

BACKGROUND & OBJECTIVES

Facing imminent deployment to the Vietnam War, five American soldiers cannot hide their worst fears. Not only are they afraid of dying in a distant jungle, but they are also afraid of being surrounded by men different from themselves, whether in race, class, or sexual orientation. Two older sergeants, already veterans of war, act as if they have conquered their fears through a combination of jokes and alcohol. But those diversions prove superficial, and the men's anguish deep. Before they even leave American soil, both the soldiers and the sergeants must confront directly the inescapable facts of death and of difference.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Identify key issues in *Streamers* including:
 - sexual orientation
 - race
 - cleansing
2. Relate themes and issues in the play to their own lives.
3. Analyze the themes and issues within the historical and social context of the play.
4. Participate in hands-on activities that enhance understanding of the production.
5. Evaluate the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *Streamers*.

PREPARATION FOR *STREAMERS*

GALLOWS HUMOR

Streamers is filled with jokes about grave topics. The sergeants, for example, sing and laugh about fellow soldiers whose parachutes failed to open during descent. This sort of comedy, where people make light of a horrifying situation that confronts them, is known as “gallows humor.” Ask students to discuss gallows humor and whether they have ever used it themselves. What is the purpose of such jokes? Are they funny or offensive? Is there a line that should not be crossed? Discuss the example of the September 11 attacks. If the students had been responsible for producing the popular show Saturday Night Live, would they have joked about the threat of terrorism in the season premiere later that month? If so, how? If not, why not?

DAVID RABE

David Rabe, the author of *Streamers*, was drafted by the United States Army and spent eleven months in Vietnam, where he worked in a hospital-support unit. Much of his writing deals with the war in one way or another. Ask students if it is wise to write about circumstances with which you are personally familiar. What problems arise when you write about something beyond your personal experience? Also consider whether Rabe’s service in a hospital-support unit might have left him with a different perspective on the Vietnam War than that of a combat soldier, an officer, or a civilian.

KEY ISSUES

Sexual Orientation

Throughout the play, the soldiers dwell upon the issue of sexual orientation. Richie openly admits to being gay, explaining: “If I feel like doing something, I just do it.” The other soldiers, however, seem uncomfortable with homosexuality, or at least unsure about it. Billy, for example, worries that a gay soldier would “probably want to hold your hand” rather than fight the enemy. At times, the comments about sexual orientation become quite crass. Nevertheless, the soldiers also exhibit some signs of understanding. Even Billy concedes that homosexuality might be “genetic” and that “you can be decent about anything.” But the true test comes when Carlyle asks Roger and Billy to leave the cadre room so that he can have sex with Richie. Their responses reveal the limits of their tolerance. Ask

your students to discuss the issue of sexual orientation as it relates to the play and to their own lives. Has our society become more tolerant of sexual differences since the Vietnam War era? Is there still a limit to what some Americans will accept?

Race

Race is also a prominent issue in the play. Carlyle, a black man, complains that the army is “a little short on soul” and that the “officers [are] always white.” He feels marginalized by his demeaning—and probably discriminatory—assignments to kitchen patrol. The last straw comes when Billy calls him by the racial slur “Sambo.” Carlyle responds with fatal force, eliciting a dying apology from Billy. Yet Carlyle, too, is guilty of propagating racial stereotypes. He says, for example, that “the black man’s problem” is that he is “too close to his blood, to his body,” as if his own problems are characteristic of an entire race. Ask your students to discuss the racial tensions in the play and whether they have experienced similar issues in their own lives. If you have time, discuss the treatment of Viet Cong soldiers and whether racial differences were used to dehumanize the enemy.

Cleansing

Cleanliness is a constant obsession in the military. Uniforms must be orderly, beds neatly made, and rooms spotless. Richie complains that “[t]here’s no point” to this obsession; to him it is mere busywork. In *Streamers*, however, the physical act of cleaning has an essential purpose: it symbolizes the psychological act of self-cleansing. In the first act, for example, Billy and Roger decide to clean up their cadre room together. Later, after Billy has been killed, Roger begins to mop up his friend’s blood. What type of cleansing is he seeking through this act? During their fatal fight, Billy screams at Carlyle: “I wash my hands. I am not human as you are.” Carlyle, after stabbing Billy, yells: “Wash me clean, shit face!” What is each soldier trying to wash out? Ask students to discuss why the characters crave cleansing, and how Rabe uses the physical act of cleaning to draw attention to the characters’ internal struggles.

OPEN RESPONSE AND WRITING

Open Response Assessment

Instructions to the students: Please answer the following as thoroughly as possible in a well-planned and carefully written essay. Remember to use topic sentences and examples from the text.

1. Why is the play entitled “Streamers”? What makes the soldiers in the play analogous to a sky-diver whose parachute fails to open?
2. Asked to explain the fight between Carlyle and Billy, Richie says: “I don’t even know what it was about exactly.” What do you think it was really about?
3. A lieutenant refers to the two murdered men as “perfectly trained and primed strong pieces of U.S. Army property.” Discuss whether this is a compliment or an insult, and why.
4. At one point, Carlyle tells Billy, “I am unknown.” But after committing murder, he cries out to Roger: “You know me.” To borrow a phrase from Carlyle himself, who is the “real Carlyle”? Explain your answer.
5. Suffering from leukemia, Cokes admits that he “probably should have lived differently, more responsibly.” Yet he notes that “my mother did and she died of it anyway.” Does the play support or refute the idea that death is largely out of our control?
6. Having murdered a fellow soldier on a military base, Carlyle can expect to be tried in a military court, not a civilian court. Do you agree that crimes like his demand a special system of justice? Why or why not?

Writing Assignments

1. The play deals with differences not only in race and sexual orientation, but also in social class. Richie, for example, is a volunteer who “never had to work or anything like that,” and always had “[m]oney for whatever I wanted.” The other soldiers have not been as fortunate, and tease Billy for being well-educated. Discuss how differences in social status affect the relationships among the characters. Be sure to give specific examples.

2. Shocked by Roger's insensitivity to sexual differences, Richie says: "I thought you black people were supposed to understand all about suffering and human strangeness. I thought you had depth of vision from all of your suffering." Compare the African-American civil rights movement to the gay rights movement. How are they similar, and how are they different?
3. How have societal attitudes about race and sexual orientation changed since the time of the Vietnam War? Do you think soldiers in the Iraq War still struggle with the same issues as the soldiers in *Streamers*? What new issues are presented by war in a predominantly Islamic country?
4. Choose one of the main characters in *Streamers* and write a journal entry from the point of view of this character, expanding on what we already know. Place the character at a key moment in the play, a time critical to propelling the action of the play forward.
5. Write a critical review of the Huntington Theatre Company's production of *Streamers* and submit it for publication in your school newspaper. Be sure to send the Huntington a copy!

MASTERY ASSESSMENT

ACT I

1. What is the setting for the first act?
2. Why is Martin holding a bloody towel as the play opens? Who tries to help him?
3. Which two horrible possibilities become the subject of a debate among the soldiers?
4. Why does Richie tease Billy when he uses the word “obliterate”?
5. What does Richie reveal about his sexual orientation, and how do the other men respond?
6. What do the men decide to do to their cadre room?
7. Two older sergeants, Cokes and Rooney, enter the room. Describe their physical and mental state.
8. In which famous army group did Cokes and Rooney serve together?
9. What song do Cokes and Rooney sing? To what does it refer?
10. Why does Cokes pass out?

ACT II

11. Why did Roger initially befriend Billy?
12. What happened to Martin?
13. Who keeps inviting Carlyle to the room? How do the others feel about him?
14. Where does Carlyle invite Billy and Richie to go? Who goes, and who stays behind?

15. What do Carlyle and Richie reveal about their fathers?
16. What are Carlyle and Richie intending to do together? What do they ask of Billy and Roger?
17. What is Roger's response to their request? What is Billy's?
18. What happens between Carlyle and Billy?
19. What happens to Rooney after he enters the cadre room?
20. What does Carlyle say when he is caught?
21. What does Roger start to do to the room?
22. Who comes looking for Rooney at the end of the play?

MEDIA ASSESSMENT

The following exercises aim to give students a better understanding of the many kinds of tasks that contribute to a theatrical production, from acting to music to visual arts and design.

Characterization

Have each student choose a character from the play to portray. As if preparing for the role in rehearsal, ask students to answer the following questions about their characters: (1) What is my character's objective in the play, and which obstacles must he overcome? (2) How does my character change during the course of the play? (3) Are there any contradictions inherent in my character? (4) What do other characters think of my character, and what does he think of them?

Stage Combat

Like many plays, *Streamers* includes some fight scenes. In order for actors to simulate physical struggles without suffering any bodily harm, all fight scenes must be carefully choreographed. Mastering this choreography can take hours of physically demanding practice, which continues until the very day of the performance. Not having undergone all of this training, your students will not be ready to perform stage combat at full speed. Instead, have them break into pairs and "walk-through" a fight scene in slow motion, avoiding physical contact. After careful rehearsal, have them share their scenes with the class. Consider the following questions: (a) How can one create the illusion of physicality? (b) How can one remain in character while also communicating safety issues to one's partner?

Protest Music

Many musicians were inspired by the Vietnam War to write songs of protest. Select a representative sampling of these songs and play them for the class. You may want to consider the following: "Fortunate Son" and "Run Through the Jungle" by Credence Clearwater Revival; "Give Peace a Chance" by John Lennon; "I-Feel-Like-I'm-a-Fixin'-to-Die Rag" by Country Joe & The Fish; "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" by Peter, Paul & Mary; "The Fiddle and the Drum" by Joni Mitchell; "Waist Deep in the Big Muddy" by Pete Seeger; and "Masters of War" and "The Times They Are A-Changin'" by Bob Dylan. As a class, discuss why songs about Vietnam were so popular, and what messages they conveyed. Have your students debate which songs would be most appropriate to play at the

end of *Streamers*' first act and at the end of the play as the audience leaves the theatre.

The Design Process

Ask students to research the style of the Army's uniforms during the Vietnam War and to create costume designs that would be appropriate for a production of *Streamers*. (Keep in mind that Carlyle is described as having "filthy fatigues," and Roger as having "long-sleeved khakis.") Students should also create a design concept for the set and props necessary in the show. Encourage students to gather pictures and renderings from that era and to choose colors, textures, and materials that reflect the trends, styles, and symbolism in this play. They should be able to defend their choices and explain how each design reflects the historic and cultural context of the production.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

1. Billy contends that the Vietnam War is necessary to combat the spread of Communism to other countries. This argument, commonly known as the “domino theory,” was made by many American politicians at the time. In recent years, the Bush Administration has pursued a reverse domino theory: that the Iraq War is necessary to promote the spread of democracy to other countries in the Middle East. Draft an essay comparing these two theories. Is either theory correct? Why or why not?
2. Billy remarks that Vietnam would “[b]e a great place to come back from, man, you know? I keep thinkin’ about that. To have gone there, to have been there, to have seen it and lived.” Roger mocks this statement, calling Billy a “fool.” Conduct some research on what actually happened to Vietnam veterans when they returned from the war. Was Billy right about Vietnam being a “great place” from which to return?
3. Cokes and Rooney fondly reminisce about their time as members of the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division, also known as the “Screaming Eagles.” Research the history of that division. When was it formed, and why? What role has it played in American conflicts? Where is its headquarters? Try to locate some pictures of the Screaming Eagles in action.
4. Whether to allow gay Americans to serve in the military has long been a controversial issue. Research the current “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and then summarize the arguments for and against it. Which arguments do you find more persuasive? If you have additional time, explore the recent legal battle over the Solomon Amendment. How was it related to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy? Do you agree with how the Supreme Court resolved it?

VOCABULARY

cadre
cashmere
chute
cryptic
degrading
demolitions
diplomatic
effeminate
enlisted
fatigues
feeble
feigns
hangdog
horrendous
humane
impulse
infantile
infirmary
intellectual
obliterate
obscene
pathetic
provost
rancid
ruffian
sacrilegious
vengeance

HANDOUT 2: ORAL HISTORY OF VIETNAM

Although the Vietnam War may seem like ancient history to younger generations, most adults have vivid memories of that era. Find a family member or friend who remembers the war and interview him or her to learn more about it. Begin with the following ten questions, and then ask a few of your own. Write down the answers.

1. Did you or anyone you knew serve with the military in Vietnam? What was their role? Were they injured or killed while there?
2. Why, in your view, did the country get into the Vietnam War? Who was most responsible for the decision?
3. What do you remember about the military draft? How did you feel about it?
4. How were Vietnam veterans treated by the community when they came back?
5. What was your perception of the anti-war movement?
6. What did President Nixon mean when he referred to a “silent majority of Americans”? Did you think he was right?
7. Why, in your view, did the Vietnam War come to an end? What did you think of the manner in which it ended?
8. What is your favorite song inspired by the war?
9. What is your favorite movie or book about the war?
10. How have your memories of the Vietnam War affected your view of the current war in Iraq?
11. _____?
12. _____?
13. _____?

LESSON PLANS

Teachers' Note: Choose activities that are appropriate for your classroom period. All assignments are suggestions. Only a teacher knows his or her class well enough to determine the level and depth to which any piece of literature may be examined.

ONE-DAY LESSON PLAN introduces students to the context and major themes of the production.

DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

1. Distribute **Mastery Assessment** (P.X) for *Streamers* for students to read before, and to review again after attending the performance.

Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout and ask students to define each word. A vocabulary test could be administered after viewing the play.

2. Read the **Synopsis** (P.X) of the play. Discuss other works students have studied with similar themes and issues.
3. If time allows, discuss further pages from the literary guide, narrating highlights for students.
4. Ask students to complete Worksheet #2, “Oral History of Vietnam,” for homework.

FOUR-DAY LESSON PLAN introduces students to the production and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think more critically about what they have seen. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.

DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

Same as Day One above; completed before seeing the production.

DAY TWO – Attend Performance

Attend the performance at the Huntington Theatre Company.

Homework: Students should answer the **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY THREE – Follow-up Discussion

Discuss **Mastery Assessment** answers in class.

DAY FOUR – Test

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the **Open Response** or one question from **Writing Assignments (P.X)** for students to answer in one class period.

Optional: Students may choose one of the **For Further Exploration** or **Media Assessment** tasks to complete for extra credit.

SEVEN-DAY LESSON PLAN completely integrates *Streamers* into your schedule. Within seven school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading and vocabulary, and assess your students on both a group and individual level. Students will ideally view the play after completing **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY ONE – Introducing the Play

Same as Day One above.

Optional: Distribute Vocabulary Handout due on Day Four.

Homework: Read the play's first act and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY TWO – Act I

Discuss the first two acts and answers to **Mastery Assessment** questions.

Homework: Read the play's second act and answer corresponding **Mastery Assessment** questions.

DAY THREE – Act II

Discuss the final two acts and answers to **Mastery Assessment** questions.

Optional: Complete Vocabulary Handout for homework.

DAY FOUR – Attend Performance

Optional: Vocabulary Handout due!

DAY FIVE – Group Work

Divide students into groups. Ask them to select one scene from the play to interpret for the class. They may act out the scene in a traditional or non-traditional fashion. Tasks should be evenly divided among the members of the group.

DAY SIX – Presentations

Have the groups perform their scenes for the class. After the performances, have students discuss the differences between the groups' respective approaches.

Homework: Students should prepare for the test on the following day.

DAY SEVEN – Test

Individual Assessment: Choose either several questions from the **Open Response** or one question from the **Writing Assignments** for students to answer in one class period.

Optional: Students may choose to complete one of the **For Further Exploration** or **Media Assessment** tasks for extra credit.

RELATED WORKS

Other Works by David Rabe:

Sticks and Bones (1969)

The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel (1971)

Boom Boom Room (1974)

The Orphan (1979)

Hurlyburly (1985)

Casualties of War (1989)

Books about the Vietnam War:

Dispatches, by Michael Herr (1977)

Going After Cacciato, by Tim O'Brien (1978)

The Short-Timers, by Gustav Hasford (1983)

The Things They Carried, by Tim O'Brien (1990)

Movies about the Vietnam War:

Apocalypse Now, directed by Frances Ford Coppola (1979)

Streamers, directed by Robert Altman (1983)

Platoon, directed by Oliver Stone (1986)

Full Metal Jacket, directed by Stanley Kubrick (1987)