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Three Forms of Death in David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Three Forms of Death in David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*

By

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Abstract

In this thesis, I argue there are three main forms of death that progress chronologically in David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*. First, the death of civilian identity as the soldier conforms to the military. Secondly, the soldier's killing—metaphoric or literal—of others, which is part of his attempt to fit with his new military identity. Third, the soldier's sacrificial suicide as his escape from the military identity. In this paper, I provide evidence and close reading to support my argument that the protagonists in both plays, Pavlo and David, encounter, enact, or experience all three forms of death. I believe this tripartite death sequence is a key component to understanding and then producing Rabe's Vietnam plays, as it highlights the idea that death radiates in unexpected directions and feeds into an endless cycle of more death, aligning with David Rabe's personal philosophy.

Key Terms: identity, death, violence, play, Vietnam, military

Dedication

God,
without whom, I would have nothing.

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Miss, I knew I wanted to be a dramaturg, but I lacked the know-how. Dr. Warrick fostered that love of dramaturgy within me and challenged me in so many ways. I was intellectually stimulated in ways I had never been. Dr. Warrick made an immense impact on my educational pursuits, and that cannot go without acknowledgement. I would not be as strong a dramaturg as I am today without his help.

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INTRODUCTION

David Rabe never meant to write the *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Sticks and Bones*, *Streamers*, nor *The Orphan*—the four plays that would come to be known as the Vietnam “quartet” (Rabe, “Afterword” 190). He didn’t pick up a pen to write until six months after his return from active duty in Vietnam. During the war, he could only write the words “artillery rounds” over and over again on a yellow piece of paper, “aware acutely, and in a way that makes writing impossible, of the existence of language as a mere symbol.” He also felt it a lunatic’s task to try to record things as they occurred day-to-day in Vietnam. He lived “in a high, brittle part of [his] mind,” to keep himself from breaking his own mental barrier of facts protecting him. Writing what he experienced in real time might have put further mental strain on a man who was already going through literal war (Rabe, “Introduction” xvi-xvii).

After the six months of literary silence, he intended to write a novel with his thoughts and experiences from Vietnam. Having written plays and novels before, he did not think drama was the vessel for Vietnam’s tragedies: “Theatre seemed lightweight, all fluff and metaphor, spangle, posture, and glitter crammed into a form as rigid as any machine geared to reproduce the shape of itself endlessly.” A machine of illusion wasn’t suitable for the desperation and pain he had seen in Vietnam. He then happened upon a Rockefeller grant for playwriting. Seeing as it would keep him housed, clothed, and fed, he applied thinking he could crank out a few plays before settling down to write the novel. When thinking back upon this decision, Rabe says, “But when I sat down to write, regardless of the form, I found it impossible to avoid the things most crowding my mind and, because these memories and ideas were of such extreme value to me, I could deal

with them with nothing less than my best effort.” Vietnam would not be silenced. Rabe wrote what he knew, what needed to be written. Like all reputable playwrights, he wrote the truth of the world as he had seen it (Rabe, “Introduction” xii-xiii).

David Rabe believes America is shaped by the human hunger for violence in response to the world in which a person lives. Several of his plays, short stories, and books express this notion, but none so clearly as his Vietnam literature, specifically the Vietnam quartet. Even his short stories about Vietnam do not paint the gory picture of humanity highlighted by Vietnam as clearly as the deaths in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Sticks and Bones*, *Streamers*, and *The Orphan* do. In his epilogue to Volume 2 of *The Vietnam Plays*, he writes:

Since the end of the war the level of violence accepted as routine in this society has risen steadily, and there are times when I think that the war was the turning point, the launch pad that fired us into this lethal drift. I see Vietnam less as a cause and more as a symptom of a comprehensive tradition of slaughter that must be understood as a constant in all history, ours included. In this mood Vietnam rises before me as our communal manifestation of an urge toward shadowy savagery innate in all human character but with specifics reflecting the individuality of our society, the true assertion of our deepest, unacknowledged values. (Rabe, “Afterword” 193)

His plays, especially the Vietnam “quartet” are a response to his own time serving in the military in Vietnam and reveal this hunger for violence in a variety of styles.

In this thesis, I argue there are three main forms of death that progress chronologically in David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*. First, the death of civilian identity as the soldier conforms to the military. Secondly, the soldier's killing—metaphoric or literal—of others, which is part of his attempt to fit with his new military identity. Third, the soldier's sacrificial suicide as his escape from the military identity. The protagonists in both plays, Pavlo and David, encounter, enact, or experience all three forms of death. I believe this tripartite death sequence is a key component to understanding and then producing Rabe's Vietnam plays, as it highlights the idea that death radiates in unexpected directions and feeds into an endless cycle of more death, aligning with David Rabe's personal philosophy. David Rabe's plays are not just tragedies about soldiers at war, they are sociological and psychological observations about the state of America and humanity post-Vietnam. The plays are not sad stories, they are mirrors, meant to show people as the savage beings they are. Every playwright is trying to portray the truth of the world as he or she sees it, and Rabe's truth is war is not left in foreign lands—it sticks inside the people who fought.

A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF THE VIETNAM WAR 1887-1975

In this thesis, I will explore death—or rather, the series of deaths—in two of Rabe's Vietnam quartet plays. To contextualize these plays, I first want to give an overview of the Vietnam era and Rabe's work more broadly. The Vietnam War was a complex entanglement that lasted more than twenty years and was never even officially declared by some parties involved. In the following section, I will construct a very brief overview of the contextual background of the Vietnam War, focusing mainly on facts

necessary to understand my argument. Any important moments or facts about the Vietnam War Era left out are not an attempt at erasure made from disrespect and are only removed in the effort to save time and space before I continue to my main argument. There are people who have dedicated their entire lives to studying the strategic, sociological, philosophical, and historical aspects of this war whose books would be much better suited for intensive study of the Vietnam War. Therefore, I will not attempt to undermine their labors by calling the following a comprehensive, authoritative work.

American involvement in the Vietnam War, also known as the Second Indochina War, escalated quickly after 1950. The conflict in Vietnam had its roots in 1887 with French colonialism and the subsequent resentment and uneasiness that exists between colonizers and the colonized. By 1941, amid World War II and Japanese occupation of Vietnam, the Viet Minh had arisen under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, and in 1945, Minh declared Vietnamese independence. Within weeks, a slew of forces including British, Chinese Nationalist, and Indian helped the French reinstate French rule out of fear of Vietnamese independence. An unnamed war between the French and Vietnamese lasted for the next eight years (Taylor iii-ix).

By 1949, America was gearing up to enter the Second Indochina War. It was supposed to be part of the war of containment, the war to further democracy and the American way, the war against Communism. The Red Scare was a country-wide fear of Communism and ran like a plague among the U.S. citizens. Communism ruled China and Russia, two giant warheads that had control of bombs, missiles, and people. Following the Truman Doctrine (named after U.S. President Harry S. Truman), which states that the U.S. would aid any civilization seeking freedom and democracy, America had declared

itself the world's big brother, looking out for any countries it deemed too weak to withstand the forces of Communism. In America's view, Vietnam was about to fall victim to a Communist government as China and the Soviet Union recognized the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Minh's leadership in 1950, so President Truman agreed to provide military assistance to the French fighting to reclaim Vietnam (Taylor ix).

This escalation would continue for years before in 1959, two American military advisors were killed by North Vietnamese forces. America could no longer be minor participants in the war. Their own had been killed. Two years later, in 1961, America's number of soldiers supporting South Vietnam in the war began the climb that would continue until 1969 after the secret bombing of enemy bases in Cambodia, authorized by then President Richard Nixon. Even still, bombings continued from both sides, and a formal cease-fire was not reached until 1973. The American government continued to monetarily support the South Vietnamese and only finally removed all Americans in 1975, hours before Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese. The Vietnam War was the war that would not end, and America felt the drain it placed upon the country's morale and resources. By the end of the war 58,000 names belonged on the future Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Taylor x-xiii).

The Vietnam War was the TV war. It was fought on real ground in Vietnam, but the airwaves carried it across the Pacific Ocean and into the American home front. The news could be shown instead of only heard. Before the television, people would listen to the radio or go to the movies to watch the preview reels to find updates about the wars going on—namely World War II. Vietnam was the first televised war, and while news

travelled faster, it wasn't just good news. Americans could watch their loved ones and strangers die violent deaths in the box in their living rooms. David Rabe has had much to say about how the television warped the perception of the Vietnam experience as a war:

I feel that a lot of what's on TV is a dissolving of the experience. It's just America eating the reality of Vietnam, the real phenomenon, it's being consumed and transformed into something in people's minds, something quite unreal, I think; it has not a lot to do with the reality of it. The end result is that it's increasingly difficult to have any real impact anymore. Everything is just part of the vast entertainment field[...]A kind of sentimental, high-tech sheen has been glossed over it all, not just the war, but everything. (Zinman 69)

Rabe is touching upon modern America's fondness for detachment from reality.

Entertainment has been used as a form of escapism conceivably as long as it has been in existence, but America has a certain affinity for television specifically. The television allows one to be knowledgeable about the world's goings-on but does not involve one in it. Americans could watch the war and yet have nothing to do with it, warping their perception of the massive amounts of death and violence that occurred. It was a seemingly perfect system, the transfer of news through television, until it went terribly wrong.

With the Red Scare at its height and the Truman Doctrine as a guide, support for the Vietnam War was widespread among the mainstream American public. Vietnam seemed to be a lineup for success with the U.S. public behind it, except this transfer of knowledge, especially through the powerful use of images, quickly backfired. America

and South Vietnam started severely losing. People began to wonder what the government was doing, throwing away thousands of lives in a country across the globe. The television became an instigator in the counterculture movements that mirrored public opinions from the late 1960s to the end of the war. Colonel Harry G. Summers, Jr. claims that national will was not mobilized. Public support is essential in strategic planning, and without a formal declaration of war, the country would not get behind prolonged involvement in Vietnam (5, 19, 2).

Vietnam antiwar protests might be some of the most-referenced examples of antiwar protests in world history. Black armbands, marches, immolation, walkouts—Vietnam had it all. The counterculture movements even became so popular that often one may think of the subculture of hippies and beatniks before the mainstream 1960s and '70s American lifestyles. Famous figures like Muhammad Ali took part in the antiwar movement by being conscientious objectors and refusing to enlist after being called up in the draft (Wiest). In protest of the Vietnam War there were letters written, advertisements taken out, petitions, vigils, installations, and lobby. People worked to elect candidates sympathetic to the cause, refused to pay taxes, refused to obey draft orders, deserted the military, participated in nonviolent civil disobedience, strikes, raided draft boards to destroy records. The counterculture movement survived because it spoke on behalf of a very noisy portion of the American public (Zaroulis and Sullivan xi-xiv).

Many soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War came home and were criticized, ostracized, and persecuted. One Vietnam veteran, whose name cannot be mentioned because it was redacted from military paperwork and is classified information, told me he and his fellow soldiers were spat upon and jeered at by people who had stayed at home.

Where World War I and II veterans had been welcomed home with parades and open arms, Vietnam veterans were once again isolated. They had been separated from the ones they loved when they joined the military and had lived through the atrocities of a war they didn't understand. The soldiers expected to be supported and respected when they returned home from war and were given anything but support and respect.

Both main characters from *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones* comment on the futility of the Vietnam War in their own ways, reflecting the American public and soldiers' ideas about the war.

ARDELL. What you think of the war?

PAVLO. It's being fought. (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 8)

Vietnam soldiers often had responses as blank and indecipherable as Pavlo did in *The Basic Training*. David Halberstam spoke of his Vietnam experience with the same mood as Pavlo: "It don't mean nothin'." This phrase was used almost as a mantra by American soldiers who alienated themselves from the acts they performed and witnessed in Vietnam (Taylor 1). Country Joe McDonald and the Fish performed a popular protest song during the height of U.S. involvement also resounding this thought. At Woodstock in 1969 Country Joe sang about Vietnam in his band's big hit, "I Feel Like I'm Fixin' to Die Rag": "[...]What are we fightin' for? / Don't ask me, I don't give a damn." Rabe's refusal to write during his time serving in Vietnam to shield his own mental wellbeing aligns with this chosen ignorance of other soldiers.

David Rabe's writing is tricky to place in a genre. Based on Rabe's philosophical views about the state of the world and the emphasis on language, I believe his work best fits in an existentialist frame with a touch of absurdism. With the general outlook on the

war, it makes sense that Rabe turned to absurdism and existentialism to express the truth of the war. *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones* both exhibit the characteristics of existentialism and absurdism in their cyclical nature, use of absurd language, and characters that may or may not be real. To be clear, Existentialism and Absurdism are major artistic movements predating Rabe's writing with specific characteristics and a canon of their own. Existentialism posits that existence is meaningless, there is nothing beyond the material world, and we give meaning to the world around us. Absurdism theorizes that because the world is absurd in its meaninglessness, the meanings we try to give things are arbitrary. Both rely heavily on the use of language in literature and drama. Rabe does not fall within these official movements, but his work still exhibits these characteristics and therefore deserves these labels. Within this paper, Existentialism and Absurdism (capitalized) refer to the larger art movements, and existentialism and absurdism (uncapitalized) refer to the general genres.

Rabe doesn't seem to label his writing at all, although he fervently denies the label of "antiwar." Rabe asserts that to call his plays "antiwar" is a misnomer because, "[a] play in which a family looks bad is not called an 'antifamily' play." Rabe lists labels that aren't applied to others' work such as "antimarrriage," "antiyouth," and "anticrime." He explains that all of those mentioned are viewed as part of humanity, so when someone writes a play negatively portraying one of those ideas—marriage, family, or crime—no one boxes up their work as people often do Rabe's. Rabe believes war and violence to be an equally important and permanent part of humanity; therefore, he believes one cannot write a play that is inherently against a part of humanity. The plays portray war as a

terrible place where people are isolated and left to fend for themselves, but he does not write his plays against war, specifically. I believe Rabe in that he does not have an agenda in mind when writing his plays. They are meant to show what he believes is a constant of all time. The truth is that war often lends itself to a negative light, and Rabe does not try to rescue it from that light (Rabe, "Introduction" xxiv-xxv).

Secondly, Rabe denies the label of antiwomen. He is sometimes given the label because to some his female characters seem vapid and empty, only a cartoon of a stereotypical feminine woman with almost no independence from her male character counterparts. With scholar Toby Silverman Zinman, who organized and edited *David Rabe: A Casebook*, Rabe completes a lengthy interview, during which Zinman questions him about his lack of favor among feminists. David responds saying he is surprised he has a negative reputation with feminists:

DR. In *Sticks and Bones*, the fact that the girl is killed in the living room of this nice, middle class house has a feminist component to it—what I would take to be one—because what is being killed with her is that intuitive, feeling, resonant part of that house, the vet, all of them, of life itself, or that potential. In order that they can be permanently false.

TZ. It does seem, though, that the embodiment of femaleness in your plays is always fairly stupid or vacant.

DR. It's not as if the plays are full of positive male characters. Why is Pavlo okay and Chrissy [of *In The Boom Boom Room*] isn't? Nor do I really think that Chrissy is stupid or vacant, or Bonnie in *Hurlyburly*.
(Rabe, "Interview" 9-10)

In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*, the women characters all seem rather shallow, but Zinman believes this is part of Rabe's writing in general, not necessarily a fault. She comes to his defense in her article "What's Wrong With This Picture?": "[H]e does not grant full humanity to any of his dramatic creatures, and he writes plays which depend upon their two-dimensionality" (42). The women in Rabe's plays are given no higher or lower place than the male characters, and it is not as if the main characters of his plays are never women. In *The Boom Boom Room* and *Hurlyburly* are both about the world of go-go dancers in the 1970s with female leads. I think Rabe never intends for his women to be flat characters in comparison to their male counterparts. Although given a bad rap with the feminists, Rabe doesn't see his writing as being against anything, much less women.

Scholar Jennifer McMillion writes generally about Rabe's work being built around stereotypes and assumptions about manhood and patriarchy. Although her work is mainly on one of Rabe's other works, *Goose and Tomtom*, she describes the manly men that Rabe often portrays: "[M]en are physically strong and aggressive; that they are powerful and dominant and must sometimes solve problems through the use of force[...]that women are objects to prove or validate manhood" (178). This comes from Rabe's experience in the military, where that is expected of soldiers. Sex is a key aspect to proving manhood, as demonstrated by the memoirs gathered by John A. Wood in his book *Veteran Narratives and the Collective Memory of the Vietnam War*. Both the mainstream and military cultures saw sex as a reward for the soldiers at war (Wood 61). Officers even promoted the utilization of Vietnamese women as prostitutes (Wood 63). The military used women to keep up morale by reaffirming men of their masculinity

through sexual exploits. For example, Yen (pronounced “Ing”) in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* seems to have almost no autonomy, but she instead serves as an image of what American soldiers generally thought of Vietnamese prostitute. Rabe wrote what he saw, not necessarily that in which he believed.

Rabe decidedly does not favor realism and refuses to write it. He notes that he sets some characters in realistic places with periods of familiar actions, but he does not want to write “sane characters.” In Rabe’s plays, something eventually breaks down. In realism, everyone is sane, “no matter how crazy they are” (Rabe, “Interview” 14-15). Characters in the realistic plays of Henrik Ibsen and Clifford Odets have sane people acting in ordinary ways. Their characters make decisions almost anyone can see making. Nora’s decision to leave her family in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is of course shocking, but it is not unjustifiable nor unproportionate. Rabe’s characters do not respond in similarly logical ways.

Language is the driving force in Rabe’s work. Rabe is adamant about the particular use of language in his work: “Language is where it starts...To be truly theatrical some kind of heightened language is needed (Rabe, “Interview” 12). He is ever-meticulous in his word choice, stating the word choice defines the nature of the world in which a character believes he or she is living. Perhaps this aspect of his writing draws on his influences from Eugène Ionesco and Arthur Miller, whose characters also speak with heightened language (Rabe, “Interview” 13-15). David and Pavlo Hummel live in worlds of poetry. Ozzie rebukes the nature of David’s poetic world when David speaks of making love to Zung, “a girl to weigh no more than dust.” In the nature of Ozzie’s world, David “pronged a yellow fucking whore” (Rabe, “Introduction” xx).

Pavlo and Kress misunderstand each other because Pavlo lives in the poetic—one where truth can bend and stretch and even be totally fabricated. Kress lives in the stereotypical world of the U.S. Army. There are facts that are solidified, so he cannot reconcile Pavlo's words with his own world. In response, Pavlo is labeled “weird” (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 17).

Although Rabe didn't want to use drama to capture the truth he discovered in Vietnam, Mark Taylor raises questions about the usefulness of literature in presenting a truth truer than history. Vietnam has been termed the “postmodern” war because of the unpredictability of scale and violence. The Vietnam War seemingly required alternative forms of representation, so Rabe's novel was perhaps always doomed to nonexistence. Rabe is intensely keyed into the unpredictability of violence, so his combination of existentialism, absurdism, and surrealism give a postmodern effect onstage. Without the visual representations of the war and its workings onstage, the war might have lost something that the television gave it. The flash and allure of theatre distracts from and yet amplifies the tragedy of the war—just like the television did. Theatre is a larger-than-life representation of a war that consumed the lives of soldiers not once, but thrice (Taylor 2).

It must be noted that neither *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* nor *Sticks and Bones* have clear scene divisions. This is part of absurdist and existentialist structure: Time can be fluent and warped. They are both divided into two acts, but the act divisions in the two plays serve different purposes. The division in *The Basic Training of a Pavlo Hummel* divides time and general style, with the second act being “fragmentary and impressionistic” according to Rabe (“Introduction” xiii). *Sticks and Bones*'s act division also functions as a division of time but more importantly as an escalation in stakes. In

Basic Training, the tragic trajectory of the narrative continues at a similar pace to that of the previous act, but in *Sticks and Bones*, Act II takes a sharp turn for the worst. In writing about these plays, they present their own problems in referencing and citation. Page numbers and specific information about the loosely termed “scenes” will be provided often in an attempt to alleviate this problem at least somewhat.

THE BASIC TRAINING OF PAVLO HUMMEL

The first play in David Rabe's Vietnam quartet, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, was written during 1968 and first performed in 1971—right in the middle of some of the most turbulent times concerning the antiwar protests. It centers around a Vietnam U.S. Army recruit as he works through bootcamp and then the war itself, where he eventually dies. *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* is a cyclical play, like many existentialist dramas. The first and last scene have only slight variations to keep a character's anonymity but depict the same scene. Because the play begins and ends the same way, with Pavlo's death, the middle actions can be thought of as a purgatory in which Pavlo is doomed to repeat the events that lead to his death for eternity. Rabe's first work of the Vietnam quartet begins and ends with death.

Pavlo Hummel is an average U.S. Army recruit in boot during the Vietnam War. Rabe describes him as hopelessly lost in a note at the end of the play, stating it is crucial that Pavlo never realizes how lost he is or how the world works for the entire play. Pavlo does not realize why his actions cause what they do (Rabe, "Afterword" 197). To help with that lostness, Ardell—an omnipresent, omniscient figure—communicates with Pavlo intermittently throughout the play. Pavlo spends the entire first act of the play learning the ways of the U.S. Army under Sergeant Tower and alongside Kress and other recruits, but he unfortunately never learns the skills to keep himself alive. Pavlo attempts to kill himself for the first time while at boot camp by ingesting an entire bottle of pills. In Act Two, Pavlo visits his family at home before heading off to Vietnam to work in an infirmary, tending to Sergeant Brisbey—a man with no legs, one arm, and a sickening sense of humor—and meeting Sergeant Wall. Pavlo asks the Corporal to be sent to

combat, and his request is granted. On the battlefield, though, Pavlo begins to fall apart again. Ardell is looking out for him without getting directly involved, but Pavlo shoots himself in the head. Finally, Pavlo is back in the first scene, but this time all the pieces come together. He jumps on top of a grenade thrown by Sergeant Wall to save his lover, the prostitute Yen. The military kills his identity, he kills others, and he attempts to kill himself twice and succeeds a third time. Pavlo Hummel cannot escape death and by the end of it all, does not seem to want to.

In *The Basic Training*, Pavlo experiences the first death—the death of his civilian identity—when he joins the army. However, Pavlo does not experience his first death in the play’s opening scene because the scene is a flashback to the past but a foretelling of the end of the play. His identity death begins in the second scene, when he first encounters other trainees in fatigues. As is custom in the U.S. Army, all fatigues have the same general form and colors, but different patches delineate different accomplishments or placements within the military. The trainees Pavlo first encounters are dressed in fatigues but have no markings “other than their name tags and U.S. Army.” Already, trainees have no defining marks, but are instead viewed as a mass of men. While Pavlo is watching all this, he removes his identifying patches he has garnered throughout his time in the army, the signifiers of his military identity, which he has at the end of the play and therefore also the beginning of the play. He strips his earned identity to begin the story chronologically, in which he loses his civilian identity first (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 9). Remnants of the first death are still present in the first scene, even though it is a flashback. Pavlo is remembering his civilian identity “13 months a [his] life ago” with a girlfriend, a mother, a cat, but Pavlo does not seem interested in recovering

the civilian identity because his learned identity does not permit fondness of a civilian identity (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 6). It was very clearly explained to him in basic training that civilians are the lowest of the low, so he regards this past with disdain (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 11).

Pavlo's identity death and the birth of his military identity emerge in the second scene, the first scene chronologically. He is put into basic training for the U.S. Army, where his civilian identity is supposed to be killed off. The military must break down the trainees from what they were and shape them into soldiers, willing to kill and die on command. Sergeant Tower iterates this point clearly for Pavlo when Pavlo does not show up for drill, and Sergeant Tower tells him he imagines Pavlo might do the same disobey orders as well when in Vietnam on the battlefield (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 22-23). Corporal tells Pavlo about his father's last advice, and he says there are other people out there like his father: "Don't you ever run on nobody, Boy, or if you do, I hope there's somebody there got sense enough to shoot you down. Or if I hear you got away, I'll kill you myself" (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 34). The hyper-masculine ideal of an American soldier does not leave room for runners. Running would mean fear, and the generation of soldiers prior to Pavlo fought in Korea and World War II. This masculine ideal has been passed down to them, and although Vietnam is a very different war, in the soldiers' fathers' and grandfathers' eyes, it must be fought the same.

To accomplish this civilian identity death, first the recruits are alienated from the world they know, so that the former identity does not have its proper setting and is therefore unstable. David Rabe specified that the setting of *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* is "stark" (5). It is rattling and disorienting. Sergeant Tower teaches the trainees

that they no longer live in the United States, but in the U.S. Army (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 11). When the first identity does not have its proper setting, it must adapt to fit the environment in which it now finds itself. This adaptation forms the learned military identity. The death of Pavlo's civilian identity is fostered by his alienation from his and his separation from his family and his old life. The soldier is given a new family and a new enemy and placed into the unfamiliar world of the military. This isolation of soldiers had a profound effect on the playwright. In an interview with Toby Zinman, Rabe says, "Each guy who went to Vietnam seemed to come back from their own particular Vietnam. It was a divisive, isolating experience and I guess it continues to be one" (69). The isolating nature of the Vietnam experience appears first in boot camp. Sergeant Tower tells the men they will think he's their family: "You gonna see so much a me, let me tell you, you gonna think I you mother, father, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and children—if-you-got-'em—all rolled into one big black man" (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 10). Whatever family soldiers had as civilians no longer exist except within the figurehead of the military for the recruits. The only thing the soldiers will know is the U.S. Army and its endeavors. The common term brothers-in-arms is about this idea. Soldiers become so closely bonded through experiences that their fellow soldiers become like brothers, substituting their biological families while at war. Even in the first scene, when Ardell drills and questions him, Pavlo first answers that he has no family. Pavlo has purposefully cast off his blood relatives in exchange for his peers. The other members of the military become the soldier's new family.

Pavlo shows the death of his civilian identity by accepting the new family forced on him. Pavlo rattles off all the information about his squad and platoon without flaw or hesitation, even with pride. He lies only twice, both times about something that might make him weaker, the first time about his family:

ARDELL. You got family?

PAVLO. No.

ARDELL. You lyin', Boy.

PAVLO. One mother; one half-brother.

ARDELL. All right. (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 8)

Pavlo does in fact have a mother and a half-brother, so Ardell accepts that answer. For Pavlo, admitting to a family outside the one he knows as a military man would make him weaker. It would give him a reason to fear dying because it would leave his family without him. Pavlo would rather deny his biological family than have to deal with the emotional complexities of having one. It is a tactic to remain cold, strong, and masculine—to remain a good soldier by the U.S. Army's standards.

The second lie Pavlo tells as Ardell questions him in the transition between the first and second scene is about nightmares. In Pavlo's mind, civilians have nightmares—soldiers of the United States Army don't. To admit to having nightmares and inner conflict, even subdued into the subconscious mind, about the death of his comrades and the Vietnamese is to admit a hesitation at the unmerciful loss of human life. Pavlo wants to be like the Corporal's Sergeant Tinden. He wants to be able to kill with no doubt or hesitation. He has been taught that the Vietnamese people are just savage "slopes" (Rabe,

The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel 33-34.) In the first scene, just before asking Pavlo about the nightmares, Ardell and Pavlo share this exchange:

ARDELL. You kill anybody?

PAVLO. Yes.

ARDELL. You like it?

PAVLO. Yes. (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 8)

Pavlo has completed his second death at this point chronologically. He has killed other people partially because it is part of military identity, but he also is killing others as a response to the confusion of the death of identity he experienced (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 79).

Pavlo's new military identity is lonely and degraded. Rabe's portrayal of the treatment of soldiers is consistent with scores of military narratives, including veterans with whom I have spoken and prefer to remain anonymous. It is a brutal environment which breaks a person down after stripping them of the comforts of familiarity. Before Pavlo even has his first independent line within the new setting of the U.S. Army, Sergeant Tower calls him "ugly" and "fool" and forces him to do push-ups as punishment for "malingering." David Rabe portrays the confusion as the civilian identity meets its new environment head-on in the stage directions: "[Pavlo] does not know what he has done or what is expected of him" (11). The other men echo this idea throughout the first act of the play. One cadence calls out: "MOTHER, MOTHER, WHAT'D I DO? / THIS ARMY'S TREATIN' ME WORSE THAN YOU! / LORD HAVE MERCY I'M SO BLUE!" (14) The soldiers are disoriented and have abandoned their mothers, and the army does not offer its members mercy as a mother might have mercy on her sons.

Pavlo's new military identity is hyper-masculine and gruff. Being a veteran of the War himself, Rabe draws upon his experiences to portray this within *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. The men march to and yell to vulgar cadences.

THE MEN. AND WE HAVE BALLS BETWEEN OUR LEGS! NO
SLITS, BUT BALLS!" (12)

THE MEN. JODY GOT YOUR GIRL AND GONE. / JODY HUMPIN'
ON AND ON[...].JODY DOIN' OUR SISTER, TOO. (24)

THE MEN. ONCE A WEEK I GET TO TOWN...THEY SEE ME
COMIN', THEY ALL LAY DOWN. (38)

The group identity is to be a man; one must rise above a civilian life in which one could afford to be sensitive and merciful. Women were not admitted into the U.S. military for combat positions until 1976. It was thought that women were not strong enough to endure the rigorous basic training and active duty. Therefore, men were the only people participating in combat ("Women in the Military").

Pavlo's former girlfriend, Joanna, represents a life in which Pavlo believes he was weaker, a life he is no longer allowed to love. He says, "Damn that Sorrentino... Your face, Sorrentino, I don't like your ugly face." He must alienate his former girlfriend by trying to degrade her because she is a civilian and represents his civilian life. When he is using his military identity, he calls her only by her last name, but as he continues speaking about her and lets himself slip into a more tender emotional state, he calls her Joanna. He speaks of falling apart when his mother called Joanna "a dirty little slut," which clearly shows the difference between Yen and Joanna as he referred to Yen as a whore and a bitch himself. Joanna receives a tantrum in her honor, and Yen receives a

derogatory name. In Pavlo's previous life, he was sensitive and emotional; in this one, he shirks off sensitivity and trades it in for sexuality (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 6).

The U.S. Army identity imposed upon recruits is an almost unreachable goal of extreme masculinity, and I read Rabe's descriptions of boot camp and soldiers as a personal, fairly accurate, theatrical account of what he experienced in the U.S. military. In *Educational Theatre Journal*, Craig Werner looks at *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* on a much larger, metaphorical scale. He reads the first three plays of the quartet, as an act of rebellion from David Rabe, a response to the oppressing world that uses people as cogs in the machine: "[Sergeant] Tower initiates the soldiers, who arrive at boot camp believing in their individuality, into the impersonal social structure by playing on the American masculine myth" (518-519). Werner argues that Tower, the initial synecdochical symbol for the entire U.S. Army, uses masculinity as an important tool to shape good soldiers. They are stripped of their individuality by the brutality of a toxic, false masculinity. Sergeant Tower wants to crush Pavlo under the weight of the U.S. military and ultimately cannot. Pavlo escapes boot camp with a new identity, afterward he is not being led by the same sense of manliness. Pavlo is assigned to an infirmary to be a nurse, the assignment he wanted least. He is living a life in the service of caring, a feminine characteristic. Therefore, his military identity seems to soften and falter, as shown when questioned by Corporal about his post. The identity he has learned from the military of a man's man is not needed in the infirmary, though Pavlo tries to hold onto it and leaps at the chance to use it.

In *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, Pavlo experiences an inability to cope with the violence and death he sees and commits while in Vietnam. The Vietnam War was the first time the U.S. Military began to work on combatting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in veterans (Bourne 14). To help cut down on the psychological trauma these soldiers experienced, soldiers only undertook a year of deployment overseas (Taylor 32). Rabe served in an infirmary (giving him a reference point for some of Pavlo Hummel's situation) during his year in Vietnam. This year of service did not eliminate PTSD as the U.S. government had hoped but instead gave it a new twist. Because soldiers could not band together as a group, or "band-of-brothers," they experienced unintended isolation. Soldiers were not building meaningful connections that bound them together and created a new family. Although a military man was supposed to abandon his family and create a new one within the military, as shown in both *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones*, many young soldiers experienced both the death of identity and the death of relational nurturing (Wiest). Because Pavlo feels inner turmoil about trying to accept and adapt to his new military identity, he lashes out, leading to others' deaths. This inner turmoil is the beginning of PTSD, which is fleshed out more fully in *Sticks and Bones*, even though the plays function independently of one another. In the military identity Pavlo has gained, Pavlo does not value the lives of the Vietcong soldiers. He first reveals this when answering Ardell's questions in the first scene.

ARDELL. You kill anybody?

PAVLO. Yes.

ARDELL. Like it?

PAVLO. Yes. (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 8)

Pavlo does not lie to Ardell unless he is also lying to himself, such as when he lied about having a family. Pavlo admits to enjoying killing people. For Pavlo, who has experienced identity death, he projects those inner bad feelings outward. Killing others is a release of pressure in his own mind. Rabe is showing how the violence inflicted upon Pavlo is now flowing through and out of Pavlo.

While Pavlo engages in the second death—killing others—he also seems conflicted about these deaths. Although Pavlo enjoys the death of others, later Pavlo says “I hope I don’t have to kill anyone; and I hope I don’t get killed” (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 72). This statement reveals the inner conflict within Pavlo. His love of life, included in his civilian identity, has not died. It is still being crushed under the weight of the U.S. Army.

CAPTAIN. You want to get killed, don’t you, Hummel?

PAVLO. No, sir. No.

CAPTAIN. And they will kill you, Hummel, if they get the chance. Do you believe that? That you will die if shot, or hit with shrapnel, that your arm can disappear into shreds, or your leg vanish—do you believe that, Hummel? That you can and will, if hit hard enough, gag and vomit and die...be buried and rot—do you believe yourself capable of that?...

PAVLO. Yes...sir. I...do... (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 72)

While loss of life and limb were very real dangers on the battlefield in Vietnam, the captain is using this as a scare tactic to confirm that Pavlo is man enough to kill or be killed. Pavlo hesitates at the captain’s description of a gory death that might await him.

Pavlo, assigned as a medic, wants to be allowed onto the battlefield to better embody the learned, military identity and to kill others. He makes it a point to keep his gun with him, a rather phallic symbol of his masculinity, a stark contrast to Sergeant Brisbey, who asks for the other men's guns. Brisbey has no gun because he has only one arm and therefore has no need for one, but he constantly begs other men for their guns so he can kill himself. Although a medic has no need for a gun, Pavlo keeps it nearby to remind himself of his military identity: He is a member of the United States Army. Pavlo makes it very clear that he in no way wants to be a medic with lines such as:

I'm not gonna get a chance at what I want. Not ever. Nothin' but shit.

They're gonna mess with me—make a clerk outta me or a medic or truck driver, a goddamn moron—or a medic—a nurse—a fuckin' Wac with no tits. (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Hummel* 44)

I don't wanna be no medic! (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 61)

Pavlo is “ashamed” of his position (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 70). He wanted to be on the battlefield. “I get made anything but infantry, I'm gonna fight it, man. I'm gonna fight it...I'm gonna wear my uniform everywhere when I'm home, Hinkle” (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 39). Pavlo's attraction to violence is shown again in that he wants to fight the assignment, not protest it or ask for reassignment. Pavlo, given the chance, will fight whenever and wherever he can. He wants to be infantry so he can kill others. This hyper-masculine ideal attached to being a good member of the U.S. Army could not be reached within the medical facilities.

It takes a very long time, both in the world of the play and in actual run time of the play, for Pavlo to completely let go of his civilian identity, and the audience sees the inner turmoil that accompanies this struggle to conform to his idea of a good soldier. This is ultimately what leads to his manifestation of the second form of death—he begins to kill the people around him out of an inner sense that he is losing at his life and needs to make others lose in a more severe way to have some sense of accomplishment. He can find a new identity in being a man’s man with kills and sexual experiences notched into his metaphorical belt.

Whenever Pavlo resists the military identity, he is pressured to accept it by others. When Pavlo does not immediately fall in line, not only his commanding officer, Sergeant Tower, but also his fellow trainees, Kress and Parker, make a point to make him do so. Kress and Pavlo’s first interaction makes it clear that Kress is aggravated by Pavlo’s presence and “goddamn foreign language” (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 18). Pavlo is a misfit and does not match the aggression and masculinity around him. In “Nationalism and Sexuality in David Rabe’s Vietnam Trilogy,” Robert Skloot briefly touches on this idea,

Pavlo is the marginalized G.I. who seeks acceptance from the military he idolizes. The play...describes the career and death of the misfit-outsider, whose identity is tied to the requirements of America’s imperialist mission. Pavlo...must be trained, and so the play ritually enacts the ‘creation’ of the individual national ‘unit’ whose value depends on his willingness to lay down his life for a war whose needs are irrelevant to his personal struggle for accommodation and validation. (227)

While I agree with Skloot on most of his points about the play enacting the creation of the identity and the mentions of both the first and last death, I would also argue that Pavlo uses the war's needs for his own purposes. He uses the brothel, whose existence is fueled by the war, though not needed by the war, to grow into his earned identity and to kill Yen and himself through *la petite mort* or, "the little death," a concept in which the post-orgasmic experience is compared to an out-of-body, euphoric experience and rigor mortis. He also uses the grenade, a weapon of the war to complete his third suicide death.

Yen and Joanna Sorrentino are two women with whom Pavlo has had some form of a romantic relationship. In the first scene, they serve as physical representations of the difference between Pavlo's civilian and military identity. Yen is a part of the world of Pavlo's military identity, and she reveals to the audience that Pavlo pours his affection into her. She says, "Paablo boocoup love. Sleep me all time...", and Pavlo reaffirms at least the sexual relationship when he is talking what his mother would think of him if she saw him in his military identity—"feelin' good, ready to bed down." Yen is a "little odd-lookin' whore" who doesn't get the respect Joanna received as Pavlo's girlfriend (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 6).

Yen also is a target of the second form of death in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. It is to be assumed that Pavlo only has sex with Yen throughout the course of his life, as he tells Brisbey in Act Two that he tried to kill himself before he ever had sex, and Pavlo uses violent language about the way he has sex with Yen. Pavlo says he "just about blew this girl's head off" (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 70). He blew her head off in the same way he thought he shot the Vietnamese man in the head. These two are only equitable because earlier in the play, Pavlo is having his first sexual

experience. Yen is performing fellatio on him onstage while he is learning rifle drills. Sergeant Tower tells him while his penis is inside Yen's mouth, "You got to have a feelin' for it, like it a good woman to you,[...]You got to love this rifle, Gen'lmen, like it you pecker and you love to make love" (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 65-66). Pavlo has been taught to view his penis as a weapon, and when he thrusts and ejaculates into Yen's mouth, he kills Yen with his own personal gun. Yet again, Pavlo treats Yen poorly. In the next-to-last scene of the play, when arguing with Sergeant Wall about who will be having sex with her, Pavlo calls her "bitch" and handles her violently, grabbing her hair (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 84). By this time, Pavlo has reached the fullness of his deathly, militant identity. The violence of his world has overtaken him, and he reacts to it by creating more violence.

The third death is the soldier's sacrificial suicide, and Pavlo does this at the end of the play by jumping onto a grenade. Pavlo has already tried to kill himself twice before (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 45, 80), and this time, when a grenade is thrown toward him, he jumps on it, curling around it. The grenade goes off, and he dies, but the timing of this death is important. Pavlo has just asked to be sent home, as he has been injured a third time in battle. Ardell tells him there is a policy that a soldier can go home if he is injured twice, so Pavlo asks to take that offer and is denied, with an officer saying there is no such policy. Then, Pavlo seeks refuge in Yen, the Vietnamese prostitute with whom he frequently has sex. She is supposed to be with Sergeant Wall, as he has already paid for a whole night with her, but Pavlo has been returning to Yen every time he has been hurt or distressed, taking comfort in her body and the domination of her as a feeling of home and manliness. The two men get into an argument and then a fight.

When Pavlo wins, Sergeant Wall throws a live grenade. Pavlo jumps on it, when it wasn't necessary.

By this point in the play, Pavlo has tried to kill himself twice already. In Act One he takes an entire bottle of pills after his fellow trainees attack him in the barracks (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 45). In Act Two, there is a confusing series of lines talking about an event in which Pavlo supposedly meant to shoot a Vietnamese man and actually shot himself (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 80). In both cases, he tries to shortcut his fate. He is already unhappy and feels excluded by and not worthy of his military identity, and he knows he will die by grenade, as told to him by Ardell in the first scene, even though he doesn't know when. In this grenade is an eternal ending in which he will no longer be in strife with himself or other people, so he takes the way out presented to him. When Pavlo looks at Ardell and exclaims, "Oh Christ!" he is realizing this is his full circle—this is the death Ardell warned him about in the opening scene of the play. In the state of mind the second death requires—one in which the identity is all about decisions made independently and with sweeping force and decisiveness—Pavlo "seizes" the grenade and holds it in his lap (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 85). He made the decision to grab the weapon of his demise instead of kicking it away or pulling Yen away from danger. Pavlo decides to take his death into his own hands. Pavlo previously told Ardell he wanted out (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 80), and Ardell tells Pavlo after the grenade goes off and Pavlo realizes he is dead: "You HOME, Pavlo" (Rabe, *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* 87).

Pavlo's death is not merely a leap at the chance to escape. It is also a sacrifice for Pavlo's country—the greatest sacrifice. Pavlo believes in the ultimate sacrifice for his

country. His death would be honorable to his family, deserving of pity from his mother and Joanna Sorrentino, but more importantly, it is a way out. Pavlo did not know that his death might be negatively received by the public as another reason to cry out to the government that it should stop sending boys to die in a foreign land for a war that needn't be fought. His suicide will be framed as a sacrifice for his country because he died in Vietnam, regardless of who killed him. Men who die in the name of their country become heroes. His death is one of Rabe's images of America's future—violent self-destruction (Skloot 230).

STICKS AND BONES

Sticks and Bones is the second play in the Vietnam quartet by David Rabe. This second play was written in 1967-68 and was the first of the quartet to reach production. It was written and produced at Villanova University, where Rabe was working with a Rockefeller grant after coming back from war in Vietnam to work on a master's degree. *Sticks and Bones* went through many titles, including simply *Bones*, before taking its final name. The play is written in two acts and follows the story Ozzie, Harriet, and their two sons, David and Rick.

In *Sticks and Bones*, Ozzie, Harriet, and their son, Ricky, are a family unit who appear perfect and pleasant and oddly close to a priest named Father Donald. Ozzie and Harriet have another son, David, who returns from Vietnam, starting the action of the play. David is deranged and scarred by war, experiencing intense symptoms of PTSD throughout the play. He has accidentally brought home the spirit of his former lover, Zung, a Vietnamese woman with whom he supposedly lived in Vietnam. David spends the entire play torturing his family as a form of the second death, and his family tries to fit him into their perfect mold. Finally, David kills himself with the help of his brother Ricky and finally escapes the torturous chambers of his own mind.

The act division in *Sticks and Bones* signals a dramatic shift in family dynamics for Ozzie, Harriet, Rick, and David. During Act I, David's family tries to welcome him home and fit him back into the family, but David has been changed both physically and psychologically by the violence he has seen, experienced, and committed during his time in Vietnam. David is blind, and since his return from war he has brought a volatile, aggressive, nature that disrupts Ozzie and Harriet's idea of a perfect middle-class

American family. He is a jagged puzzle piece that does not fit, and the characteristics of his unfamiliar identity bring out the worst in everyone else in the family. They are unable to reconcile his nature with their own, and it leads to David's sacrificial, assisted suicide.

Sticks and Bones's characters are loosely based on the fictional television family from the popular 1950s television sitcom about an average American family titled *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*. The show's titular married couple has two sons, and while the play's character Ricky very clearly fits the idea of the television sitcom family, the Vietnam vet David is juxtaposed as the antithesis to Ricky. Rabe even has David compare himself to wild dogs that had turned into wolves (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 169). Ricky always sweeps into the living room with a guitar, camera, and textbooks and always wears a beaming smile to say hello to his mom and dad and grab a snack before bounding off to whatever trite activity is next on his agenda for the day. Only at the very end does Ricky take a dark turn and fall into David's world of torture and death. Rick is the first character to suggest that David kills himself.

In *Sticks and Bones*, David experiences his first death—death of his civilian identity—offstage. Our glimpse of this death is mostly shown through given circumstances unveiled in the beginning scenes of the play, although there are consequences of the first death throughout the entire play. He comes back from war blinded, though we don't know how, only that the military is sorry and views it as a loss, apologizing for it (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 102), and David views his eyes as ugly (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 112). The audience is automatically shown a man who previously had something and now lacks it, although the audience does not know what David has garnered either.

Like with Pavlo, David's alienation from his family shows the death of his civilian identity. It was a tactic used by the military to kill his civilian identity, and it worked. Just as Pavlo had to learn the U.S. Army was his home, his new family, so did David. When he first enters the play, he is very confused and uneasy. He is not Ozzie's son anymore, hence Ozzie's denial when the Sergeant tries to deliver David. Ozzie, Harriet, and Rick are no longer David's family.

DAVID. You said "Father." (*Worried.*)

OZZIE. Well...there's two of us, Dave; two.

DAVID. Sergeant, you said "home." I don't think so.

OZZIE. Dave, sure.

DAVID. It doesn't feel right. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 102)

David no longer recognizes his previous civilian home. He is fearful of the foreign land that is covered in green and plants and people he does not know with an unfamiliar terrain. For David, this is the beginning of Vietnam all over again.

Like with Pavlo, David's military identity is a degraded and dehumanized identity, and although the audience never sees David in the military, we see how the military treated him. The military does not allow for a rebirth of the civilian identity. Sergeant Major tells David he has his father before he sets David down "like a parcel." David is dehumanized throughout this whole transaction. Sergeant Major asks who's going to sign the "shipping receipt" for David. David is simply another package to be delivered in the long line of trucks carrying other wounded soldiers who are no longer fit for duty. He does not care about David's wellbeing, only that he is left at the correct address. He responds to David's pleas about loneliness in the house by yelling "YOU

SHUT UP! YOU PISS-ASS SOLDIER, YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP!” Just as Pavlo was berated by his superiors in the military, so must David be. Whining, complaining, or begging are not privileges given to soldiers, and Sergeant yells at him to shut him up as an angry owner would yell at a whining dog.

David has been ripped away from his lover and his new way of life as a soldier. When going into the military, he lost his civilian identity as shown by his inability to recognize his civilian, but coming back to his house has deprived him of his militant identity. David has gone through the first and second death once already, and now we see him reeling from the repetition of the first death and once again responding by executing the second death on Ozzie’s identity, attempting to kill the family’s idea of a perfect television life, and wanting to physically kill them. David has an immense amount of resentment and anger, but he is living in the hell of the homefront.

While back at home in the U.S., David describes the violent acts he conducted in Vietnam. Pavlo has a hunger for violence, but David’s hunger is voracious. He draws pleasure from the torturing of Vietnamese victims. David speaks of his want to inflict violence on other people in the second act. His father went snooping around in David’s things he brought home from Vietnam and asks David why razors are sewn into his cap.

OZZIE. There are razors sewn into it. Why is that?

DAVID. To cut people. (*Slowly putting the cap on his head.*)

[...]

DAVID. Here..., I’ll show you... (*Getting slowly to his feet.*) You’re on the street, see. You walk...and see someone who’s after you—you wait...(*He tenses. His hand rises to the tip of the cap.*)...as they get

near...slowly you remove the hat—they think you're going to toss it aside, see? You...SNAP IT! YOU SNAP IT! (*Seizing the front edge of the cap between thumb and finger, he snaps it down. It whistles past OZZIE, who jumps.*) It cuts them. They hold their face. However you want them, they're yours. You can stomp them, kick them. This is on the street. I'd like to do that to somebody, wouldn't you?

OZZIE. Huh?

DAVID. It'd be fun. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 152)

David wants to cut people. He has learned from the military how to inflict violence on others. He has learned to be wary and cautious of strangers, and David's father is a stranger now, as demonstrated in the first scene. David cannot trust him, so snapping the cap towards Ozzie is logical for David—he's warding off potential threats. David is trying to kill his father's identity, and physically endangering Ozzie shakes him. David finds fun in this violence; he feels the urge toward the innate shadowy savagery of which Rabe speaks.

David's engagement with the second death—the death of others—is revealed through his grandiose, warped fantasies of destruction. David is not ashamed of the violent thoughts he has.

DAVID. [...I]t seemed sometimes I would rise, and slam with my fists into the walls of a city. Pointing at buildings, I turned them into fire. I took the fleeing people into my fingers and bent them to touch their heads to their heels, each screaming at the sight of their brain turning black. And

now sometimes I miss them, all those screaming people. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 152)

David misses the level of unpredictable violence in Vietnam. This warped identity is indicative of the inner turmoil David feels after returning home. He had grown accustomed to the second way of life that had been created for him by the military. David was still living amongst the home of Zung in Vietnam, the same way that Pavlo was living in the home of Yen. It seems David had not progressed far enough along to complete the third death while in Vietnam, but this repetition of the first and second death that David is experiencing throughout *Sticks and Bones* pushes him far enough to kill himself with the help and encouragement of his family in the last scene of the play.

During his time in Vietnam, David metaphorically kills his lover Zung (by “ruining” her) in addition to killing Vietnamese people. The audience does not learn any of it until they piece it together as David makes cryptic statements and drops hints while at home. Zung was David’s home as Yen was Pavlo’s home while at war, but David’s relationship with Zung is considerably more unclear. Rabe does not clarify exactly what Zung’s status is. In this paper, I will refer to her as a presence or spirit. Nonetheless, David’s relationship with her was very strong. Throughout the play, Zung is present as an omniscient, omnipresent figure like Ardell, but she does not communicate verbally nor interact with other characters until late in the play, right before Ozzie kills her. At Zung’s first appearance—then referred to as Asian Girl—she is standing in the doorway and before she can enter, Harriet “*goes racing over to slam the door, shut.*” Zung’s spirit has come home with David, and Harriet can feel her, responding to the feeling of Zung with,

“What an awful...wind.” Zung is a force of nature that cannot be denied (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 106).

David has brought Zung’s spirit home, and according to Ricky, brought her by accident. Ricky believes David did not bring Zung. Right after Ricky tells David to slit his wrists in the end of Act Two, David begins looking around, and Ricky tells David Zung was never here.

RICKY. You looking for her? She’s not here.

DAVID. What?

RICKY. Nooo. She’s never been here. You just thought so. You decided not to bring her, Dave, remember? You decided, all things considered that you preferred to come back without her. Too much risk and inconvenience...you decided. Isn’t that right. Sure. You know it is.

You’ve always known. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 173)

It is questionable whether Ricky knows Zung is there. Ozzie knows Zung is in the house and even interacts with her. Harriet calls her a strange wind and seems to understand there is a presence in the house, and after Ozzie kills her, she brings Ozzie a green garbage bag in which to put Zung. In Rabe’s absurdist, unrealistic world, characters kill a spirit.

Similar to how Pavlo “kills” Yen through rough sex, David metaphorically kills Zung through ruining her reputation. There is mention that Zung might be a prostitute, but whether this is an assumption made or the truth is not clear. David says in Act Two when he first speaks Zung’s name to his family: “They were all just hunks of meat that had no mind to know of me until I cared for her.[...]And in all the time I knew her, she

cost me six dollars that I had to sneak into her purse” (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 152-153). Possibly Zung was never a prostitute, but once David left to return to the States, she was considered “ruined,” so she turned to prostitution to make a living. Ricky certainly seems to think Zung is a prostitute and that David made her so. He accuses David of leaving Zung with no choice but prostitution, “[taking] a young girl like that and turn her into a whore, you shouldn’t when of course you should or at least might...on a whim... (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 173). Or possibly she was already a prostitute, and she entered a semi-relationship with David like Yen did with Pavlo in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. After all, David did pay her six dollars. Either way, David has left Zung behind; she is a ghost to him.

Throughout *Sticks and Bones*, David tries to metaphorically kill his father by usurping his role—a manifestation of the second death we do not see in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*. While both main characters execute others through la petite mort and physical violence, David also kills his father’s idea of himself. One could argue that when David comes home from war, the upsetting of Ozzie’s idea of himself is natural. Of course his son’s battle experience and sacrifice for his country would emasculate Ozzie, who helped build tanks and lost nothing for it. However, David feeds off of the unstable energy surrounding Ozzie and pushes it further. He tells Ozzie he will become the father. David has lost his own identity as son and civilian. He cannot and does not want to revive it, so he breaks down others’ identities as a response to the sickness he feels within himself.

David is blatant about his hatred for his family and his father, as well as his want to kill them in more ways than one. Repeatedly David uses psychological warfare on Ozzie.

DAVID (*whispering into the ear of his father*). I think you should know I've begun to hate you. I don't think you can tell me anymore. I must tell you. Does that disturb you? (*OZZIE stirs.*) If I had been an orphan with no one to count on me, I would have stayed there. (*OZZIE stirs more.*) Restless, are you? You think us good, and yet we steal all you have. [...]

DAVID. It's not innocence I have lost! What is it I have lost? (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 134-135)

DAVID. Surprise? In time I'll show you some things. You'll see them. I will be your father. (*Tossing the cap at OZZIE.*)

OZZIE. Pardon, Dave? (*Shaken, struggling to catch the cap.*)

DAVID. What's wrong? You sound like something's terribly wrong?

OZZIE. No. No, no. I'm fine. Your poor mother—she's why I'm here.[...]It's me you're after, yet you torment her. No more. No more.

That's what I came up here to tell you.

DAVID (*getting to his feet*). Good.

OZZIE. What do you mean, "good"? I just told you to stop what you're doing.

DAVID. I know.

OZZIE. You're phony, David—phony—trying to make up for the thousands you butchered, when if you were capable of love at all you would love us, your mother and me—not that we matter—

DAVID (*exiting the room*). I know. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 153)

David wants to kill his family and specifically his father. He is slowly killing all of his family members but sees his father Ozzie as the center point of the family. David's second death is enacted upon Ozzie's identity, not Ozzie's physical body, but as Rabe makes clear—the violence courses through the play and more death occurs, spreading into multiple characters. If David can use his enactment of the second form of death to bring about Ozzie's first death, Ozzie must also go through a stage in which he enacts the second death.

Near the middle of the play, David's attempts to kill Ozzie's identity have begun to take effect. David's words are rattling and unnerving him, making him question his own identity. By the end of the play, Ozzie is so overcome and tries "to COMBAT the weariness beginning in [him]" (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 166). He has been fighting David's psychological attacks for so long and is beginning to grow tired. David has brought the war home, and Ozzie feels as if he is in combat. Rick tells David, "you're getting them so mixed up they're not themselves anymore" (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 168).

David successfully kills Ozzie's identity. Ozzie can no longer identify himself as the man who won races and built tanks. He is empty. He has come into the house with hundreds of sheets of paper inventorying everything he owns and tries to grasp an identity of material wealth and status. He has tried to reason with himself, to keep himself from falling into the great pit in which he will be "it. That feeling of being nothing"

(Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 166). He explains to the family that he tried to find his identity through gaining skills like guitar-playing. He says that he realized “in just the nick of time” that it would not fulfill him and reestablish his identity nor be a suitable new identity because if he could not succeed, it would only frustrate him and cause him to crumble again (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 166). Instead, Ozzie grasps materialism, believing only the material world will last beyond him.

Ozzie also enacts death upon others when he kills Zung. He refuses to be “weak” like “silly and soft little David” (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 171). He is tired of pushing back against David’s attempts to kill his identity and tries to reclaim himself by killing Zung. His language reflects the hatred he feels toward Zung and the violence that flows through him:

I’m sick of the sight of you, squatting all the time. In filth, like animals, talking gibberish, your breath sick with rot...[...]You are deceit. (*His hands, rising to her throat. The fingers close.*)[...]The sight of you sickens me.[...]I spit on you, the both of you, I piss on your eyes and pain. Flesh is lies. You are garbage and filth. You are darkness. I cast you down. Deceit. Animal. Dirty...animal...Animal. (*And he is over her. They are sprawled on the ground. Silence as no one moves. THE GIRL lies like a rag beneath him.*) (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 171)

Ozzie cannot contain the violence within him and lashes back at what he believes is the source of it all. Because Ozzie alludes to David being weak, it is clear he believes David is under the influence of Zung, and Ozzie must kill Zung to be free of David’s evil.

David's final death occurs in the final scene of the play. He sacrificially gives up his life to cleanse himself and his family of the evil he has brought into the house. For the family, he must be executed to save them from him, although for David, it is for his own escape. In response to his own identity death, Ozzie has murdered Zung. She lies in a green garbage bag behind the couch. The whole family has gathered together, and while the audience watching might feel uncomfortable after just having watched a murder, the family is relatively normal. They chat about a movie Ricky watched and what day of the week it is before Ricky turns to David with a shocking request:

(moving to DAVID, who sits alone in a chair) Hey, Dave, listen, will you[...]I just gotta say my honest true feelings and I'd kill myself if I were you, Dave. You're in too much misery. I'd cut my wrists. Honestly speaking, brother to brother, you should have done it long ago. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 173)

Before David begins slitting his wrists, he tells his family of his intent to execute more instances of the second death upon them, but at this point, the family has started the ritualistic blood cleansing.

DAVID. I wanted...to kill you...all of you.

RICK. I know, I know; but you're hurt; too weak.

DAVID. I wanted for you to need what I had and wouldn't give it.

HARRIET. That's not possible.

OZZIE. Nooooo.

DAVID. I wanted to get you. Like poor bug-eyed fish flung up from the brief water to the lasting dirt, I would gut you. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 174)

Ozzie responds to Rick's statement of pity about David's death with "He's only gonna nearly die. Only nearly" (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 175). David's body may be dead, but he cannot die because Ricky immortalizes him by taking a photo, which will stay in the family for generations as shown by its appearance in the first scene (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 96). *Sticks and Bones* has a cyclical nature created by symmetry of scenic elements, not dramatic action as *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* did.

While some critics and viewers may view David's death as a murder by his family, I read it as a suicide. In *The Cristian Perspective: War and Ritual Sacrifices in David Rabe's Sticks and Bones*, Cristoph Houswitschka frames David's final death is a sacrifice without necessarily framing it as a suicide. Houswitschka claims that David's suicide unites him with the family, and I argue that David's suicide cleanses the family but does not certainly unite him with the family. According to Houswitschka, David is sacrificed by the family as a Christ figure, with the killers gathered around him and claiming that he will almost die but not quite. However, Houswitschka contradicts himself by saying before David could die, he must be blessed by the priest. Father Donald does bless David against his will, but a Christ figure would not need a blessing to die (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 148).

The argument could be made that David is murdered in the final scene. I argue that David commits suicide because of Rabe's inclusion of the stage directions about his family's involvement. David's family definitely encourages him to kill himself.

RICK. [...]Do you want to use my razor, Dave? I have one right here and you can use it if you want.

(*DAVID seems to be looking at the razor.*)

RICK. Just take it if you want it, Dave.

HARRIET. Go ahead, David.[...]You don't have to be afraid.[...]

RICK. It doesn't hurt like you think it will. Go ahead; just take it, Dave.

OZZIE. You might as well. (Rabe, *Sticks and Bones* 173)

Rick has told David he should kill himself already, but now he has offered David the weapon of self-destruction. It is important that Rick offers it to David, telling him to take it only if he wants it. David must make a decision whether to kill himself or not. Finally, he does, and with the weapon with which he inflicted violence upon people in Vietnam and Ozzie. Now he's going to hurt himself. The violence is coming back to him to end his misery. There are crucial stage directions written by Rabe which say: "*DAVID, with Rick's help, will cut one wrist, then the other*" (174). When one takes out the dependent clause "with Rick's help," there is left a sentence in which David is doing the action alone. Rick's action is dependent upon David's action. Rick only assists David, making it a suicide and not a homicide.

CONCLUSION

David Rabe is a Vietnam veteran, playwright, and philosopher. While in Vietnam, serving in an infirmary, he was surrounded by violence and death. The constant of tragedy stained Rabe's psyche as it did many Vietnam soldiers'. These stains are so deep they flow through Rabe's pen and onto the modern stage. He seems obsessed with death, and his plays are encircled by it. They form cycles as if Rabe is reliving his trauma, but with his pen, he can control it. The chronological progression of deaths in *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* and *Sticks and Bones* are obviously part of the existential musings of a hardened veteran of the Vietnam War. However, these musings have a crucial impact on the productions put on of his work.

Without analyzing and emphasizing the multiple deaths of the main characters and the deaths they enact upon others, audiences are missing the reason they should be watching David Rabe's Vietnam plays instead of other Vietnam plays. These plays reveal to Americans not only the violence and death committed at war, foe-versus-foe, but also in their own homes, family-versus-family. Soldiers die many deaths, but U.S. Army soldiers are still U.S. citizens and have still been awakened to the level of violence of which they are capable and which society fuels. The war always comes home.

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