without an adequate emotional safety valve. Outwardly, he may be predatory and savage, but inwardly he is a very frightened and bewildered young man whose sense of identity is quickly eroding. He is, as Henry Hewes says, "a confused, unhappy ghetto animal caught in a bad scene."

Sometimes Carlyle's inner fear breaks through his savage exterior, taking the form of a child-like contrition and even confusion over what is real and what is merely a game, a kind of naivety that sharply contrasts with his abusive speech and behavior. However, more than hatred of his real or imagined persecutors, it is that very inner fear that explains his brutal and violent responses to Billy and Sergeant Rooney and even to Richie, towards whom he is alternately playfully if roughly affectionate and savagely cruel.

In commenting on what happens in the play, more than one critic has complained that the murder of Billy seems inadequately motivated. For the *New Republic's* Stanley Kauffmann, Carlyle's stabbing of him is a "sheerly insane violent act, unfounded in character, only prefigured by the playwright *outside* these characters," i.e., in the blood of the cut wrist of Martin, who disappears from the play before the end of the first act. Kauffmann argued that the "two stories of homosexual tension, of black disquiet are arbitrarily pushed together, as if there were some real relation between psychosexual drama and racial bitterness." Perhaps, however, there is, at least in Carlyle's distraught mind. Rabe chooses not to probe that mind terribly deeply. He does not, for example, allow Carlyle to reflect on his life at any great length, whereas, in their reminiscences, the other characters disclose significant facts about themselves, thereby giving helpful clues to their psychological makeup.

For example, from Billy's account of his teenage years, it may be deduced that he hides uncertainties about his own sexual propensities, which in turn explains his anger towards Richie, who is trying to break through Billy's "straight" facade. It may not be that Billy is in fact bisexual, but it may be that he fears he is. His trip to the black bordello in the company of Roger and Carlyle is a rite of passage that confirms his heterosexuality and allows him to parade it before Richie.

Carlyle, though, remains a very perplexing character, partly because the contents of his mental and emotional suitcase are not put on public view. He tells little about himself, other than the fact that his father would not even acknowledge his paternity. Even some of the most admiring critics of *Streamers* treat him as an unfathomable psychopath, one who has no rational motives for his violence. But Carlyle is in one sense most emblematic of what is wrong. There is something missing for all of the men awaiting a transfer overseas. None of them considers the war necessary for some just and rational purpose such as making the world safe for democracy. Rather, though dangerous and life threatening, it is a senseless absurdity, exhibiting all the irrationality of the cartoon

world of Disney. The men do not talk about ridding the world of monsters like Hitler or Mussolini; they talk instead of the faceless Vietcong, an enemy that is savage and brutal, an enemy waiting to impale them on sharp stakes anointed with elephant excrement.

Faced with such a possible fate, it is hardly any wonder that Carlyle and even Rooney spend their waking hours tugging on bottles of whiskey or beer. Carlyle even practices creeping through the jungle, trying to learn how to evade a senseless and inglorious death. Cokes joins Rooney in a drunken rampage, not because he is to be sent into the jungles of Asia but because he has been diagnosed as having leukemia, a blood cancer that to him is as inexplicable, arbitrary, and irrational as anything that might be encountered in a Vietnam combat zone.

Carlyle's mental Chinese boxes are very different from those of any other character in the play. For him, the Army itself is a slagging area for Vietnam, an area in which he has already encountered the enemy and is in a kind of mortal combat with him. His enemy is the white man who has a long history of wronging the black man and whose authority has forced him to learn ghetto survival strategies his verbal taunting, his swaggering, and his reflexive knife-wielding response to invasions of his turf whether it is Billy's interference with his sexual encounter with Richie or Rooney's inept attempt to prevent his escape from the cadre room. He feels caged and threatened, in a situation that is analogous to being in the jungle or rice paddies of Southeast Asia. His violence is certainly understandable, although, certainly in Billy's case, it is tragically misdirected. Both Billy and Rooney pay the ultimate price for the social injustices of their fellow whites.

Although the Army provides a context for senseless violence, it also provides the opportunity for putting an end to some of it. That is the paradox of *Streamers*. At one level it is an anti-war play, or at least an anti-Vietnam War play. However, it does not condemn military life per se. After all, it is not really the Army that victimizes Carlyle; it is an American society that in the 1960s was deeply involved in another struggle, that over civil rights and wrongs. In fact, the Army provides a means for advancing racial integration in social and workplace conditions that, for example, the ghetto in Carlyle's experiences outside had simply denied him. It was not until drafted into the Army that Carlyle faced having to give his white enemies a personal identity or begin to confront their potential as friends. He seems, for example, both amused and partly baffled by the fact that Billy wants to accompany him and Roger on their excursion into town.

What Rabe captures in *Streamers* is an encapsulated sense of the social changes underway in American society during the Vietnam War. In Carlyle's case, the dream deferred does not dry up like a raisin in the sun, it explodes into racial violence, like it did in the Watts section of Los Angeles, California, in 1965. He is not insane, but he is enraged and incapable of controlling his anger and fear. To use the central metaphor of the play, Carlyle's parachute is too tightly bound by racial injustice to open and land him safely on his feet. He is outfitted with a streamer.

Against the main action line, the drunken antics of Sergeants Rooney and Cokes serve as a kind of choric counterpoint, at first comic but in the end soulful and sad. Despite their seediness, they have an affectionate, brotherly bond, a comradery made possible because they share something the younger soldiers, the "shit sacks," have yet to experience: a battlefield baptism by fire. They act childishly, like a pair of aging drunks attempting to recapture their lost youth in juvenile games, but like circus clowns or the great comedian, Charlie Chaplin, they are not just funny; they are also full of pathos.

At the end, Sergeant Cokes, left unaware that Rooney has been stabbed to death, but aware that he himself is sick and dying, begins reflecting both on his friendship with Rooney and the irrational nature of life, on how he and Rooney had been in four accidents and fights and escaped without harm. He also reveals that his sickness has given him a new perspective on life. When Roger tells him that Richie is a homosexual, and Richie confirms it, Cokes tells him that it is not so bad, then reflects on things he would change if he had a second chance. He confesses that he can not forget the Korean soldier, the "funny little guy" he blew up with a grenade, and how he would now let that soldier go unharmed.

Cokes's nostalgic monologue seems to serve as a halting but eloquent commentary on what the play is finally all about the inexplicable and arbitrary nature of life. There is no way that he or anyone else is going to "figure it out." Like Cokes, the most one can do is display some courage in the face of it.

Source: John W. Fiero, for *Drama for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Kolin is a noted authority on the Vietnam War. In this essay, he evaluates Rabe's play, the final in a trilogy. Kolin finds Streamers to be "a brutal and realistic portrait of young men coming of age."

The last play in his Viet Nam trilogy, David Rabe's *Streamers* (1976) explores an archetypical theme the rite of passage into manhood in the lives of four young soldiers (Billy, Roger, Richie, Carlyle) who are in a period of transition from stateside Army life to Viet Nam combat. The testing ground for these young men is a barracks frequently described as "a home," "my house," or a "happy family" where they are to learn the "obligations" of soldiering. An essential character in their drama of manhood is the father (or father figure); and multiple examples in *Streamers* underscore Rabe's message about the failure of fatherhood for a Viet Nam generation. The sons in the barracks are abused, betrayed, and deserted by fathers who are alcoholic, diseased, self-destructive, and malicious. (Ironically, LBJ is likened to Hitler [page 31] in leading the American fatherland.) Appropriately, *Streamers* may rival any other American play in its blatant use of phallic symbols; but the symbolic phalli in Streamers liquor bottles, knives, stakes, and the *streamers* (or unopened parachutes the "Big icicle" [page 41]) which lend their metaphoric name to the title are stage metaphors of an ignoble manhood.

The most glaring examples of destructive father figures are Rooney and Cokes, veteran sergeants who recommend themselves as heroes for the boys to emulate. Both men transmit a latent death wish by singing a song (to the lullaby tune of "Beautiful Dreamer") that "a man sings" (page 42) about parachutes that fail to open. Rooney, the platoon sergeant, lives down the hall and visits his boys nightly to make sure they are asleep; they fear and obey him as they would an ogre father "We're good boys," says Billy Wilson (a willing son). As if baptizing Roger (page 62), Rooney sprinkles him with whiskey from his bottle. Ironically, a "chill" (page 62) emanates from Rooney's room, for he has just received his papers for Viet Nam. There he will play "Mickey Mouse" in "Disneyland" (page 10), the macabre playground of death for many young men. The boys recognize Rooney as a bungler "the poor ole bastard who cannot light his own cigar for shakin' is supposed to go over there blowin' up bridges" (page 10). His cigar a phallic symbol suggesting heat and power becomes an instrument of self-destruction. In fact, Rooney is powerless to protect his boys from the pathological fury of Carlyle, a "new boy," who repeatedly stabs Billy (and later Rooney) full of holes.

Sergeant Cokes, Rooney's friend, is equally ineffective and doomed (he has leukemia). Always swilling or swinging a liquor bottle (his phallic emblem), he has trouble navigating despite the fact that he can wear special combat boots that let the water (life?) out. At play's end, he and Rooney go through a foolish game of hide and seek with tragic results (car accidents, near deaths, and the loss of friends). The play ends ominously with Cokes singing the streamers lullaby in "a makeshift language imitating Korean" (page 109) to boys soon to confront death on oriental shores.

Rabe reinforces his message about Viet Nam fathers through domestic parallels of paternal crimes. Richie's father leaves the family when the boy was six "sneaking out" and pushing his son in the grass (page 76). The father was thus possibly responsible for Richie's homosexual fantasies and desire for punishment gladly inflicted by Carlyle. Himself a victim of father desertion, Carlyle sardonically recounts how his daddy abandoned the family but still worked "in the butcher shop two blocks up the street" (page 79). Both location and occupation nearby father turned butcher psychologically maim the son. In fact, daddy denies he has a son at all. Ironically, Billy likes his father, but Billy too has been scared by memories of other father figures who have seduced and destroyed youth. His friend Frankie "got his ass hooked" on homosexuality (page 49) by one of those "old guys" who "were hurting and happy as hell to have us" (page 48). Rabe offers an ironic parallel here: young men are ensnared by old homosexuals the same way they are trapped by Army fathers like Cokes and Rooney.

Streamers is a brutal and ritualistic portrait of young men coming of age being groomed for manhood and death. America's sons suffer at the hands of irresponsible Army fathers who are degenerate and degenerating. But, as Rabe shows, Army fathers are not essentially different from their civilian counterparts.

Source: Philip C. Kolin. "Rabe's *Streamers*" in the *Explicator*, Vol. 45, no. 1, Fall, 1986, pp. 63-64.

Critical Essay #3

Rich reviews Rabe's play, assessing it as the culmination of the author's previous efforts and a work of riveting theatricality.

Streamers is the great play that has been trying in several guises and with several degrees of success to burst out of David Rabe in the five or so years he has been on the scene. It is at the Mitzi Newhouse now, in a stunning production directed by Mike Nichols; neither author nor director has come close to this level of accomplishment in the past, and I urge you to share with me the keen pleasure of having your faith restored in the power of American drama to make important and worthwhile sense.

Rabe's play may (or may not; it isn't important) form a trilogy with his two other works about the Vietnam war (*Sticks and Bones* and *Pavlo Hummel*). On its own, it is a harrowing study, set among some kids in a Virginia army camp in 1965, of lives torn apart by the shadow of war or imminent death. The kids are vulnerable and decent, but their uprooting from predictable, protective life-styles has both intensified and warped their ability to connect to one another. When they have made a tentative beginning at reaching each other, an intruder further upsets this uneasy balance, and the climax is one of shattering, wasteful, but thoroughly motivated violence. Two elderly, drunken career soldiers weave a path through their life like a discordant cantus firmus, a sort of updated Quirt and Flagg underscoring that today there is No Price Glory.

The play is superbly performed, notably by Paul Rudd as an earnest, uncomprehending, Midwestern square, Peter Evans as a troubled but reasonably self-contained homosexual, and Dorian Harewood as a lower-class soldier desperately trying to cope with his place in life. The pace and tone are masterfully modulated by Mr. Nichols, and the entirety makes you realize that sometimes sitting on the edge of your seat is more than an idle theatrical catch-phrase.

Source: Alan Rich. "Hank Cing and Hank Sunk" in *New York*, Vol. 9, no. 19, May 10, 1976, p. 78.

Critical Essay #4

Oliver offers a highly favorable review of Streamers, calling the play "almost literally stunning."

David Rabe's almost literally stunning "*Streamers*" a New York Shakespeare Festival production at the Newhouse which originally opened at Long Wharf, in New Haven is the final play of his trilogy about Vietnam; the two others are "*The Basic Training ofPavlo Hummel*" and "*Sticks and Bones*." All the action of "*Streamers*" takes place in one room in an Army barracks in Virginia in 1965, when the worst of the war still lies ahead. The room itself seems an oasis of civilization. The three young enlisted men who live in it get along well. They are Billy, a sympathetic, rather innocent fellow from Wisconsin; Roger, a black soldier who seems far more realistic and mature than the others and is a close friend of Billy's; and Richie, a well-to-do homosexual from Manhattan. Billy teases Richie some about his effeminacy, and Richie teases back; Roger does not quite believe it or take it very seriously. None of his business anyway. But the inevitable brutality and pain and violence of the Army and the war (along with loyalty and understanding and surprising tenderness) cannot be kept at bay. Their old sergeant in Korea, Cokes is back from Vietnam and is dying of leukemia. Both are drunk and appallingly reminiscent. Cokes, laughing heartily, tells an anecdote about a soldier whose parachute didn't open, and he sings a song to go with it "Beautiful Streamer," to the tune of "Beautiful Dreamer." A more important intruder is a black soldier named Carlyle, a far rougher type than Roger, and half out of his mind with anger and frustration after three months on K.P. He never lets up on Richie, and it is he who precipitates the terrible, bloody climax of the play. This climax almost seems gratuitous, yet it is integral to the story; nothing in the play is done purely for effect. At the end, two of the young soldiers are sobbing on their cots, and the dying old sergeant again sings "Beautiful Streamer," but as softly as Stephen Foster might have wanted it, and in Vietnamese.

Mr. Rabe is a strong dramatist, and as capable of comedy much of the soldiers' talk is funny as he is of tragedy. The plot is filled with mood and incident, and every line rings true. To a certain extent, "*Streamers*" lacks the originality the totally persuasive illusion of firsthand observation and inevitability that helped make "*Pavlo Hummer*' the masterpiece it is. (Why another black with a knife? Why another homosexual as whipping boy?) Even so, it is very good. The performance, under Mike Nichols' direction, could not be better. The actors, some of them familiar to me, some not, all seem new, so inseparable are they from their roles. The principals, in order of appearance, are Peter Evans (Richie), Dorian Harewood (Carlyle), Paul Rudd (Billy), Terry Alexander (Roger), and Kenneth McMillan and Dolph Sweet as the two old sergeants. The spare, clear setting is by Tony Walton.

Source: Edith Oliver. Review of *Streamers* in the *New Yorker*, Vol. LII, no. 11, May 3, 1976, pp. 76-77.

Adaptations

Rabe adapted *Streamers* for film in 1983. Directed by Robert Altman, the work features Matthew Modine as Billy, Michael Wright as Carlyle, Mitchell Lichtenstein as Richie, David Alan Grier as Roger, Guy Boyd as Rooney, George Dzundza as Cokes, and Albert Macklin as Martin. The film is available on videocassette.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the Vietnam War situation that existed during the time the play takes place, about 1965, relating your findings to the impressions of the conflict given in *Streamers.*

Research the use of war in twentieth-century American drama and, on the basis of your discoveries, create a list of ten plays that could be gathered into an anthology of quality works in which war plays a significant role. Justify your choices.

Investigate the civil rights struggle underway in the United States in the mid-1960s and relate your findings to the racial consciousness of the characters in *Streamers.*

Read *Sticks and Bones* and *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, the other two plays in Rabe's Vietnam trilogy and compare their themes, dramatic techniques, and plots with those elements of *Streamers*.

Restricting your inquiry to the 1960s or 1970s, research the use of the American stage as a medium of social protest, picking a subject like war, civil rights, or women's liberation as a focal issue.

Compare and Contrast

1960s: Fidel Castro's rule in Cuba reminds Americans that communism is "only 90 miles away." President Kennedy and Soviet premier Nikita Kruschev spar over the missiles in Cuba, averting open hostilities only when Kruschev orders the removal of the weapons from that island nation.

Today: Although Castro remains in power, and the U.S. sanctions against him are still in effect, the fall of Russia's communist government effectively ended the Cold War. Cuba is no longer considered a threat to the United States.

1960s: In 1962, Rachel Carson publishes *The Silent Spring*, the seminal work in the environmental movement. The federal government begins taking steps to protect the environment from further damage. The first landmark legislation is the Clean Air Act of 1963.

Today: Environmental concerns have grown considerably since the 1960s. Most recent studies concern global warming and the population explosion. Bleak predictions about future inability to prevent such disasters as mass starvation, the destruction of the ozone layer, and the depletion of natural resources are often in the news, despite efforts of nay-sayers to minimize them.

1960s: Perhaps the greatest single "happening" symbolizing the new consciousness of the 1960s is the rock festival held at Woodstock, New York, in 1969. There, to celebrate the new tuned-in culture and protest civil wrongs and the Vietnam War, thousands gather for "three days of peace, love, and music.

Today: In 1999, in an effort to tap into nostalgia, promoters stage a new Woodstock festival that will be remembered not as a love-in but an embarrassing commercial flop that led to minor rioting when greedy concessionaires gouged attendees for food and drink after prohibiting the concert goers from bringing their own supplies into the festival area.

1960s: The United States is just beginning to enter the "Informational Age." Computers are large and extremely costly devices designed for large organizations rather than home use. By mid-decade communication satellites are in orbit and new fiber optic cables greatly expand communication channels.

Today: In the post-industrial society it is common for many homes to have personal computers. Communication with virtually any place in the world is now possible via computers and satellite links, and the Internet is rapidly becoming a virtual library, making information retrieval quick, cheap, and easy.

What Do I Read Next?

Rabe edited a collection of plays entitled *Coming to Terms: American Plays and the Vietnam War* (1985). In addition to *Streamers,* the anthology includes Tom Cole's *Medal of Honor Rag*, Amlin Gray's *How I Got That Story*, Emily Mann's *Still Life*, Terrence McNally's *Botticelli*, Stephen Metcalf's *Strange Snow*, and Michael Weller's *Moonchildren*.

Among other plays providing an interesting contrast to Rabe's work are Megan Terry's *Viet Rock* (1967), Christopher Durang's *The Vietnamization of New Jersey* (1978), Arthur Kopit's *Indians* (1968), Lanford Wilson's *The Fifth of July* (1979), Ronald Ribman's *The Burial of Esposito* (1971), Robert Patrick's *Kennedy's Children* (1976), and David Berry's *G. R. Point* (1980).

Among the important nonfiction written on the Vietnam War is the work of Tim O'Brien, notably *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973), *Going after Cacciato* (1978), and *The Things They Carried* (1990); Joe Haldeman's *War Year* (1972); Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* (1977); Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie* (1988); Michael Herr's *Dispatches* (1968); and Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1976).

Poetry written by Vietnam veterans was anthologized in *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972).

Further Study

Asahina, Robert. "The Basic Training of American Playwrights: Theatre and the Vietnam War" in *Theatre*, Vol. 9, Spring, 1978, pp. 30-37.

Asahina argues that Rabe, despite his flaws, is the only dramatist focusing on the Vietnam conflict "concerned with the art of the theater." He considers *Streamers* Rabe's best work and separates characters into those who, like parachutists, "will float" and those who "will plunge" to their fate.

Beidler, Phillip D. *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*, University of Georgia Press, 1982.

Beidler credits Rabe with producing the most important Vietnam War plays in the 1970s. *Streamers* is discussed as a play dealing with the brutal influence on soldiers who have yet to go to Southeast Asia, and argues that the character of Carlyle evokes "the dark latencies" in the other major characters.

Hertzbach, Janet S. "The Plays of David Rabe: A World of Streamers" in *Essays on Contemporary American Drama*, edited by Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim, Hueber, 1981, pp. 173-86.

Hertzbach examines the metaphors, basic themes, and topical allusions in Rabe's plays and concludes that *Streamers* is the most direct, structurally coherent, and "persuasive" of the playwright's works.

Hurrell, Barbara. "American Self-image in David Rabe's Vietnam Trilogy" in *Journal of American Culture*, Vol. 4, 1981, pp. 95-107.

Hurrell discusses the deleterious effect of the Vietnam War on the conscience of America as seen in Rabe's "trilogy," which depicts struggles between conflicting and "incompatible" images of one's self and those of antagonistic forces, including, in *Streamers*, fellow soldiers with diverse backgrounds.

Kolin, Philip C. "David Rabe's *Streamers*" in the *Explicator*, Vol. 45, Fall, 1986, pp. 63-64.

Kolin discusses the archetypical rite of passage theme evoked in Rabe's play and the important role of the "destructive father figures" whose crimes against the young soldiers lead to the barracks violence.

Kolin, Philip C. *David Rabe: A Stage History and a Primary and Secondary Bibliography*, Garland, 1988.

A major research tool for further Rabe study, Kolin's book includes an exhaustive bibliography through the 1980s and a thorough stage history of Rabe's plays, including *Streamers*.

Marrance, Bonnie. "David Rabe's Viet Nam Trilogy" in *Canadian Theatre Review*, Vol. 14, Spring, 1977, pp. 86-92.

Marrance argues that Rabe's so-called "trilogy" is not anti-war per se but is rather concerned with the effects of Vietnam conflict on his ordinary characters. The author claims that *Streamers*, a modern "well-made play," chronicles those effects with "documentary realism."

Rosen, Carol Cynthia. *Plays of Impasse: Contemporary Drama Set in Confining Institutions*, Princeton University Press, 1983.

On pages 236-250 of her study, Rosen identifies both *The Basic Training ofPavlo Hummel* and *Streamers* as "impasse" plays. Streamers presents a "no-exit situation" that, in "entropic" fashion, deteriorates into violence, the only possible response in a "system which promises nothing."

Werner, Craig. "Primal Screams and Nonsense Rhymes: David Rabe's Revolt" in *Educational Theatre Journal,* Vol. 30, December, 1978, pp. 517-29.

Werner argues that language problems lie the heart of Rabe's war plays. In *Streamers* it is the "collapse of metaphor" that leads to an inescapable "concrete reality" resulting in death.

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Rabe, David. "Afterword: 1992" in *The Vietnam Plays*, Grove Press, 1993, p. 181.

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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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