

# UPSTAGE

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# ***Interview with the Director: Scott Ellis***

“This group is a family; as distorted as it is, it is still a family. They’ve created a family.”

**Scott, why did you want to direct “Streamers?”**

One of the reasons is that I’ve known David Rabe for a long time. I directed a play of his entitled “The Dog Problem” and I’m just a fan of his work. I think he’s a great writer. I love his language; I love what he writes about. I also wanted to do a play that had not been done in many, many years. I thought it was time to see this play again.

**“Streamers” takes place in an army barracks. Have you ever been in the armed forces?**

No, no. Never, never. As far as my experience with the army-- zero. But I did do a lot of research on Vietnam. I talked to a lot of people and watched documentaries. I do, however, have experience with what the show deals with in terms of sexuality, racism, fear.

**Where were you when the Vietnam War was happening? Were you in school?**

Well, basically, considering the play happens in ‘65, I was seven. I graduated in ‘75. So I was young and didn’t really know what was going on. I became much more aware of Vietnam after I graduated.

**Do you believe the idea of the characters going to Vietnam circa 1965 is crucial to the workings of the play?**

David and I are looking at it as a period piece right now. We’re very clear it’s 1965 and if one wants to look for the universal theme of war in the play, they will certainly find it. But there are some things that are different and some things are the same. Being part of the military is very different now and yet it’s not. You still have to be careful. You can’t be out and gay in the military; that hasn’t changed. Racism is certainly a lot less in the military now than it was in 1965.

**What is the play about from your point of view?**

The play is about a lot of things. What do you do when you are surrounded by people who you are going off to war with and where there is a sense of fear? How do you

deal with the individuals you are with? How do you deal with the fear that is part of that world? How do you survive in this situation? Anyone can relate to this. Grabbing onto anything to survive, this group of soldiers reaches out; they grab, they try to survive, mentally. You don’t turn around in the army and go, “You know what, I’m leaving now.” You are forced to deal with different circumstances, different people, different lifestyles, pressured instances when you are locked in a world with certain individuals. You have no choice to leave. You have to stay and deal with it.

**Can you tell us a bit about the type of actors you were looking for, for this piece? It’s not easy to cast is it?**

No, it’s not easy. I mean, you always, no matter what play you are doing, try to get great actors. The cast of “Streamers” is made up of younger actors; they haven’t done a lot yet, so you’re taking a little bit more of a chance because you don’t really know their work that well. But they’re a great group of actors. It was also about trying to find a group of people you feel will be able to work well together in a rehearsal room, work as a team. This group is a family; as distorted as it is, it is still a family. They’ve created a family.

**Can you talk about how this differs from other pieces you’ve done? What’s fascinating to me is that you’ve done *1776*, *Twelve Angry Men*, and now *Streamers* which are all male casts.**

It’s just a very different way of working. Even though “Streamers” deals with sexuality in a very major way, when you take the female sex out of the room everything adjusts in a different way. I like it. I think the men get to bond in a really great way. And I don’t think they get that opportunity all the time. When you put guys together there’s a bonding that happens, at least that’s what I understand.

**Having done the play in Boston and now doing it here in New York, are there changes that you’re making?**

Yes, we are doing some changes, tweaks. It’s great to have a little more time to take a look at it. And most of it is because we now are able to delve into it in a much deeper way. We’re not concerned about that overall question of “What am I doing here?” We’ve figured that out; so now we have permission to let that go and just to get deeper into it.

**You have the same design team from Huntington?**

Yes, absolutely. Everyone's the same. We did a reading at the Roundabout for the subscribers, and my hope was to take it out of town, try it and bring it back into New York; which is what happened.

**Do you find the space is right for the play?**

I think the space is a really good space even though it has some challenges. I actually think for this particular play it will be very good. Boston was a much bigger space and I'm looking forward to doing it in a more intimate space. It's going to have a very different feel than it did in Boston. I'm looking forward to that.



**And who are you working with on the fights? Is Rick Sordelet staging those?**

Yeah, Rick Sordelet, yes.

**He's the best isn't he?**

Yeah, he's great and even the fights are going to be a little different in New York. We're going to make some

adjustments. We're looking at everything. It's really great to have a base and go back and explore things.

**Who is doing the music for you?**

John Gromada.

**When you talked about music with him, did you ask him for music that underscored the emotion or...?**

There's no underscoring. He wrote some stuff, he's found some stuff and now we've gone back and gotten a little bit more period music. It is really fun.

**In terms of other designers, are the set or the costumes changing from Boston?**

The set is changing. We're pulling it in a little bit and we're putting a ceiling on it. There was no ceiling on it in Boston. There we chose to open it up a little bit. It was a larger space, but now it's a smaller space so we're trying to pull it all in.

**What advice do you give to young people who say to you that they want to do what you're doing?**

As a director?

Yes.

I always feel like the best thing you can do is get training. Also, if you're interested in it, go find directors and observe and assist; that is always a good way seeing if this is something you want to do. I think learning in stages is a good way. I started as an actor. That helped me a great deal for working with other actors. You don't have to go to school for directing. I wanted to be an actor but ended up directing. But for any young directors out there, if you are interested, start reading plays, do anything you can to start directing plays; any place. School, wherever. Start getting that experience.

**Scott, is there anything about your process that I didn't ask you that you wish I had?**

One thing that was really helpful for us, which we got through the Blanche and Irving Laurie Foundation, a big supporter of the Roundabout, was extra money to have a week of rehearsal just sitting doing table work. We had a solid week before we went to Boston, just being around a table which was invaluable to us. We had to understand so much about the army and Vietnam. We had people come in to show us how soldiers stood and saluted and how to make a bed and what would be in their lockers; you know, all of that detail work that is important.

**That sounds exciting. It sounds like a real luxury.**

We were lucky to get it. It's not something you always get, but for this play it was really, really important because it is a period piece.

**Normally, how many days of table work would you do if you hadn't gotten that grant?**

We would have – maybe in this situation, two, three, at the most. But we had a solid week of table work.

**Thanks, Scott, this is some great information.**

My pleasure.



# ***Vietnam: An Era Of Controversy***

## **Vietnam and the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel**

In 1954, Vietnam was a nation plagued by a history of struggle with colonialism and civil war. As the French abandoned their attempts at colonization, a temporary partition of North and South Vietnam was drawn at the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. Soon after the split a communist party, led by Ho Chi Minh, took control of North Vietnam. The Republic of Vietnam was formed in the South, but lacked strong leadership. As a result, remaining communists in the south commenced guerrilla warfare against the Republic of Vietnam.

## **U.S. Involvement**

The United States became involved with Vietnam in response to its containment policies and the Cold War. Although President Truman had initiated U.S. support in Vietnam, it was the Kennedy Administration that redefined U.S. policy in support of South Vietnam. As the war in Vietnam forged ahead with no end in sight, American support began to waver. The extent of U.S. commitment to South Vietnam was becoming too large a burden and put a significant drain on military and economical resources. Towards the end of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Congress overrode President Nixon's veto of a new law. In 1973 Congress passed the War Powers Act. This law required the President to notify Congress if possible before sending U.S. forces into an area where hostilities might take place. Also, once forces were engaged, they could stay no more than sixty days unless Congress granted specific authority to extend their presence. It was too late for this law to affect actions in Vietnam, but it would prove to make an impact on U.S. military actions in the future.

## **Meanwhile in the U.S.**

The year 1964 marked the point of no return for the U.S. in Vietnam. President Johnson had just won the election, and the anti-war movement was beginning to surface. By 1968 the anti-war movement was gaining momentum on college and university campuses across the nation

In the early sixties, the Civil Rights Movement was losing momentum due to the growing attention given to affairs in Vietnam. Both supporters of the Civil Rights Movement and those joining the anti-war movement wanted to see an end to the war in Vietnam. Their efforts could have made a very strong impact, but they disagreed on the reasoning behind removing the U.S. from efforts in Vietnam.

Another movement gaining popularity during the sixties was for the advancement of Women's Rights. Women not only demanded equal rights, but also equal opportunities. Women's Rights supporters also protested the practice of referring to women as the "weak" sex and men as the "strong" sex, which implies male superiority. In the midst of the Women's Rights Movement the Gay Liberation Movement emerged during the later summer of 1969. Many of the same ideals and demands of this liberation movement were shared with those of the Women's Rights Movement.

## **The Draft and Changing Military Policy**

"Have you ever had or have you now...homosexual tendencies?" was the question posed to every American male reporting to his local draft board for pre-induction screening during Vietnam. Although President Truman had ended racial segregation and discrimination of the armed forces in 1947, military policy was another realm in which homosexuals faced discrimination and constant ridicule. During the 1950's, homosexuals were dismissed from government jobs as well as the military because they were seen as a security risk and were suspected as agents of communism. This type of dismissal was called "dishonorable discharge." A dishonorable discharge meant that a soldier was fired without notice and would receive no benefits. This also meant that the soldier would have a very hard time finding another job. Those dismissed with a dishonorable discharge were banned from obtaining any civil service jobs or other jobs requiring a security clearance

## **Looking Back on a Controversial Era**

Today Vietnam is known as a war that nobody won and a war that was never officially declared. As a result, Vietnam is still seen as a controversial time period in American History. In 1982, a memorial in Washington DC was dedicated to the American men who were killed or declared "missing in action." A total of 58,000 names appear on this memorial.

# ***Interview with the Actor: Ato Essandoh***



**You've done the in-house readings of *Streamers* and the stage production that happened at the Huntington Theatre in Boston as well, right?**

Yes, absolutely.

**So to a certain degree are you recreating your performance.**

There's a bit of me recreating what I did in Boston and what I did at the readings. David Rabe, the author, is here with us now, so he's giving insight. It's a very deep play. You can come at it from a lot of different angles. There's a level of being familiar with what's going on that allows me to find other ways to tell the story that Carlyle is telling.

**What is your process in creating the part of Carlyle? Did you do research?**

Yes, I did research about 1965 and Vietnam and the kind of guy I thought Carlyle was in my initial assumptions. With this particular play, the language is very muscular so it's pretty much all on the page. There is a lot you can get just by reading the play. The lines inform you, not just what the words are, but the way the words are arranged on the page.

**Has Rabe answered certain questions for you? Are you comfortable with sharing that with us?**

Yeah, Rabe has talked about how Carlyle is confused. He just wants to know what's going on. He wants to know what the situation is at all times and he's easily thrown off the track. The other thing is that he wants to be part of something. Scott Ellis, the director, was very interested in exploring Carlyle's profound sense of loneliness. He really desperately wants to have friends. He wants to have a place to call home, people he can trust, people he can talk to. He just has a, dare I say, manic way of doing it, which is kind of an understatement if you know the play. There's this desperation to belong some place and the way the play is set up he definitely doesn't belong anywhere. He just drifts in, looking for a home; he's like a stray. The role of Carlyle is a trap in a way. Acting wise you can play him completely crazy and out of his mind without a method to his madness.

**He really doesn't want to go to Vietnam, am I correct?**

I think he's the one who has, ironically, the most realistic view and visceral view of what will happen if he gets sent to Vietnam. The other three guys have perhaps a theoretical notion of "We will be fighting, we might get killed, but we're doing something for our country". Roger talks about his patriotism as does Billy to a certain extent. They think there is a glorious thing happening here. Carlyle has a deep practicality. He thinks: "No, this is crazy, it's not my war, I don't know why I'm being sent there. It's not fair and I don't want to die".

**So is the challenge of this role not to play him too crazy or too manic?**

I think the challenge is that the muscularity of the words automatically force you in a certain direction. Your job is to insure that Carlyle is trying to communicate something. The words that David Rabe has supplied are not conversational words that you and I are used to. But that is the way Carlyle communicates. His communication comes out in strange bursts of text. His emotionality can't be controlled. He rarely says one or two things. He always has lists of things that he says. Think of someone with Tourette's Syndrome or with some sort of manic depression. He gets confused about something and then completely loses his mind about it.

**Does this role have any personal relevance for you?**

I think I get Carlyle's need to understand what is happening. His words just seemed to come out of my mouth easily as opposed to other plays, productions, or movies that I've done where I've had to sort of figure it out. The first thing that lets me know that I'm on the

right track is if the language comes out of my mouth easily. If I'm not searching for lines, I know I'm on some sort of track.

**The play takes place in 1965, which coincides with the civil rights movement and is twenty years after WWII, when blacks in the army were segregated. Is that a part of your understanding of the world Carlyle is in?**

It's a big part. I'm still exploring the racial politics that were happening at that time. I've talked to David Rabe about what the relationship between blacks and whites was in the army at that time. I just can't imagine a black guy talking to a white guy the way Carlyle seems to be able to in that time period. So that's one of the challenges. There is definitely something in Carlyle's psyche that, while he's aware of the racial politics, he really pushes against that. He interacts with the white people in the play in ways that didn't, at first, seem realistic to me. But I've been told it's absolutely the case because the army is separate entity from society.

**And what about the dynamic between him and Roger? Roger is of a different class than Carlyle. Or don't you see that way?**

I don't necessarily see it that way. I could see Roger and Carlyle coming from the same neighborhood -- just that Roger went one way and Carlyle went one way. I seem to remember watching something on CNN about Arkansas where they were trying to integrate the schools.

**You mean Little Rock?**

Yeah, Little Rock. I saw a special and there were two brothers that were part of that group of kids that had to attend school under the protection of the National Guard. One of the brothers became a huge success after he graduated from Little Rock and the other brother just went south, selling drugs, going to jail, and I think he also became a crack head. And so they came back to interview both of them. It was striking that both of them had the same experience growing up as brothers but their paths veered in completely different directions. That's how I see Roger and Carlyle. They could even be brothers, they could even be twins, but the environment worked differently with both of them. Roger is much more upstanding, "I'm doing this for a reason." Carlyle has just been scooped up by the big machine and doesn't know what's going on. I think it's a very striking difference between the two which is also an interesting aspect of the play.

**Carlyle is pretty much the catalyst for why things change in the play. Is that something you're aware of as an actor or does that get in your way?**

I'm aware of it when I'm reading the piece from a dramaturgical stand point but not when I'm in the play. As an actor, I feel my only responsibility is to synch Carlyle into the story. I have to trust that the text will lead to those moments where Carlyle is the catalyst. Carlyle obviously can't knowingly be the catalyst. He's only aware of his own desperate need to be friends with these people and to have a home; that's what he wants. He says, "I know I want a home. I know what a home is. Why can't I have a home?"

"The first thing that lets me know that I'm on the right track is if the language comes out of my mouth easily. If I'm not searching for lines, I know I'm on some sort of track."

**So basically what happens between him and Billy is an accident?**

I guess in a grotesque way it's an accident. Because again, and this is something that has come out of my research, we all behave based on our life's circumstances and we all have rules we understand. You have a moral compass inside you. Whether you live by it or not is up to you. I think in Carlyle's book the rules are: if you insult me in some way I need to prove to you that you can't do that. In Carlyle's book, you go and cut the guy. Period. You know what I'm saying? And that's his moral compass. That's how he understands how you are supposed to live. It gets out of control because he's not someone in complete control. So when Billy comes to defend himself he thinks, "Oh, I have to stab him because that's how we do it where I'm from."

**And what about the situation with Richie? What is going on there from your point of view?**

I've tried to figure that one out. We talked about that in rehearsal today. Carlyle is acting the way he's acting because that's his understanding of the world. His assumption is that if you have a group of men, whether it's in jail or whether it's in the army, there's always one or two guys who do that for you, especially when you don't have access to women. So if you don't

have a woman – well, there's a guy. And that's the tragic misunderstanding in the whole play. And on top of that they're all 19 or 20 years old. No one has explained to them what's going on about homosexuality or sexuality period, so they're trying to figure it out as young men and that's always disastrous in my book.

**Tell me what it's like to be in a play with no women in it. Is that an unusual circumstance?**

Yeah, it's unusual. It's like walking into a locker room. It's just guys. You don't hear the note of any femaleness around. Our ASM is female and I feel sorry for her because she's the only woman in the whole room. So there's definitely that male energy thing happening

**Testosterone, right?**

Yeah, there is definitely a lot of that.

**Ato, I want to wrap this up by having you talk to our young readers about what it takes to be an actor.**

I guess what has attracted me to this business and particularly acting, is that I love storytelling. There are different types of storytelling. You can be a writer or you can be a musician, a painter or a number of things. All artists are storytellers. The special thing about being an actor is that you are using your body and your voice to tell a specific story and that story happens though your character moment by moment. If that's something that appeals to you then this is definitely a business you should be in. You get to explore how to use the words in the script to convey to an audience what's happening. The glorious thing about theatre is that it's not real; it's absolutely not real.



And yet, with a play that's done very well, people react emotionally because it feels real. There is something about that communication that I love. You can be standing on stage doing something and people are viscerally reacting to what you're doing as if it's real. If something about that lights you up, then you should definitely follow that path. Only you can know that. It's a hard slog. But everything is a hard slog. If you want to be a doctor it's hard, if you want to be a businessman...it doesn't matter. Just follow what your heart tells you and you'll be okay.

# A Look at the Playwright: David Rabe

David Rabe was born in Dubuque, Iowa in 1940. He attended Roman Catholic schools in Dubuque and graduated from Loras College, a small, Catholic liberal-arts college located there. Rabe could have had a career as a college football player, but instead majored in English and got involved in theatre on campus. He helped found a theatre company on campus for which he wrote his first play, *Chameleon*, performed in 1959. Rabe began graduate studies in theatre at Villanova University, but dropped out and was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1965. After his return, he attended Villanova University on a Rockefeller Playwriting Fellowship receiving encouragement from his teachers and fellow students, later becoming an assistant professor there.

By the early 1970's, Rabe had established his reputation as the major playwright of the Vietnam-War era. After serving with the army in Vietnam (1965-1967) he used his experiences and observations to inspire his first two major plays: *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (first produced in 1971 by Joe Papp's New York Shakespeare Festival) and *Sticks and Bones* (1972, Best Play Tony Award). Both depict the brutality of war and its aftermath in dramatic situations, searing characterizations, and explosive dialogue. In his third wartime drama, the prize-winning *Streamers*, race and sex-based violence tears apart a Vietnam-era Southern army camp. Together, these three plays are often referred to as the Vietnam Trilogy.

He recently received the Helen Merrill Award for Distinguished Playwriting. Rabe's screenplays include "I'm Dancing as Fast as I Can," "Streamers," "Casualties of War," "The Firm," "Hurlyburly," and the upcoming "The Untouchables: Capone Rising." Rabe continued to write for the stage until 2003 when he turned exclusively to prose writing the novel Recital of the Dog, as well as a collection of short stories entitled "A Primitive Heart." Rabe's latest novel Dinosaurs on the Roof was recently published by Simon & Schuster in the summer of 2008.



## Resources

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# education

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