



***Streamers* Lecture Series**

On November 8th, 2008 as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department interviewed Dr. Bob Vorlicky, who is on the faculty at NYU, followed by an audience Q & A.

TS: What is it about *Streamers* that provokes audiences? It seems it still has the power to press buttons.

BV: *Streamers* is set in 1965 and in many ways is a history play. I think that David Rabe, the playwright, captured a period that's dealing with the rise of troops in Vietnam during the LBJ administration. 1965 is when Johnson came out with the Great Society. But concurrently we have Martin Luther King and the growth of registered voters, and then, toward the end of that year, the passing of the Voters Rights Act. Also around the time of this play, 1965, there's also the Watts riot. And beginning in 1965 there was the assassination of Malcolm X. When thinking about pressing buttons, I think that it brings back a very volatile time in American history; it also has subject matter that shows the tensions that existed in the play between race, sexuality and fear of the Vietnam War. So from a historical perspective I think buttons are pressed because of a reminiscence of the volatile 60's. This is the first time I've ever seen the play. And I was struck very much by the attentiveness of all of us in the audience; listening to what the characters were saying to one another and to our reactions to the violence that's onstage. There is something about the various topics of the play and the nature of the violence onstage that continues to press our buttons.

TS: What about that violence? Rabe has sometimes been accused of going down the route of gratuitous violence. Or do you see it as a tragedy that's inevitable?

BV: I think one of the important things about *Streamers* for us to think about is that it is unlike the other plays that make up Rabe's Vietnam trilogy. *Streamers* is the only one with an all male cast. *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* is a mixed cast of men and women and it also takes place in Georgia as well as Vietnam. *Sticks and Bones* takes place in the United States with the Nelson family. It's a parody of Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and their sons Ricky and David. It's about their son, David, who comes home from the war having been blinded, disabled from the war. When *Streamers* was produced at Lincoln Center, Rabe captured a dynamic of what can happen when men are interacting with one another in the absence of women. This violence happens when they find themselves frustrated with trying to connect to each other. So in that regard, I would say it's actually quite typically American. It captures a particular dynamic of how men interact with each other; particularly when they are in confining institutions like

prison or the military. In this particular instance, I find the violence completely believable considering what's going on in the barracks. I don't know if you picked up the references to "this is my home" and Carlyle saying, "I need to find my home." There's not one character in this "home" that has a dominant voice. We see difference in terms of race. We see difference in terms of sexuality. There's no one character who dominates the discourse of this particular home setting or what their home is supposed to be. Watching how that diversity is trying to deal with itself—that's powerful. The violence comes out of disgust, fantasy, grotesqueness, alcohol, confusion, despair, and a tremendous fear.

TS: Do you think Rabe is telling us that when you put very diverse people together under one roof there's no chance for getting along?

BV: That's a good question. Rabe ultimately is doing parallel realities in terms of showing us the kind of violence that can happen in response to sheer frustration. And that frustration is happening in an altered state. I want to put an emphasis on the fact that Carlyle, who executes the violence, is absolutely out of it, but there is this level of rage that is seething inside of him. He is absolutely desperate as to who he can find to connect with. He's always felt like he is an outsider. He doesn't feel particularly that people like him. He's saying, "What special deal do you guys have here? I want to have this." He also knows that he is going to Vietnam. And on one level this fear is so deep that it's striking back in any way. Rabe is saying, to some extent, we are all capable of being irrational.

TS: The characters are all trying to define this army barracks as a safe place even though we know they're facing certain death if they go to Vietnam. So what is it about this intimacy between the men that's driving this play? Is that something that Rabe is getting at?

BV: I think that's a really important question. The US military requires distancing from your loved ones and from any intimacy to your families. And all of the men in the play have different ideas of who their families are, some were supportive, some were not, and they're all from different parts of the United States. So much of it is about their vulnerability as soon as they start to be more direct about what their needs are and intimacy is pushed away. There is something very engaging and dynamic that happens with Richie's homosexuality. This is usually something people want to talk about; but it's a big secret, something that's weird. The fact that it's out in the open and that they're dealing with it from the very beginning; that along with the issue of race makes this play incredibly unusual. Part of the battle is how does one speak about the wish for intimacy? Can you feel close to someone just by being able to talk about what's on your mind? Can you share a dream? Can I share a story about Frankie? I don't know who Frankie absolutely is to Billy but the wish on Billy's part is that, "If I tell them a story, how much trust can I get back from them?" It's almost as if the characters are asking: "Can I tell this story without automatically having who I am be questioned?"

TS: I want to follow up with something you said about Richie's character. In 1975, it was still unusual to have a gay character be so prominent on the Broadway stage. Richie doesn't come out until the very end when Cokes asks,

“Are you queer, boy?” and then he finally says that he is. What is it about that character’s ambivalence that makes him important to the plot?

BV: I think it’s a huge step for Rabe to deal with this. I think that it’s a “don’t ask, don’t tell” situation. In fact, I think that using the military for the setting was an incredibly brave choice. Richie is asked by other characters, “Have you done this?” And he says, “Yes, I have.” And it’s up to us as an audience to ask, “Well, has he? Or has he not?” There’s still ambivalence about this. It’s not safe for him to self-identify. He has to trust, as one might at home tell it to brothers or sisters or a family member or best friend. In this play the gay character is one of many kinds of men. He’s neither a minority nor a majority. Bi-sexual Carlyle is absolutely fine with moving forward with having some kind of sex with Richie. It doesn’t necessarily make him gay; but it certainly says that he doesn’t mind engaging in homosexual activity. Rabe is showing the fact that the army is this social organization, a place where people of the same sex bond with one another. This may be the same thing that would happen with a sorority for instance. Okay, that’s a bad analogy; but anyway, I think that this play is charged with a homo-eroticism which is very different from homosexuality. Because homo-eroticism is saying that you can have characters that actually desire each other without necessarily wanting to have a relationship through the sex act. The play is about characters who desperately want to be able to speak more intimately about themselves, whoever that self might be.

TS: I want to ask you about the race factor. The play is set in 1965, which is just the beginning of the Civil Rights movement. Obviously people’s understanding of African- American people was different then than it is today. I’m very curious about this concept of the two different black men in this play. I spoke with Ato, who plays Carlyle, and he’s convinced that Carlyle and Roger could be brothers who just went down different paths -- that they just have different moral codes, if you will. Do you see that as a possibility?

BV: Does he imply brothers like actual brothers? Coming from the same family?

TS: No, no, but he said that there are a number of documented cases of two brothers having the same parents, the same background and going in two directions.

BV: I think again Rabe is deliberately putting in this household, four men who are all diverse from one another but who also intersect with one another. Roger says, “I’m going out with Carlyle. He’s got wheels. We can go out tonight and drink beer, go to a brothel and it reminds me of home.” That’s very real but that doesn’t mean they necessarily embrace the same moral code or respect the same politics. Rabe has deliberately put race and sexuality together as two of the most volatile issues that confronted the United States in the mid 1970’s and bringing it forth to say how do men deal with it? Because, quite often, they are among the topics that we don’t deal with very dynamically.

TS: It’s also fascinating that in 2008 we have our first African-American president and yet a few states in this last election banned gay marriage. So it’s fascinating to see where we’ve come in the 30-some years that this play

was first presented. It's the audience's turn to ask questions. Gail will come to you with the microphone, so if you have a specific question about the play you saw today, raise your hand.

(SPOILER ALERT: Please note some of the following questions and answers talk about vital plot points)

Q1: I have a question. Are the roles of the two sergeants necessary? There isn't a lot to say about them. Are they atmosphere?

TS: What do you think the purpose of the sergeants is in terms of the dramaturgy, Bob?

BV: I think it would have been an extremely different play without them. I think the generational difference is hugely important. Rabe makes the reference that they have seen three wars; WWII, the Korean War and now the Vietnam War. You have this play which takes place in a barracks, which is homelike, and one of the soldiers has killed one of the parental figures, Rooney, who is one of the father figures. He's been killed by this "other," a black man, so there's a racial thing as well. That's when we begin to see the characters bond and not be individuals. At the very end of the play, we hear Cokes tell a story...and the amazing thing is the story telling that these guys share with each other in the dark; it's like sharing stories at bedtime. It allows them to be children again. And for Cokes to say in his monologue, which is the coda of the play, "I would have done it differently" is powerful. He knows he's facing his own mortality. For him to sit there and know that he's now dying and to think about the act that he did is commanding. And it's preceded by him making the comment that the last thing Richie should worry about is being queer. That's not important, he says. He tells the younger soldiers he deliberately killed someone while he was screaming for his life. And that's the violence that this institution of the Army has brought him to. That story Cokes tells becomes very childlike. By the end it really becomes gibberish. It can't really be identified as Korean. It's kind of gibberish toward the end. It is an explosion of truthfulness at the end and he's ready to start over.

TS: I'd like to build on that. Watching the play I thought: "Who the hell is in charge here? Who's watching out for these kids?" And when the two sergeants come out drunk and these are the two role models, I thought: "No wonder everything is screwed up. There's nobody in charge here. Why isn't somebody dealing with Carlyle?" It sort of allows us to believe that this could go on in what's supposed to be a regimented place, a place that's highly organized. There's no one in charge. There are no adults in charge. Would you agree with that, Bob?

BV: I would say that on this particular day no one is in charge. That's what makes this particular day the one that Rabe choose to write about. He must have asked himself what makes this day different than any other day. And it's that on this particular day the parents are not home. No one's looking after the kids and the kids are having a free for all. It reminds me of *Home Alone*. I think they were just left to their own devices. And we have this young 18, 19 year old boy from Wisconsin saying, "Wait a minute, this is my house. I'm white, I'm straight and this isn't the way it's supposed to be." And the other voice in the room, the guy next to him, Roger, says, "Turn your back," implying

that Billy is not the dominant voice in this room, he's just one of the group and nothing in this group, in this house, says that his voice should be the one most adhered to.

Q2: Do you see similarities in the sergeants and Captain Queeg in the *Caine Mutiny Court-Martial*?

BV: There is a reoccurring image at times in US drama in which the officers in the military are not shown in the most favorable way. I do think there could be connections to that, yeah.

TS: Also, this was first produced two or three years after the war was technically over, so Rabe could be commenting on how the war was lost or how people's psyches were damaged. Rabe was in Vietnam from '65 to '67. He did not see combat, which is fascinating, because none of the plays that make up the Vietnam trilogy deal with combat. It's the aftermath or before. You see basic training in *Pavlo Hummel*, you have *Sticks and Bones*, where the vet comes back blind to a very bizarre household, a riff on "Ozzie and Harriet," and then you have this play which is the most realistic of the three. This play deals with what goes on before you ship out. I think this is a Virginia barracks...

BV: It is. And let me say one more thing. This is the particular day that the sergeants choose, irresponsibly, to party. They've been apart from each other. It doesn't justify that they are behaving the way they are; but when they come in the room initially it's a very party atmosphere. They haven't seen each other in a long time and they are telling stories. I'd like to temper my earlier remark and say I think that their trajectory is an unfavorable dramatization of the military in terms of higher ranking positions. In this play, I think it's very important to see the relationship between these two guys and their moment of bonding.

Q3: The sergeants seem to portray what happens when men are in this environment for a long period of time. I was wondering why the privates are so uncomfortable in that environment with the sergeants especially since they are seeking that relationship with each other.

TS: You mean every time the sergeants are in their company they seem to be repulsed by them?

Q3: Yes, they also seem to be seeking that brotherhood out but every time they see that brotherhood being carried out they don't want that. They don't want to be a part of that.

TS: So are we dealing with the generational gap here or are we dealing with the fact that they are sensible enough to know that they don't want to become like this? What would you say, Bob?

BV: I think this is once again like mom and dad. These are two dads who are up there, and who wants to watch their parents party? I think that with that kind of thing, there's a potential judgment. They don't have the power over the sergeants because of the

hierarchy, so there is a tolerance that they have to deal with. But I think that they want to bond in a different way than what they see between the older soldiers. What they see is that you have to go to war to bond and none of these guys really want to go to war.

Q4: Frankly, I saw the two sergeants as authority figures who were drunk and out of control themselves. And if I were one of those soldiers I would be cautious and afraid because they were authority figures and they were not in control of themselves. I think Rabe wrote a very strange play, frankly. I really don't think in an army situation a homosexual soldier would necessarily behave in such a way to cause that much of a problem and I don't think Carlyle would have been in the army at all.

TS: You have to understand that this is during the draft and if Richie chose not to divulge that he's a homosexual, he's going to be accepted. "Don't ask, don't tell" didn't start until Clinton. You have to keep in mind that during the draft they were taking everybody, everybody. People tried to get out by saying they were homosexual. But I hear what you are saying. You didn't suspend disbelief to buy that this homosexual character would act the way he did nor did you believe that Carlyle would be in the army. I'm saying to you that from my point of view, I could very well understand why these two are in the army.

Q5: I was wondering why the choice of this play at this time? Because I find that the men I know these days are much more articulate about their feelings. They aren't just ready to be violent because they're in touch with those things and so I was wondering why?

TS: That's a good question and I think that I can answer that since I work here at the Roundabout. I know that the play has not had a major New York revival since 1976, which is always part of the equation as far as what plays are chosen to be seen by our audience. So if there is a substantial amount of time, fifteen years or more, usually a play is ripe for revival. I think the play also allows a modern audience to touch on how we have evolved as a culture. How do we look at homosexuality now? How do we look at race now? How do we look at people being in the army facing a war? I think that there are opportunities for us to make comparisons between then and now. And I also believe Rabe is a playwright who hasn't been getting a lot of attention lately; in fact, he's given up the theatre. He stopped writing for the theatre around 2003 because a play he wrote based on a Chekhov story couldn't find a home in New York. Rabe is writing prose now. He's writing novels now. He just had a novel published. I also think Todd Haines, our artistic director, is always looking at what the audience can take away from the play. It's almost like audiences have an easier time sometimes understanding contemporary events if they see them through the prism of history. So what is this play telling us about our own time?

Q5: Yes, but I focused, I guess on the men issues because I found that the racial issue is so dated.

TS: I find it funny that you think the racial issue is dated. Why do you say that?

Q5: I think there's still racism but I think that the fact that we've been able to elect a black president says something about America's acceptance of people. And I think the ideas that the playwright presents are so removed from anything I tend to find now. I also think the things he talks about in terms of homosexuality are also very dated. I just didn't like the way they were handled in this play. And my immediate reaction after the play was to turn to the man sitting next to me and ask "Is this how guys relate?" Because I couldn't relate to how these relationships were taking place onstage and that's why I liked your comment so much about the men being away from women. Because I do think that does have some relevance but not quite the same relevance today as it did in '76. I remember when *Streamers* first came out; it was a very controversial play at the time. And it was really very awakening and I can imagine that at that time it was really very relevant.

TS: Do we have a couple more questions?

Q6: I feel that this play is very relevant and I think it's timeless as well. The heart of this play is about differences and what are the consequences when you are forced to bridge those differences. The legacy of this is that we must resolve these differences. You can be infected with a sense of fear. And when your fear is heightened it can lead to violence. And I think this play shows the senselessness of violence whether it's committed as domestic murder in what the soldiers think of as their home or abroad. I think to me one of the saving graces of this play is the end which shows you the price each of the soldiers has paid. What Cokes shows at the end was that there may finally be some respect. And I think in a sense that's what we all hope for. Respect. The fact that Cokes shows he can change is a very powerful point.

TS: Thank you. I think there's a question down here, Gail.

Q7: I'm asking if it was intentional to have parallel violences, the violence of going to war and the violence of the people who are not yet in the war? Do you think that was intentional?

TS: This juxtaposition he mentions, Bob, what do you make of it?

BV: The whole world of the play is peppered with the sense that they are going to Vietnam and the differences between them and the Vietnamese. And then to realize that they haven't even begun to know how to relate to each other as Americans. And each confrontation acknowledges that violence is part of the dynamic. So absolutely, it's the parallel universes.

TS: It's also ironic that the violence that they are anticipating intuitively in Vietnam, happens here in the barracks.

Q8: I was shocked by how the playwright moves us from death to comedy, how Cokes comes in and changes the subject.

TS: It's funny that you should pull this out, because in all the material that we both read on this play, one critic, who was nameless, called David Rabe the "Neil Simon of death and destruction." But what do you think he's trying to do there, Bob? This young person felt that the final monologue, or coda as you refer to it, was strange.

BV: I can appreciate your response to it. As I said, this is the first time I've seen a production of this. I've waited a long time. In terms of reading the text and script of this many times and teaching and writing about the play, I have found the experience to be quite powerful. I'm still kind of digesting my reaction to watching it in performance. Cokes has no idea of what just took place when he walks in to speak his monologue, which is the coda. He's looking for his best friend. He knows he's dying, and he's lonesome and he's found a moment of peacefulness that happens to be there when he begins.

TS: Can we talk about the definition of the word coda for a moment? Because I've always understood the word coda, in musical terms, to be when you take the world of the play and extend the message beyond the immediate community. Would you use it in that way here?

BV: One thing I'd like to point out is that Cokes is being absolutely specific about himself at the end. It happens while he's drunk and it's something he just wants to get off his chest because he is feeling tremendous guilt about throwing the grenade into the spider hole. That has become an almost obsessive moment in his personal history and he realizes that he would not have done that had he been aware of his own mortality at the time.

Q9: As I was watching this play so many thoughts were going through my mind and there were so many comments I wanted to make. I think of Carlyle as an amalgam of what resonated in the 70's.

TS: Why don't you tell us what that is from your point of view?

Q9: My point of view is Carlyle was a person to fear. This is the symbol of explicit violence, a symbol that can explode without any hesitation. And I thought Rabe incorporated that into Carlyle. And the other thing I was thinking of was the prejudices against different races that we had in the 70's and it seems it is an entirely different vibe from what we are living now. I think the path from the 70's to now shows what we've learned, what history has taught us. Hopefully, we will continue down the path.

BV: I'd like to acknowledge what you said about who Carlyle is. For some of the characters onstage Carlyle might be someone to fear. Roger doesn't fear him. In terms of the possibility of meeting one another on a sexual level, Richie doesn't fear him. So I find it interesting what Rabe is doing. Who the "we" is becomes kind of deconstructed and becomes kind of diverse and sub-par. It leads to Billy, a straight male, saying this is "our home too." Who to be afraid of is dispersed across everybody in the room. Everybody to some extent fears his other. I think it's masterful what Rabe has done, the multiplicity of these individuals taking very different positions from each other and

putting it in one room. And to think that this was produced in 1976. Still today it's rare that a play will show a diverse group of men interacting to a controversial issue onstage.

TS: It's very interesting to hear people speak about their reactions this play. Every point of view is valid, that's what art does; it forces a subjective response. It's what makes plays like this valuable. Stella Adler once said that unless a play forces people to discuss its meaning it has no value as a play. So this is why I think this play has value because it forces people to discuss it's meaning and what side am I on and what do I understand. I think that there is value in the play no matter whether you think we've grown past it or not. But I have to tell you that since and during the election, the virulent racism on the Internet in response to this black president is frightening to me. Whether these are children or pranksters or the equivalent of cyber vandals, I don't know; but what they're saying about this man is terrible. I believe racism will be with us for a long time as will homophobia.

We have to wrap it up, but I would like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Bob Vorlicky for joining us today. Our next lecture will be December 6th for *Pal Joey*.