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Self-Disclosure and Irrational Violence in David Rabe's Streamers

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Abstract

Cultural, social and ethnic disparity plays a prominent role in fueling conflicts, tension and violence among individuals, local communities, and regional societies alike. These tensions may stem from ignoring, denying or contempt the rights of some for others whatever the forms or types of these rights. The conflict may rage because of ideologically directed charging to gain certain benefits, such as material benefits, authoritarianism, and partisan sectarianism. In many cases, these differences and tensions lead to spontaneous or systematic violence against individuals, groups, societies and peoples.

Some of these conflicts can be applied to the tensions in *Streamers* by David Rabe (1940-). The tension and violence that occurs in the play is due to the different cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the main characters. In addition, the army, as a military institution, imposes orders on its members to adapt and to engage in the army's culture, even if it does not conform to the psychological nature of the individuals and their societal and human principles and values as well.

Therefore, what matters to the army establishment and its officials is the attempt to impose orders of discipline, duty, implementation and commitment on the recruits by various means and methods, regardless of the consequences of these orders.

Keywords: Rabe, Vietnam War, Self-Disclosure, Homosexuality, Irrationality, Violence.

1.1 Introduction

Christoph Houswitschka notes that, "the Vietnam War has had the most poignant impact on American society since the Civil War," predisposes an ideal atmosphere for Rabe's Vietnam's plays (117). *Streamers* revolves around a few American soldiers in their military barracks, where they come from different backgrounds and races. It is not only the expected fate in the war that unites these individuals, but rather their feeling that they were neglected by their parents and that they did not receive sufficient attention from their families. They even feel that they are descended from parents "who are either addicted to alcohol, have some disease, tend to self-destruct, or are characterized by malice" (Kolin, 63). Moreover, the military existence in their barracks is vitiated by ethnic as well as sexual tensions. Therefore, Rabe's *Streamers* does not only present the theme of "manhood in the lives of U.S. Army soldiers" (Wakefield, 82), but it also embodies the chaotic and random tendency of human existence, with which it is difficult or perhaps impossible to achieve psychological stability or achieve the desired rational results. The soldiers' divergent concepts of the horrors of war, sexual perversion, and the complexities of race turn their daily lives in the vicinity of their barracks into a hell that is no different from the hell of the battlefield, where death and violence are almost as deadly as the violence and death awaiting their lives imminently in Vietnam.

With his return to America after Vietnam War, Rabe's trouble lies in the fact that his people are either uninterested in the war itself, or they are interested in the war "simplifications, in the debate about the war rather than in the experience of the war itself" (Savran, 193). That is why Rabe highlights his writings on the critical aspects of American civilization, its conquest of safe peoples, and the placement of its soldiers in such a war. Christopher Bigsby asserts that Rabe's plays "were attempts to understand, to find a form and a language in which he could explore an experience that he had found impossible to penetrate or express when its reality was part of his daily life" (258). His plays embody the irrational violence practiced by the American soldiers against other safe peoples or towards each other (as in *Streamers*) as a result of the contrast of their social, cultural and psychological backgrounds, indicating its causes and disastrous consequences in an unrivaled dramatic artistic style and stories close to their bitter reality.

1.2 Streamers (1976)

The play is set in a military barracks outside Washington, DC. It almost shows the impenetrable obstacles to "human communication." (Werner, 518). Rabe, according to Hans-Ulrich Mohr, epitomizes his insightful perspective at war to uncover the mysteries far away from the surface and the superficial view (135). The play's four main characters are Billy Wilson, Richie Douglas, Roger Moore and Carlyle. Since the backgrounds of these recruits vary, the four main characters "represent the diverse American social and cultural spectrum" (Demastes, 43). The white heterosexual Billy Wilson, who is from a conventional middle-class family, tends to show a certain sympathy for others, describing his parents as being "really terrific people" (II, 197). The second white character, Richie, a wealthy spoiled who descends from separated parents live in New York, tends to adapt himself to be homosexual.

The third main character, Roger, an African-American, is a straight man who lives in an unnamed urban area. Moving away from the inferior ghetto, he embraces the society's conventional values. Roger believes that playing basketball game can do a lot to heal feelings of spiritual distress and since he hates arguments and fighting, he is keen to activate his physical strength in doing something like cleaning or mopping the floor of the barracks. The fourth main character, Carlyle, is another ghetto black man. Coming from a lower social background, like Roger, he asserts he has been "on street" all his life. (II, 209). Carlyle's entry into the barracks room of the other three men is due to his hearing that a black person of the same race lives there and also because he looks for a friend as he feels lonely. Carlyle is nothing but a drift who never finds comfort in his presence in the army, and this is evident when he says: "I hate this goddamn army" (I, 167).

Carlyle's coming into the staff room threatens the delicate balance among the other three characters. Moreover, since Carlyle is alienated because of his color, race, culture and social standing, he undoubtedly carries a passive feeling of resentment and hatred towards the American white community as well as the waging war in Vietnam. He declares his dissatisfaction of the war because he believes that neither the war nor the country is theirs (the black) and what makes him furious is that "everybody just sittin' and takin' it" (I, 168).

The distraught Billy overlooks the sexual advances of the homosexual Richie because it is at odds with his traditional social concept. Consequently, Richie, who believes that he is denied his right by Billy, resorts to Carlyle for a homosexual coalition, which represents an antithesis stance of Roger and Billy, who try to avoid the war's tension and panic fits, that surround them by clinging to their sense of dignity and respect, resorting to mop or wax the floor of the room or by resorting to sports. As for Carlyle and Richie's personal homosexual

relationship, it is the main driving force in the occurrence of the crisis among members of the group that will lead to self-disclosure and irrational violence.

1.3 Self-Disclosure and Irrational Violence in Streamers

Whether the main characters are enlisted or drafted, their presence seems meaningless and aimless, as they have brought with them insecurity, self-doubts, and all the anxiety and turmoil of civilian life. Billy recalls his early youth in the Midwest, where he lost his equanimity as a result of random actions. Having the desire to be a priest to "take away what hurt" people (II, 196), he becomes involved with a gang that beats up homosexuals, and he ends up as a soldier. As for Roger, like his friend, he recalls helping to bash homosexuals, and he remembers seeing a street crime. He even hints, perhaps ironically, at being under the care of a psychiatrist. The friendship that appears between them is, in fact, fragile because they are only brought together because of their enlistment in the army. The four main characters, indirectly, agree that war is not necessary to achieve justice or a rational purpose such as making the world a safe place for democracy, as senior US officials state through propaganda and mass media.

What adds to the anxiety of the main characters as soldiers, who are waiting with fear for the time when they will be deployed to the battle fronts, is what they hear of the talks about the unknown, ruthless Vietnamese Vietcong gangs who represent a brutal, stern enemy who is eagerly waiting to penetrate their bodies and hang them on sharp sticks anointed with elephant excrement. However, instead of fighting a battle with an "external enemy, sexuality and race become the territory over which the main characters struggle for control, and this struggle eventually explodes into violence and death" (McDonough, 114). The internal conflict becomes apparent and inevitable as the recruits argue over ownership of the cadre room that represents the home or the place these men belong to. Therefore, the play deeply concentrates on "the dynamic of men in groups and explore how the male mind creates illusion to assume identity, security, and power" (McMillion, 175). Billy cannot deny that Richie is gay and he's confused about how realistic Richie's actions might be. At the same time, Carlyle is not much different from Billy, as he outlines his need to confirm a certain identity and, in particular, his blackness when other recruits are present. Annette J. Saddik asserts that *Strearmers* explores the "national, racial, gender and sexual categories as markers of identity" (182).

Although 'Streamers' the title word has several dictionary meanings, in this play it means the parachute which fails to open. Therefore, the title of the play, *Streamers*, which is quite suggestive, reflects the fate of the main characters through the metaphor that symbolizes the parachute which fails to open over the head of the paratrooper and remains hanging up to lead him to his inevitable fate. Consequently, *Streamers* comes to embody more than the imminent threat of death in Vietnam which is an inescapable image. The characters of the play are not only victims of their circumstances as they cannot reach something through which they can be saved, but they also seem to be landing in a free fall without a parachute. They cannot leave the complexities of the military barracks including its violence and even if they survive the barrack's violence, they are destined to go to Vietnam where the jungles and the booby brutal traps are.

Streamers begins at dusk in the recruits' room in the military barracks, where Richie calms down another recruiter, Martin, who tries to commit suicide by severing a vein in his wrist. The suicide attempt incident confirms the nervous and psychological breakdown of the recruits and perhaps it also expresses their anti-war position as they are isolated from the world and await imminent death when they are forced to deploy in Vietnam. Moreover, the

incident foreshadows upcoming violent events that will dominate the conscript's mentalities. Analyzing Martin's action of suicide, Carol Rosen notes that "the action of the play proper …begins with an image of blood, of violence prefigured" (254).

Martin has two years left to serve in the army and says that "he just wanted out". Ritchie explains Martin's stance more frankly as he asserts that "It's just fear" (I, 154). Such a fear cannot be denied or avoided, as it is an obsession inherent in their daily life in the army. Sending them to Vietnam constitutes the largest part of it and the other part is the fear of confronting facts about oneself and the attitude towards it. Despite Martin's disappearance at an early stage of the play's start, his shadowy presence remains a witness telling the plight of those who are still there living with their painful despair which intensifies continuously day after day.

Through Martin's words to Richie and his pondering of the reasons that lead him to cut his vein to commit suicide, it can be said that Richie and Martin are emotionally charged, frank and enjoy self-disclosure to each other. They reveal their disgust towards the military establishment, and their apprehension of their indiscernible fate. Martin confirms to Richie his disappointment that the Army is not "different from the way it is" (I, 154). They also agree to condemn the practices of injustice and fear of military life, and they clearly express their feelings and thus they withstand the authority that restricts them and impends their human existence. (I, 155-6)

With the start of the theatrical events, it is possible to notice that there is a delicate balance in the recruits' room in the military barracks between the white homosexual, Ritchie, on one hand and Billy and Roger on the other. As for Billy, who cannot tolerate such practices, he is able to suppress his quick reactions to such matters. They have forged an interracial friendship and seem determined to continue it even to the point of ignoring Martin's suicide attempt with which the action begins. But Carlyle represents the grenade in this play and it is his requirements that set off this delicate balance.

Carlyle's grenade detonator contains the hidden class disdain, his suffering and disgrace. There is isolation between him and the white soldiers, so he comes looking for Roger and he is excited to have a "soul" (I, 166) like him on the military base. Carlyle is resentful of his weakness and inferior status as a recruiter and criticizes the dearth of opportunities for fun and pleasure when leaving outside the base. He asserts to the other, "Jesus, baby, can't you remember the outside? How long it been since you been on leave? It's so sweet out there, nigger; you got it to forgot . . . They don't dance baby, make you wanna cry. I hate damn army" (I, 167). Carlyle believes that the black man is close to essential nature and his problem is not that he does not "have no good mind, but BELIEVE in his body" (II, 204).

Billy, Roger and Richie coexist despite some tensions that occur from time to time due to Richie's homosexual orientation, in which Roger plays the role of the peacemaker. While Billy and Roger deny Richie's homosexuality, Carlyle identifies it instinctively, especially he believes that sharing Richie's body will make him unite with others and wipe away any stigma that has defied his life as a black man. He believes that Richie does not like him first, but "now he changed his way a thinkin' . . . We gonna be one big happy family" (II, 213). Although Billy is very different from Martin and Richie, he is like them when he speaks frankly about his fears of death in this war and the difficulty of understanding being a soldier fighting in Vietnam. However, Billy, who represents the middle-class and its values, tries to prove in himself the values of true masculinity and what it represents in order to divert his

thinking from everything that questions his masculine feeling. This manly feeling is evident from his attitude towards Richie, who threatens his manhood and sexuality, because Richie is labeled according to the prevailing culture that he is effeminate.

The relationship of the three soldiers before Carlyle's coming remains sober and tainted only by small fits of anger that do not rise to the level of quarrels and violence. When Richie enters the military barracks, for example, in a sexy playful mood, "he tousles Billy's hair" (I, 161), especially as he invites Billy to watch a movie with him where he can" kiss and hug" him (ibid) and even express (love) (I, 162) to the young man from the Midwest. Regardless of Richie's sexual flirtations that he does in "acting gay with vengeance" (Clum, 220), Billy, who hears and sees those sexual connotations, that disgust him, reacts in an aggressive and threatening way: "I am gonna have to obliterate you" (I, 161). Richie tries to dismiss Billy's dissatisfaction by going to the shower cheerfully. Richie's flirtation remarks about his love and attraction for the same-sex make the topic of homosexuality a focal point for discussion among the main characters throughout of the play.

When Carlyle, who is a ghetto angry bisexual African-American enlistee, comes to be their fourth roommate, racial and sexual matters get complicated and take on a different form because his race differs from Ritchie and Billy, while his sexual orientation makes him distinct from Roger the African-American man. Carlyle is aware of his humiliating, uneasy standing as a black soldier in the white-led army, and even when Roger and Carlyle are alone, their talk of race is closely related to the military.

Isolated because of his color and being bisexual, Carlyle, who longs for social bonds, tries to put an end for his seclusion and to "communicate his pain to the three boys" (Rosen, 254). Terrified and afraid of being sent to Vietnam, he wants to join to the trio of men to rid himself of fear and feel that he is safe. He is eagerly longs to be, as it were, part of the male family who "got it made" (I, 191). In act II, Billy, who feels "sick like" (II, 198) confesses to Roger that he is not sure how to "behave in a simple way, "and that he complicates every issues by noticing complex matters that are there but "nobody else sees" (I, 195). Although Roger supports Billy by expressing his views and insights, he tries to push him out of the room to stop him talking and keep him away from stirring up manly tensions. Leaving the personal talk, Billy and Roger depart for the gym to leave Richie and Carlyle alone in the room.

Carlyle employs his body to forge interactive personal relationships because he believes that the black man is "too close … to his body …he BELIEVE in his body". (II, 204). Such belief shapes Carlyle's ideas and the rest of the actions of the play.

Carlyle, who thinks this army male 'home' is set up on a sexual basis as Richie sexually serves Billy and Roger, wants to know 'the real Ritchie," so he is eagerly wants to have sex with him. He tells Richie openly "I want to talk to you . . . why don't you want to talk to me? We can be friends. Talkin' back and forth, sharin' thoughts and bein' happy" (I, 202). Noticing Ritchie's hesitation, Carlyle gets furious and shouts "DON'T YOU TELL ME I AIN'T TALKIN' WHAEN I TALKIN' . . . You goddam face ugly fuckin' queer punk!" (II, 202)

Richie does not only want to express his homosexual tendencies towards Belly, but he wants his other roommates to accept him for what he is: "It's not such a terrible thing" (I, 171), he tells Roger. However, neither Belly nor Roger is ready to confess or believe his homosexual identity. While Billy is anxious about questioning his straight sexual identity by

Richie, Roger cannot believe, according to his personal assumptions, that there is an enlisted in the army who can be homosexual because it contradicts normal traditions and society conventions. Moreover, commenting on Richie's homosexual identity, Billy asserts to him that "you're gonna have us believein' you are just what you are" (II, 214). Carlyle invites Roger to go to the brothel and drink beer in his military wheels, and in his turn Roger invites Billy and Richie to go with them for and get rid of the pressures inside the barracks. Billy agrees, but Richie refuses to go because he thinks going to prostitutes is disgusting.

The four men begin to reveal their mutual innermost thoughts, such as what scouts share their secrets and privacy when they sit around a campfire at night. Carlyle recalls his complicated relationship with his father and then declares to the other soldiers that they "gonna be big happy family" (II, 213). Carlyle's use of the term a "good happy family" indirectly includes his perverse sexual orientation towards Richie and his premeditated intention to establish this relationship sooner or later. Thus, among the main four characters there are two characters, Richie is white and Carlyle is black who can be classified as two outcasts "connect in a sexual pact born at least as much out of loneliness and despair as from physical craving" (Hertzbach, 187). Undoubtedly, Ritchie's sexual approach to Carlyle provokes Billy, who rejects the deviant sexual orientations and he asserts that it cannot be "gonna have this going on here" (II, 217), therefore, he insults Richie as he says "I put you down—you gay little piece of a shit cake—SHIT CAKE," and then turns to Carlyle and rebukes him racially: "And you—are your own goddamn fault, SAMBO!" II, 222).

Ritchie assures his roommates that he also lives in the room and that there are no privileges for one over the other and that he has the right to stay with Carlyle in the room alone to spend a good time just as they have the right to go to the brothel for entertainment and leisure, so he asks Roger and Billy to leave the room to enjoy their homosexuality. Roger and Billy's reaction for Richie's demand is contradictory. Roger, who knows and experiences very well what social and racial oppression is, cannot deny Ritchie's rights and orientations in the barracks, even if they go beyond straight social conventions. Billy takes a different stance and insists on confirming that Ritchie's desires contradicts 'good male' attitudes and may lead to 'war at home'.

Billy's convulsive attitude towards what he considered immoral behavior led to Carlyle's irritation, especially with regard to the confusion of dominating the house where they live and consequently he feels that his rights as an individual in this place have been confiscated by Billy. Carlyle warns Billy angrily as he says "don't you got no feelin' for how a man feel? I don't understand you . . . . DON'T YOU HEAR ME? I DON'T UNDERSTAND THIS SITUATION HERE" (II, 217). Underestimating his reactionary feelings and denying his individuality, Billy insults Carlyle and accuses him of being an awkward animal if he wants to shamelessly engage in homosexual perversion in this house. Rejecting Bailey's denigration, Carlyle says furiously "I KNOW I ain't no animal, I don't have to prove it" (II, 218). Carlyle cannot hide the feeling of indignation and resentment towards the society which inculcates into his psychology the alienation of race, education, social status as well as his sexual perversion.

Carlyle's furious response to Billy's daring insults is with a quick knife stab in the white youth's stomach. After fatally stabbing Billy to avenge his individual dignity, Carlyle announce to him "Don't nobody talk that weird to me, you understand? (II, 222). However, Carlyle's irrational violence does not stop until he also kills the elderly sergeant, Rooney, who suddenly and unexpectedly returns to the Soldiers' house. No doubt that both Billy and

Rooney's murder is unjustifiable and senseless. Carlyle's gratuitous violence demonstrates his inability to cope with his situation, therefore he resorts to revenge for his fragile identity.

Carlyle's crime demonstrates the inability of traditional society's values to control the irrationality and violence in the daily life of American society. In *Streamers*, David Rabe portrays the deterioration of American society's conventional values during the Vietnam War. Metaphorically speaking, Carlyle's parachute is highly limited by oppressive racism to open and land him safely on his feet. Moreover, Rabe's view on the Vietnam War is simply an estimate of this fact. Hertzbach notes that "Rabe uses the war in Vietnam as a generalized backdrop for his reflections upon the inevitable, natural violence of American life" (184). 'Streamers' which means parachutes that fail to open serves as a metaphor in the play; Billy, Richie, Roger and Carlyle and the others, who represent a microcosm of American society, all face destruction, for the society can no longer provide them with 'parachutes' that guarantee their safety and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Streamers' background is the Vietnam War and David Rabe places the soldiers who represent the characters of the play in a societal context, such as the backgrounds of the characters and the psychological pressures they suffer from before and after they come to their military units. Although the Vietnam War serves as a backdrop to the play, it has been employed as a factor that reflects a debilitating culture characterized by unbridgeable social relations, violence, and spiritual sterility. Mixing the soldiers' lives in the military barracks with their personal backgrounds in their homes, the playwright shows that military senseless violence is nothing but an extension and outgrowth of the irrational violence that occurs among the soldiers themselves who come from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds in Streamers.

The main characters of the play and the societal background they descend from are both lie under tremendous pressure and tension that may lead to collapse at any moment. Reflecting the complexities of existence and anxiety of American soldier, the play presents also a psychological atmosphere for the soldiers as it shields them from their mythical, social, moral and human values when they fulfill their irrational or brutal duties. Therefore, Streamers embodies the chaotic and random tendency of human existence, with which it is difficult or perhaps impossible to achieve psychological stability or achieve the desired rational results.

David Rabe's main principle of writing is going off from the wish of discovering the complexities of existence of the world rather than interpreting the world itself. Realizing that America does not deserve to host the noble spirit, the playwright aspires to a true civilization that respects the human being and develops social and spiritual values instead of manifestations of violence, moral corruption and degradation of true values.

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