

**Illusion at All Costs:  
Violence in David Rabe's Sticks and Bones**

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□ ABSTRACT □

*This paper examines the causes, manifestations, and efforts of violence, both verbal and physical, in Sticks and Bones by the contemporary American playwright David Rabe. It particularly demonstrates how characters tend to act violently mainly because of their feeling of guilt, personal frustrations, racial prejudice, alienation, struggle for self-realization, and above all on account of their failed attempts to preserve their image about themselves and the world around.*

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## خداام معما كائنا الكلفة

### الءنفا فف ماسرءفة الكائنا ءفففء رففب "عصفف وءظام"

\*ءءكءور : مءءوء عمران

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#### □ ملءص □

ءءرس هءة المءالة أسباب العنفا ومظاهره وآثاره فف ماسرءفة "عصفف وءظام" للكانب الأمرفكف المعاصر "ءفففء رففب" وءظهر المءالة بشكل آاص أن نزة الشءصففة للقفام بأعمال العنفا ناءمة عن شعورها بالءنبا واحباطاتها الشءصففة وءآفزها العنصرف وصراعها من أجل آءقفق ذواتها. وكءلك بسبب مءاولتها المءكراءة والفاشلة للءفاظ على الصور التي آءففظ بها عن نفسها والعالم الآارءف.

\* اسءاذ مساءء فف كلفة الآءاب والعلوم الإنساءفة - قسم اللغة الإنكلففة - ءامعة ءشرفن - اللاءقفة - سورفا

This paper attempts to investigate the causes, manifestations and effects of violence in Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*.<sup>1</sup> In particular, it demonstrates that violent Spasms are mainly prompted by the characters' feelings of guilt, personal -frustrations, racial prejudice, alienation, struggle for self-realization, and above all on account of their failed attempts to preserve their image about themselves and the world around.

*Sticks and Bones* is one of Rabe's so-called Vietnam trilogy, the others being *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Streamers*.<sup>2</sup> However, *Sticks and Bones* does not present images of military combat. Rather it shows how a returning son's attempt to relive his experience in Vietnam provokes a war of a different kind, but with no less disastrous consequences. Bigsby dismisses Rick's pictures as insignificant, offering "no insight either into the lives of me individuals or the nature of events."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as is shown below. Rick's pictures are probably partly meant to reinforce the message conveyed by the film David shot in Vietnam.

David's film, which is projected near the middle of Act One, is perhaps the most crucial event in the play as far as the motivation of prior and ensuing violence is concerned. The family members gather in a parody of a situation comedy to watch David's film. However, to their surprise, they see nothing but a blank screen "except for a greenish glare, and an intense flickering."<sup>4</sup> In contrast, David, who is physically blind, keeps repeating the word "look" and, in fact, describes what he sees and comments on die action. As narrated or described by David, the film shows a number of callous acts of violence David witnessed in Vietnam, including the savage execution of a Vietnamese couple. The screen-flickering, together with David's comments, proves too much for me family members, including his mother Harriet. She "gels to her feet, marches to the projector, [and] pulls the plug" (126) "Not only does Harriet pull the plug, but she angrily lambastes the Vietnamese. She marvels at the yellow people's cruelty to one another, calls them "animals" and concludes: "That's inhuman. It's inhuman, barbaric and uncivilized and inhuman" (p. 127).

Given Harriet's and her family's cruelty throughout the play, Harriet's disdainful comment is charged with ironic resonance, in fact, her removal of the plug is in itself an act of violence of the type called "redirected" aggression. For the moment at least, Harriet is inhabited by her motherly feeling and the social norms governing family life. Therefore, rather than hitting her son, Harriet finds in the plug an "outlet" for her "pent-up anger"<sup>5</sup>.

The ironic resonance of the scene, with all its attendant tragic and violent results, can get heightened by a brief reference to a similar situation in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Paradoxically, Gloucester's physical blindness

enables him to see and understand what goes on around him. This symbolic value of Gloucester's blindness is retrospectively intensified by Kent's warning at the outset of the play, suggesting that Lear should "see better". Indeed, Lear's inability to see leads to violence, in turn, violence produces the tragic consequences and awareness in the play as a whole <sup>6</sup>. Similarly, in *Sticks and Bones*, David is able to see and comprehend, while his parents and brother, who are able to see physically, are blind, especially morally. The family's moral blindness is shown through the device of the blank screen to be symbolic of the national blindness. The blank screen is apparently meant as a comment on the television coverage of the Vietnam war itself. Rabe seems to be attacking the sensational effect of the coverage which leaves viewers blinded as to the real cause and cost of the war. Paradoxically, the fictional audience, the family members are forced to see or experience the horrors of the war imaginatively. The blank screen creates a situation whereby their sense of vulnerability is heightened. This is because they are faced with the more upsetting image evoked by David's reporting of the violence in Vietnam. As Albuquerque argues, "if we do not see something we know to be unpleasant, it is likely that we will imagine it to be more terrible than it actually is <sup>7</sup>". Thus, whereas a journalist's "vivid technicolour" "picture of the tortured Vietnamese couple" "would have risked an invitation to a cheap thrill, David's narrative representation of the atrocity is fraught with an awareness of pain and guilt<sup>8</sup>".

David's awareness, which is a byproduct of his exposure to an alien sexual and cultural environment, renders him unable to fit into the framework of the life of his family and/or its cultural platitudes. David's first words in the play foreground his forthcoming alienation from his family and its middle-class values. They echo his strong sense of personal disappointment and anger with me army sergeant who has just left him in an unfamiliar place with people he does not know. In this respect, David's physical blindness has an important symbolic implication. David "can no longer find any meaning in middle-class suburban existence. He looks at it and sees nothing<sup>9</sup>".

David is estranged because his family struggles to preserve a "Hollywoodized" <sup>10</sup>image of itself. To be happy or in harmony with one's surroundings is the essence of this image. In other words, the family members strongly believe that the world they inhabit is "evacuated of political tensions, devoid of pain and death and drained of real anxiety <sup>11</sup>". A stark expression of the family's illusory life or "Hollywoodized" world-view is, among other things, embodied in the solutions they provide for David's disorienting human experience. Rather than trying to respond to David's pain and anxiety in a humane and familial fashion, the parents seek quick and

superficial solutions, which further enrich the symbolic implication of the blank screen. Indeed, the parents' initial response is modeled after their espoused television images. For example, Harriet's immediate response to her son's pain is to give him "Easy Sleep" tablets (106). She thinks that medicine would relieve David's pain in the way "Meyer Spot Remover" removes dirt off Ozzie's dirty jacket, leaving it "clean and fresh like spring" (157). This mundane mentality further enriches the demystifying effect of television already conveyed through the device of the blank screen. Put differently, Rabe appears to be trying to highlight the negative effect of television, especially its creation of a superficial mentality that expresses itself in specious discourse.

Dramatically, David's awareness of pain and guilt is in part exteriorized in the person of Zung, the Vietnamese girl he loved and married but had to leave behind upon his parents' request. Being the embodiment of pain and guilt, the girl is naturally non-existent as far as the parents are concerned. Rabe skillfully signals this negation by keeping Zung out of the parents' sight. But with David always communicating with her or talking to his parents about her, the girl becomes a ghost that haunts them. The parents are made to feel as if they were continuously watching a horror film on a blank screen. Therefore, the family's moral blindness, together with the mutual sense of estrangement between David and other family members, engenders a dynamic conducive to violence. It is Harriet's (and for that matter her family's) stubborn attempt to lead a life of illusion that partly blinds her to David's suffering and provokes her violent reaction to his film. In other words, it is the family's desperate attempt to preserve its image of itself and the world around, pitched against David's stubborn insistence on making his experience and presence felt that generates a state of conflict which is marked by "uncooperative communication". This uncooperative communication is dramatically manifested in "sustained silence, verbal abuse, or physical violence"<sup>12</sup>.

*Sticks and Bones* is made of a succession of scenes whereby these three manifestations of violence come into play, although the first two, being forms of psychological aggression, tend, as recent research into family violence concludes, to precede and predict "the development of physical aggression"<sup>13</sup>. Failure of dialogue or uncooperative communication builds up tension which makes characters susceptible to mutual incrimination and violence. While this formula may partly apply to the conflict between the parents themselves following David's return, it largely governs the relationship between David and other family members.



However, because violence is recurrent and retaliatory in nature, attention is here focused upon two violent incidents that are strategically placed and timed to serve climactic ends, with some decisive turn of direction: the first comes at the end of Act One, and the second at the end of the play. The first incident is the culmination of a chaotic condition that exists in the family as a result of David's intrusion. This chaotic condition represents the first stage of the sacrificial pattern outlined below. In particular, internecine struggle develops between the parents. This is because they fail to address David's persistent effort to make his pain felt within the family. In this sense, the internecine struggle appears to be part of the initial re-channeling of the parents' frustration and anger with David. For example, Harriet's inability to comprehend her son's trouble leads her to state repeatedly and blunderingly that Ozzie is to blame for his son's present predicament; "You thought you knew what was right, all those years, didn't you, teaching him sports and fighting .(105) "On the other hand, Ozzie counteracts by shifting blame into David himself. In fact, Ozzie's accusatory invocation of David's brutal killing of the cat is directly provoked by Harriet's charge.

Later in his moments of rage and inability to cope with David's emotional involvement in Vietnam, Ozzie himself directs his rage at Harriet and explicitly implicates her in David's conduct:

YOU! Your internal organs- your internal female organs-they've got some poison in them. They're backing up some kind of rot into the world. I think you ought to have them cut out of you. I MEAN, I JUST CAN'T STOP THINKING ABOUT IT. LITTLE BITTY CHINKY KIDS YOU WANTED TO HAVE! LITTLE BITTY CHINKY YELLOW KIDS! DIDN'T YOU! FOR OUR GRANDCHILDREN!(137)

The words in bold demonstrate Ozzie's racism in the way Harriet's comments on the film do reveal hers. But clearly Ozzie's redirected anger implies that he views David's problem, his "sickness," as congenitally passed on by his mother. Ironically, this reverses the implication of an earlier comment addressed to his wife during one of his many moments of confusion: "Don't you know I could throw you down onto this floor and make another child live inside you now!" (119) This comment may be partly

intended by Ozzie to reassert his sexual prowess, but it is also clear that he still thinks of Harriet as a good wife and mother. Presumably, Ozzie believes that the would-be child would not bring disgrace to me family.

However, the parents soon stop their recriminatory exchanges and abort the blame where they both think it is due. Thus, David becomes me victim of a coordinated aggressive strategy. Initially, the parents wage a psychological campaign against their son. They opt to ignore him by preoccupying themselves with less important matters. For example, Ozzie spends his time trying to repair his out-of-order TV set, and Harriet concerns herself with her cross-words book or invents excuses to go to the groceries. Attunes, the parents' reactions to David's own outbursts of anger may seem to verge on physical expressions of violence. For in their moments of desperation, they even sometimes chase David or block his way when he frequently leaves to cut short a coercive dialogue with them. Such moments of reciprocal tension and violence normally develop when David is asked to put his Vietnam experience behind or called upon to feel at home, be happy, and take part in family outings and visits to church or the movies. Nevertheless, the parents always try to avoid direct physical assault.

But the last straw comes at me end of Act One when in a very explosive fit, Ozzie verbally abuses all his family members and ends by repeatedly slapping David on the face before he himself collapses. The fact mat both Rick and his mother are targets for Ozzie's verbal assault is significant, as will be shown later, but what is important about Ozzie's victimization of David is its vehemence and directness. This extreme use of physical violence does not only seem to put an end to previous re-channeling strategies, but it also marks a shift of attitude towards David by Ozzie and other family members. Thereafter, no serious attempt is made at incorporating David into the family structure. Instead, a unanimous decision is reached first to ostracize him and then to eliminate him physically.

Indeed, the other and most violent incident against David, which takes place at the end of the play, is communally executed. Rick, who has for the most part distanced himself from family violence, gets involved and becomes me family spokesman and planner for communal punishment. Coming back from one of his out-of-home happy excursions, he appears very upset to find his parents "so mixed up" (168) by his "confused" brother. Rick's sense of "responsibility" is finally awakened: after all, Ozzie and Harriet are his "mom and dad too" (168).. Thus, he immediately physically attacks David and yells at him:

Let Dad alone. Let him alone. He's sick of you (*He smashes the guitar again and again.*) He's sick of you

and all the stupid stuff you talk about. What the hell's a matter with you? He doesn't wanna talk anymore about all the stupid stuff you talk about....He wants to talk about cake and cookies and cars and coffee. He's sick and he wants you to shut up. We hate you, goddam you. (171)

Rick's comment accurately sums up the divergent world views whose contact engenders violence within the family. Violence emanates from the dangerous contact between the lifestyle of a happy family and David's Vietnam experience. The family's happiness is embodied in "cake," "cookies," "cars," and "coffee," while David's "stuff" is pain and guilt. However, Rick's use of the pronoun "we" at the end does suggest that Rick speaks for his family and that David is unanimously hated.

Naturally, communal hatred leads to communal violence. Thus, Rick's forthcoming suggestion that David cut his wrists is welcomed by his parents. Soon, the three do in fact gang up to help David execute this violent physical act. The fact that David's wrists, are cut may recall the executed Vietnamese couple who, as reported by David, were left hanging by the wrists on a fence. More importantly, the wrists are also probably selected for this savage punishment in order to deprive David of the ability to carry his cane, which is the means he uses as a weapon both to resist aggression and at times to terrorize others. But given that the parents are specially horrified by his narration of violence, it is surprising that they do not decide to cut David's tongue. Indeed, both violent incidents are largely instigated by David's verbal assaults. The first is provoked by David's whispering unpleasant words into the ears of his sleeping father, causing the latter to have a nightmare. Similarly, the other violent incident is partly brought about by a surreal situation, a day nightmare, instigated by David's effective exploitation of noise and verbal narration to bring to life (the two things most detested by his parents- maimed soldiers and his Vietnamese wife. It is worth mentioning here that this is the first time Zung is seen by other family members. No wonder, that she is immediately brutally murdered by Ozzie just before David himself is physically brutalized.

The parents' comments following (the execution of the wrist-cutting) reiterate Rick's conclusion and also point to the motive and pattern of violence in the play as a whole. Harriet says "[David] is happier," and Ozzie replies "we're all happier" (175). Thus, David is damned not just because of his dissent but also because the community wants to regain its lost sense of happiness, its ability to live by its illusions. In other words, David becomes



like a scapegoat, a surrogate -victim whose sacrifice is therefore required if the family is to regain harmony or normality. Thus, *"Sticks and Bones ..."* culminates in a rite of exorcism, as a family, identifying David as an [sic] diabolical threat to their well-being, expel him from their midst in a scapegoat ritual that restores the social and psychological equilibrium of the family unit."<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, such an ending, as well as the verbal and physical violence governing David's relationship with his family throughout the play, complies with the pattern of violence outlined by René Girard.<sup>15</sup> Act One presents the first stage of the "sacrificial crisis" by dramatizing "the chaotic condition of reciprocal violence [which] prevails"<sup>16</sup> as a result of David's return. As mentioned above, a struggle develops between the parents. The living room, symbol of the happy and harmonious family, becomes a ground for conflict and mutual violence. On the other hand. Act Two dramatizes the remaining three stages of the sacrificial act, although the large bulk is concerned with the second stage, leaving the final moments of the play to embody the third and fourth stages: David's destruction by the united family and restoration of the family's lost happiness.

The second stage shows how, "in some unknown fashion, responsibility for the state of crisis settles on one person who becomes the surrogate for all the guilty, that is, for all me violent, the entire community."<sup>17</sup> In this respect, the violent attack on Ozzie outside his home is highly significant. Perhaps to avoid his unpleasant home environment, Ozzie takes a walk along the street, seeking some peace of the mind. Ironically, this moment turns out to be the occasion for one of his most unpleasant and violent experiences. Ozzie is hit hard by eggs from a fast-moving car. Significantly, when Ozzie is back home, he blames David for the attack. Of course, David denies the charge, but the fact that he is charged provides an excellent example of how David becomes the surrogate victim for the violence within the whole community. This is despite the fact that David is throughout confined to his upstairs room.

Indeed, David's confinement is a very crucial part of the second stage of the sacrificial crisis. The confinement is at once metaphorical of his deemed mental disorientation and prophetic of his imminent sacrifice. It is true that the upstairs room is his from the start, but earlier it is more of a refuge away from the repressive atmosphere of the living room, the place of his parents' persistent attempts at his assimilation. For in Act One, David is frequently shown to be re-channeling his anger by pressing his cane to the floor or waving it to find his way upstairs. However, after so many failed attempts at establishing some form of cooperative communication with him, the family

members decide they have had enough and appear to conclude that David is an insane person who should therefore be locked up and medically checked. In (his respect, David's confinement to his room recalls the image of the Victorian mad woman in the attic. Indeed, there is a play upon the word "attic", with David at one point in Act Two rhetorically asking his father: "YOU WANT ME TO GO UP IN THE ATTIC?" (150) In other words, although David is in an upstairs room close to the attic, he is metaphorically treated as a mad person in an attic.

In preparation for David's sacrifice, his metaphorically conveyed condition is reinforced by major characters' statements. For example. Father Donald, who is the first person to be in touch with David in Act Two, does not act like a religious person. Instead, he assumes the role of a racist psychiatrist. The Father judges that David's "problem" is psychological or mental rather than spiritual. He thinks it emanates from sexual contact with a member of an inferior race. Obviously, the Father's diagnosis is racially prejudiced. This is why David gets very upset. In fact, David violently kicks Father Donald out. However, David's aggressive reaction to Father Donald lends further credence to the unanimous view regarding David's insanity. Indeed, shortly afterwards, Harriet openly asserts "David's crazy." (168) Nevertheless, Harriet makes this assertion after she too is violently forced out of David's room when she unsuccessfully seeks to bathe him.

On the surface, both Father Donald's and Harriet's visits to David's room may appear as attempts to find a remedy for David's malady. But both Father Donald's forced blessing and Harriet's failed attempt at bathing David are also probably meant to be forms of preparatory religious rituals prior to David's sacrifice.

The aftermath of the sacrificial gathering provides the last photo opportunity for Rick. He takes a picture of David before he starts to play the guitar in celebration of the restored happiness. While Bigsby is dismissive of Rick's pictures, Lindsay Davies suggests that "they are taken at the most inappropriate times."<sup>18</sup> This is true especially in view of the prevalent violence within the family. The photographs are taken at moments before or after violent storms when characters struggle to be optimistic regarding a solution for the problem afflicting the family. For example. Rick takes pictures of his mother while she is on the phone seeking Father Donald's help; of David following the latter's whispering into his father's ears; and of Ozzie smiling after his physical attack on David at the end of Act One. Rick appears intent on recording manufactured "happy moments" that satisfy his parents' image of a family life. In so doing, as Davies rightly remarks, Rick attempts "to dissipate family conflict."<sup>19</sup> The implication here is that images

have the ability to hide the truth and can be deceptive. Thus, at a deeper level, the photographs are most appropriately timed, at least as far as the aforementioned significance of the blank screen is concerned. Pain or suffering is blanketed. It has no space in the family world-view. Therefore, it is no surprise that David resorts to verbal description to make his experience of the horror of war more vivid.

In anticipation of the deadly outcome of the relationship between themselves and their returning son, the parents seek to preempt any unfavorable response towards their conduct. They want to exonerate themselves from blame by presenting an image of David as an almost innately violent personality. This is voiced even before David's return and more strongly resurfaces during the conflict with his parents following his return. Thus, the news of his arrival-broken on the phone by an army sergeant- provokes them to dig deep into David's own childhood mischiefs. For example, Harriet recalls moments when "David locked himself in that old icebox... or that time he fell from that tree" (99). On the other hand, Ozzie says: "I... seen him do some awful, awful things, ole Dave. He was a mean ... foul-tempered little baby. I'm only glad I was HERE when they sent him off to do his killing"(111). Following David's homecoming, Ozzie provides a further example of David's awful things: "I saw him put a knife through the skin of a cat. I saw him cut the belly open" (105). David, who overhears his father's accusation, denies involvement in such a savage act and suggests instead that it was his brother Rick who committed the atrocity. But regardless of David's denial and counterclaim, the fact remains that the family members implicate themselves in acts of violent nature. Ironically, the parents' preemptive measure mitigates against the image they present of themselves as members of a peaceful and happy family.

Indeed, it is made clear throughout the play that besides conflict within the family, David's return brings to me open the family's past and existing problems and prejudices. Personal frustration is one of such problems. Generally speaking, all characters are shown to be frustrated by each others' attitudes. The parents are frustrated by David's unwillingness to be incorporated into their family and world-view, while David himself is frustrated by their failure to understand him. However, it is the accumulated frustration in the family's past or history that is of interest here, because it both disclaims the family's image of itself and explains the tendency on the part of its members to act violently.

From a psychological perspective, frustrated characters are always more inclined to act irrationally and violently. Being the head of the family, Ozzie is shown to be the most frustrated character in *Sticks and Bones*. Therefore,

he is naturally the most violent character in the play. This is why attention is here focused on his own personal frustration and its violent repercussions. In fact, Ozzie himself confesses to being a frustrated character in two crucially timed soliloquy-like speeches. Following a slanging match with his wife, which is itself a reflection of their inability to cope with David, Ozzie soliloquizes:

They think they know me and they know nothing.  
They dont know how I feel. How I'd like to beat  
Ricky with my fists till his face is ugly! How I'd  
like to banish David to the streets. How I'd like to  
cut her tongue from her mouth! They know nothing  
...! I was myself. (*And turning to the audience now,  
it's clear that the audience are his friends, his  
buddies.*) I lived in a time beyond anything they can  
ever know- a time beyond and separate, and I was  
nobody's goddamn husband! I was myself! And I  
could run. (119)

Obviously, the connection between Ozzie's personal frustration and his violence is underlined by Ozzie himself. Clearly, Ozzie's recollections of his victories and personal freedom before marriage are meant to emphasize the point that his family is the major source of his frustration. Significantly, he does not spare any member of his family from criticism. This explains why both Harriet and Rick are at times objects of his verbal attacks. They become targets of his continuous desire for revenge. But it is David, now an outsider, who is the recipient of violence, both verbal and physical. In fact, the first direct and very violent physical attack on David comes shortly after Ozzie's revelation of his repressed personality.

Ozzie's second soliloquy is when he performs his value before three chairs representing his family members. Outlining his plan to "COMBAT the weariness beginning" in him, Ozzie once more foregrounds his increasing sense of frustration and anger:

It's like stepping into a hole, the way I feel each  
morning when I awaken, I see the day and me sun  
and I'm looking upward into the sky with a sense  
of looking down. A sense of hovering over a great  
pit into which I am about to fall ...At first... at first



I thought the thing to do would be to learn the guitar. But THAT I realized- in just the nick of time-was a folly that would have taken me into the very agony of frustration I was seeking to avoid. (166)

Once more, dramatic context emphasizes the connection between frustration and violence. No sooner does Ozzie finish his speech than he comes to grips with the source of his mental trepidation. Ozzie sees Zung for the first time and wastes no time in taking revenge. He soon smothers her.

However, a dormant and more dangerous cause of violence, which is also awakened by David's return, is the family's racial prejudice and hatred. In fact, David Rabe himself underlines this point in his introduction to the play. He considers the "root of racism to be sex, or more exactly miscegenation" (Xiii). This is exemplified by the parents' and Father Donald's reactions to David's love affair in Vietnam. Ozzie and Harriet are not in principle opposed to David's whoring around, but what they cannot bring themselves to understand or accept is his having an affair with a Vietnamese girl. Soon, their racial prejudice unleashes a chain of violent reactions. The parents take the initiative, although David himself is not altogether blame-free. His attempt to evade discussion with his parents provokes them to react violently, both verbally and physically. Ozzie "*pushes David backward*" (114) and yells at him wondering:

What the hell do you think you're doing? It's what you did. Who the hell you think you are? You screwed it. A yellow fucking whore. Some yellow ass. You put in your prick and humped your ass. You screwed some yellow fucking whore! (*He has chased David backwards, Harriet joining in with him*)(114-5)

Ozzie's use of the pronoun "it" and the noun "ass" to refer to the Vietnamese girl predicts Harriet's stigmatizing of the Vietnamese as barbaric and inhuman. Nevertheless, although she joins her husband in chasing David and blocking his way, she appears at least momentarily to be able to contain her emotion and even justify David's emotional involvement. Harriet even suggests that the involvement was a normal reaction to David's loneliness and the fact that there were "no white girls anywhere around" (115). Nevertheless, David's confession of his true affection draws an unpleasant physical response from the mother. She is soon shown to be vomiting. Later,



Ozzie himself appears similarly disgusted by David's stories: "YOU MAKE ME WANT TO VOMIT"(137). It is this racially-motivated revulsion which contributes to the communal destruction of David.

However, being the victim of communal violence does not necessarily mean that David has a peaceful history. Judging by parents' claims, David has done some cruel acts. Certainly, his physical appearance does nothing to dispel the image created by his parents; neither does his subsequent behavior, although it is part of his attempt at self-realization. The cane is not simply carried to help David probe his way, it is also at times used as a weapon both to resist aggression and/or force his parents to see things his way. For example, when Father Donald visits David in his upstairs room, David forces him out by hitting him with his cane. In fact, the Father is pushed to a funny position whereby he "blesses" David from a distance with his hands down. Harriet's luck with David is not much better than Father Donald's. Her attempt to bathe David is resisted by him using the cane as well. In fact, David does force his cane beneath his mother's skirt in what could be construed as a metaphorical act of rape or incest.<sup>20</sup> Earlier, David is frequently shown re-channeling his anger with his parents by violently pressing his cane on the floor. In fact, at one point, enraged David is not just forced to poke the floor, but with tension building in him further, "[he] crashes into his father [while] heading for the stairs" (115).

Nevertheless, it is David's verbal insults that merit more attention because of the riveting effects they have on his parents. To counter his parents' racism, not only does he keep conjuring up the image of his Vietnamese wife, but he also praises the Vietnamese in general: "She was the color of the earth! They are the color of the earth, and what is white but winter with the earth under it like a suicide!" (115) In fact, this remark is the direct cause of his mother's physical revulsion. Moreover, David seeks to destroy the family ideal hero, Hank Greenweller. To Ozzie, in particular, Hank is like Uncle Ben to Willy Loman in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Thus, David's revelation of Hank's death to be caused by a "congenital sickness" (111) is too shocking to the parents to be true. Ironically, Ozzie can only think of such diseases to be associated with the Vietnamese, as he later claims, in a further confirmation of his racially motivated violence:

Dirty, diseases. They got'em. Those girls. Infection. From the blood of their parents it goes right into in (he fluids of their bodies. Malaria, T.B. An actual rot alive in them...gonorrhoea, syphilis. There are some who have the plague. He touched mem. It's disgusting. (118)

Thus, in reporting Hank Greenweller's death to be caused by a "congenital sickness", David both attacks the family icon and forestalls the parents' latent racism.

The stage directions at the beginning of *Sticks and Bones* clearly suggest that the family is meant to be an all-American one. Therefore, it is likely that the causes, effects and manifestations of violence within it mirror the violence at the national level. Thus, ultimately, the play suggests that the national culture of violence is to blame for waging the Vietnam war itself.

## Notes

1. Violence has always been identified as an important issue in *Sticks and Bones*, yet it has not been fully explored. See, among others, Jane F. Bonin, *Major Themes in prize-winning American Drama* (Metuchen, NJ, 1975), 85-6; Bonnie Marranca, "David Rabe's Viet Nam Trilogy," *Canadian Theatre Review*, 14 (Spring 1977), 92; Janet S. Hertzbach "The Plays of David Rabe: A World of Streamers," in *Essays On Contemporary American Drama*, edited by Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Hueber, Munich, 1981), 178; Richard L. Homan, "American Playwrights in the 1970s," *Critical Quarterly*, 24:1 (Spring 1982), 75; and Christopher Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama, Volume Three, Beyond Broadway* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985), 328-9.
2. In his interview with James Schroeder, David Rabe finds this grouping lacking and includes *The Orphan* among his war plays: "for me they're not [a trilogy]. They are a group of four plays." See *Vietnam We've All Been There: Interview with American Writers*, edited by James Schroeder (Praeger, London, 1992), 210. Probably taking note of Rabe's grouping, The Grove Press, Volume Two of Rabe's plays features *Streamers* and *The Orphan*.
3. *A Critical Introduction*, Volume Three, 329.
4. David Rabe, *The Vietnam Plays, Volume One: The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel and Sticks and Bones* (Grove Press, New York, 1993), 125. Further reference to both plays by page number in me text is to this edition.
5. Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, translated by Marjorie Ken- Wilson (Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1966), pp. 169-70.
6. For a more general and detailed parallel between *King Lear* and *Slicks and Bones*, see Thomas P. Adier's article "'The Blind Leading the Blind': Rabe's *Sticks and Bones* and Shakespeare's *King Lear*", *Papers on Language & Literature*, 15:2 (Spring 1979), 203-206. It is worth noting, however, that while he does not deny the existence of parallels as identified by Adier, Rabe confirms that he did not consciously try to pattern his play after *King Lear*. Moreover other critics draw a similar parallel between David and Tiresias in Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. See Samuel J. Bernstein, *The Strands Entwined: A New Direction In American Drama* (North Eastern University Press, Boston, 1980), 34; and Don Ringnalda, "Doing It Wrong Is Getting It

Right: America's War Drama," in *Fourteen Landing Zones: Approaches to Vietnam War Literature*, edited by Philip K Jason (University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1991), 34.

7. Severino Joao Albuquerque, *Violent Acts: A Study of Contemporary Latin American Theatre* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1991), p. 42.

8. Pamela Cooper, "David Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*: The Adventures of Ozzie and *Hanict*," *Modern Drama*, 29:4 (December 1986), 615. Similarly, in his essay "A Dual Perspective: First-Person Narrative in Vietnam Film and Drama", David J. DeRose likens David's role to that of the first person narrator in a war film and suggests that the "veteran's subjective impressions of the Vietnam war ... are far more powerful than any film image, however graphic." in *America Rediscovered: Critical Essays on Literature and Film of the Vietnam War*, edited by Owen W. Oilman, Jr. and Lome Smith (Garland Publishing, Inc., New York, 1990), 109.

9. Jen-old A. Phillips, "Descent into the Abyss: The Plays of David Rabe," *West Virginia University Philosophical Papers*, vol. 25 (1977), 111.

10. Don Ringnalda, p. 46. It is worth mentioning that the names in Rabe's play are after those in *The Adventures of Harriet and Ozzie*, which is a popular television comedy in the 50s and 60s.

11. Bigsby, 326.

12. Robert Voriicky, *Act Like a Man: Challenging Masculinities in American Drama* (Ann Arbor, 1995), p. 19.

13. Christopher M. Mirphy and K. Daniel O'Leary, "Psychological Aggression Predicts Physical Aggression in Early Marriage," *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 57:5, 582.

14. J.W. Fenn, *Levitating the Pentagon: Evolution in the American Theatre of the Vietnam War Era* (London, 1992), 208.

15. See chapter one of his *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore, 1977).

16. Mary Karen Dahl, *Political Violence in Drama: Classical Models, Contemporary Variations* (Michigan, 1987), p. 7.

17. *Ibid.*

18. "Watching the Box: TV on Stage in *Sticks and Bones*," in *David Rabe: a Casebook*, edited by Toby Silverman Zinman (New York, 1991), 137.

19. *ibid.*

20. See Samuel J. Bernstein, p. 28.



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