

An Interview with David Rabe

Philip C. Kolin

Coming from America's heartland (Dubuque, Iowa), David Rabe was drafted in 1965 at the age of 25 and completed a tour of duty in the literal Vietnam that he would later project symbolically on the American stage. Defining that event for himself, Rabe became one of the most promising playwrights of the post-1970 theatre. After his discharge from the Army, Rabe finished an M.A. in theatre at Villanova University and worked on the early drafts of what critics have labeled his Vietnam Trilogy--*The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel*, *Sticks and Bones*, and *Streamers*. He then put in an 18-month stint as a feature writer for the *Sunday Pictorial* magazine of the *New Haven Register*, publishing more than two dozen hauntingly beautiful and painful stories on the draft resistance movement, drugs, sports, the arts, and various rituals in American society, topics that also surface in the plays. In 1970 Rabe began an eventful 12-year friendship with Joe Papp who introduced, directed, produced, and defended Rabe's early work. Papp's admiration for Rabe was unqualified: "He is the most important writer we've ever had" (quoted in Mel Gussow, "2nd David Rabe Play to Join, 'Pavlo Hummel' at Public Theater," *New York Times* [Nov. 3, 1971]: 43).

Pavlo Hummel and *Sticks and Bones* made theatre history when both plays were performed at the same time at the Public Theater, *Pavlo* at the Newman and *Sticks* at the Anspacher. In March of 1972 Papp prevailed upon Rabe to move *Sticks* to Broadway (Rabe's first appearance there) where Rabe won a Tony, Obie, New York Drama Critics Circle Award, and a Hull-Warriner Award. A year later, Rabe (and Papp) were embroiled in controversy with CBS over the network's refusal to air the screenplay of *Sticks* as originally planned; CBS was fearful of offending the families of POWs. Rabe also saw

The Orphan (1970) and *(In) The Boom Boom Room* (1973; 1974) produced at the Public Theater. Papp had initially selected the later play to debut at his directorship of Lincoln Center in 1973.

In 1976 Rabe's *Streamers*, directed by Mike Nichols, was voted the best play of the year. Considered by many to be Rabe's most carefully crafted work, *Streamers* remains one of Rabe's most frequently performed plays. Robert Altman directed the film adaptation of *Streamers* (1983) for which Rabe wrote the screenplay; the playwright/screenwriter was cheered at film festivals here and abroad. In 1982 Rabe's relationship with Papp suffered a fatal blow when Papp staged an unauthorized production of *Goose and Tomtom*, which Rabe immediately and bitterly disavowed. Rabe's screenplay *I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can*, starring his actress-wife Jill Clayburgh, was released by Paramount that same year. In 1984 *Hurlyburly* (also directed by Nichols) ran for more than 400 performances on Broadway. Set in the coke-dusted hills above Hollywood, the play has mesmerized audiences across America, Australia, and Europe, one of the most notable productions being at the Kungliga Dramatiska Teatern in Stockholm in April of 1987.

Rabe's evolving and complex canon does not lend itself to one convenient label. Stylistically and structurally, his plays reveal a wide variety and range of techniques. In *Pavlo Hummel* (and in *The Orphan* to a greater degree), Rabe effectively uses expressionistic techniques to capture the nightmare world of war and contemporary violence. In *Sticks and Bones* he appropriately blends the grotesque with the lyrical, middle class clichés with impassioned memories of a Vietnamese ghost, a blind son's blood with the family's best rooster-embroidered towels. With *In The Boom Boom Room* Rabe choreographed a feminist tragedy with brutally naturalistic effects. Although *Streamers* and *Hurlyburly* have been widely praised for their cruel realism, Rabe follows no such school. In fact, he has been trying for years to find an appropriate language to escape from realism, one of whose liabilities is a blind faith in specious ratiocinative discourse which actually destroys community and blocks communication. *Goose and Tomtom* may foreshadow one of Rabe's most innovative periods. An existential comedy, the play explodes with romance, fable, sordid crime capers, Ovidian metamorphoses, and glittering epiphanies.

The following interview was conducted on the evening of 10 February 1988 shortly before Rabe was to leave on vacation. In his quiet, even shy Midwestern dialect, Rabe crossed the decades as he answered questions about his upbringing, his characters, his plays, and his views on theatre, film, and rituals.

PCK: Let's begin with a broad question about how you write. Do you make an outline or keep a notebook and do you revise much before actually showing the play or the script?

DR: I rarely use an outline. Usually the first draft is the outline. I find that it blocks off more ideas than it releases. In other words, when you're committed to a certain direction and other ideas show up along the way, they don't have as much chance. I tend to make notes, ideas of this or that. When I'm working on something, I might make a lot of notes. And the amount of revision I do is varied. I've had some plays where there was very little revision and some where there was a lot. I've had experiences where some scenes are absolutely perfect the first time I write them and there are other scenes that I struggle with.

PCK: Which of your plays do you think you've revised the least?

DR: Probably *Streamers*. *Streamers* had a very odd development. I wrote thirty pages, a thirty-minute one-act play. Then three or four years later, I revised it; I wrote it again as a one-act play, but it turned out to be fifty pages. And at another point I wrote it turned into a full-length play. But in each case the actual writing took about five hours, even though the whole endeavor spanned seven years. So the total writing time was about fifteen or twenty hours. *Hurlyburly* in its original form had very little revision. In the form that finally got published it went back to that form.

PCK: Do you use a typewriter or have you gone to word processors or do you write everything out by longhand?

DR: I did longhand for awhile. A lot of *Pavlo* and *Sticks and Bones* were written in longhand with some typing. Then I went exclusively to typing for the rest of my plays. But just this year, last summer in fact, I started using a word processor.

PCK: Do you think that the word processor stifles or enhances your creativity?

DR: I have the feeling that it's enhancing. I haven't worked much on it yet, so I don't know. When I'm writing prose, it's very helpful. I think it's freeing, but I haven't done it enough to be sure.

PCK: Why do you live in Westchester County away from the fury of the city? What influence does this location have on your writing habits, your schedule, your ideas?

DR: The move was really made because my son by my first marriage had moved in with us, and we had a baby, and we're about to have another one. It was really a move that had more to do with the number of children in our life than it had to do with any aesthetics.

PCK: It didn't alter your schedule?

DR: No.

PCK: You don't write more or less?

DR: It made it easier to get to work, but I find that wherever I am I have the same problems or ease with writing. If I get going, I get going; if I don't, I don't. I've been in a lot of different apartments and homes. It's nice though to have a private place to go to, a room up over the garage.

PCK: Do you tend to write at a certain time of the day? Are you a morning person or do you write whenever the spirit moves?

DR: I try to get in each day and aim for a certain nine to five regularity. But lately I think I'm forcing a little bit. I seem to do best sort of late in the afternoon. Or if, when I get up, I go right over without interruptions.

PCK: You don't exercise first and run around the track or swim to get yourself going?

DR: No, I find that stuff gets into my brain and then that's what I'm thinking about. I like to do it afterwards; I like to go work out or play tennis or something.

PCK: Many of your works achieve their power through a central, oftentimes controlling, symbol and most often people have cited the streamer or the drill rituals in *Pavlo* or Phil's note, or the diamonds in *Goose and Tomtom*. How do the symbols come to you? Does the symbol come first or does it usually radiate out of something else, something different?

DR: Of the examples that you've given, the only one that was there right at the beginning was the metaphor of training--drill sequences in *Pavlo*. The streamer, or parachute that doesn't open, was one of the last elements to show up in *Streamers*. The sergeants were part of the last phase of the play that I wrote. The sergeants showed up and in their stories I found my title. There had been working titles, but I knew they weren't good. The diamonds in *Goose and Tomtom* showed up about two-thirds of the way through the writing. I began to wonder if people's fascination with diamonds was somehow a kind of metaphor for soul or the life force. I wondered if that was why diamonds were in so many fairy tales and so many people were obsessed with them. I hadn't really thought about it until I wrote that part of the play. So again the symbol came out of the process of writing. Phil's note also came up as I was writing the scene. I looked "accident" and "destiny" up and found those definitions.

PCK: My next question is intimately related to the previous one about rituals in your works. Why and how do you use rituals? How do you judge their effectiveness as a vehicle for ideas?

DR: In the beginning I was always looking for a physical metaphor around which the play might cohere. Such a metaphor gave me a way of skirting realism and approaching the material theatrically; it was sort of instinctive connection for me that had roots in certain religious rituals and rites, though I feel less dependent on them.

PCK: Would it be accurate to characterize you as "David Rabe: The Playwright of Failed Rituals"? Do you think that's accurate or would you change the "Failed Ritual" to "Frustrated Ritual"?

DR: Well, I don't know. I'm not sure what that would mean.

PCK: What such a designation might suggest is that the rituals of *Pavlo*, for example, don't allow him to reap any insight.

DR: I think that's right. But I think that a lot of rituals in life, in fact, serve that purpose and that they prohibit people from real thought and sometimes from authentic experience. Some people come to the theatre looking for the ritual to do something positive for the character, but I don't think that's what the theatrical ritual is meant to do. In a religious ritual, the ritual is meant to bring illumination to the observers not to participants. In other words, social rituals frequently fail to do what they're promising. But in a religious or theatrical sense I think that they're about the illumination not of the participants but of the viewers.

PCK: As a kind of offshoot from what you said, do you see theatre 1980s style using more or less ritual?

DR: I don't think the connections are as apparent for people today. It's hard to pull off rituals in our day and age because frequently the rituals are passing for reality so we don't perceive them as rituals. And in theatre the realistic form is still pretty dominant. With *Pavlo* or *Boom Boom Room*, there were clear social rites--the rite of training and dance. In *Sticks and Bones*, there were domestic rituals--the food routines and rules about the way you're supposed to say hello. When you don't say "hello" right in *Sticks and Bones*, there's trouble. Those are rituals and when people violate them, then there's a sacrifice, but it's harder to find currently.

PCK: You grew up in a very Roman Catholic culture, as I did for a matter of fact, and you went to Loras Academy, Loras College, and then Villanova. In

your early plays, did this religious influence affect the style or message of your work? Has it affected you at all today?

DR: I no longer am a Catholic of any kind. I don't believe in it, but I do think that the habits, synapses, and reflexes are still present; sometimes they connect and function in other ways with other material. I suppose there's an influence from all that including an attraction to ritual and theatricality, but I don't think the influence is active as a theology or philosophy. I have spiritual concerns and preoccupations, but I don't look to satisfy them in the direction of the church and I don't have very positive feelings for the church.

PCK: My students always laugh at many of Father Donald's lines in *Sticks and Bones*. Of course, some of my students come from Catholic backgrounds and they've examined Father Donald's own failed theology in trying to minister.

DR: When I wrote the play, I was still wrestling with Roman Catholicism. I was out, but I wasn't comfortable. I was still fearful that it could snap me back; I don't feel that way anymore.

PCK: There's a great deal of comedy in your work. Sometimes it's very funny; sometimes it's very bleak. And yet I don't think when your name comes up, people say, "David Rabe, comedian," or "David Rabe, a writer of comic drama." Can you discuss this dimension of your work?

DR: I've always felt that the humor is natural. When I write, I find a sort of mix of humor from which I have no desire to exclude other kinds of events or lines. The mix can make the play a sort of rollercoaster ride, laughing and fun and then things get dark or scary. I remember when *Boom Boom Room* was done in California. The first hour and a half produced some of the hugest laughs that I have ever heard in any theatre anywhere. The guy playing Eric was very funny and beautiful, and there were laughs on some of his lines that were the biggest laughs I've ever heard in my life. But when the play turned and got dark and violent and scary, there was resentment. There wasn't one review that mentioned how funny the play was.

PCK: Is there any one of your works that you would say is more comic or uses more comic elements than any other play?

DR: I don't know. With *Boom Boom Room* there was such a dramatic experience of the audience perceiving the humor and the reviewers not. Once the play turned dark, the reviewers forgot how funny the play had been or they resented the humor. I don't know what it was. It was very strange. Certain rehearsals of *Goose and Tomtom* that I've seen had very, very funny things.

PCK: Are there any heroes in your plays? If so, who are they? What are the characteristics of a Rabe hero?

DR: That's a hard one because you have to have a working definition of what a hero is before the "Rabe hero" can be defined.

PCK: Somebody whose actions are enviable and commendable; maybe he or she is not hero in the sense of having superhuman prowess, but a hero in the sense of having great integrity and great insight.

DR: I think that certain of my characters are struggling heroically to achieve some equilibrium or knowledge of themselves, or some understanding of the truth and some passionate goal, and in that way, they are heroes. Certain of my people shed, or rip from themselves in one way or another, that which is false, that which has been imposed on them by others. I think people like Pavlo and Chrissy and Phil and Eddie would qualify as heroes.

PCK: And what about Goose?

DR: Well, I don't know. Maybe Goose and Tomtom are. That play functions so unconsciously it's difficult to say what they're up to, but in a sense, they strive and strive and inadvertently find something. That's more of a play about destiny, I think.

PCK: Would you say that either Lulu or Lorraine would be considered heroic?

DR: I would say perhaps Bingo is and perhaps Lulu. I wouldn't say Lorraine at all. She's very satisfied and materialistic and I think she would stay that way. Goose and Tomtom are going through something and they drag her along; Lulu might qualify and Bingo would because he is truly on a quest.

PCK: Is there anybody in *Streamers* that you would point to as having those kinds of heroic qualities you've mentioned?

DR: I think that to a large extent all of the boys do. The younger guys in one way or another are trying to come to some kind of terms with themselves. But again that's a play where, as in *Goose and Tomtom*, I feel that there's a kind of group identity and that as a group they're all struggling. But the only one who truly achieves something is Cokes. The others through their struggles (I mean, those that survive) participate a little with him, but he actually gets to something. If the play works right, you feel that somehow they're all going to participate in what he gains. It's a kind of group identity. They're all factions of a particular entity struggling with a particular issue; they do it in different ways.

PCK: Walter Kerr wrote one of the most famous reviews of your play in which he said *Streamers* does not offer a home. As you've just said, the characters are very much striving for that kind of group inclusiveness and yet they never find it.

DR: Right.

PCK: You were actively involved with the directing and filming of *Streamers*. Overall were you happy with that film version?

DR: Actually, I wasn't all that involved. I could have been. Robert Altman invited me down to the shooting, but I didn't go. I was involved in the editing. He was quite open about that. But I wasn't ultimately satisfied. I thought it was an honorable effort, but I felt that the first scene which included the two sergeants went far off the mark with an effect that distorted the play. In the first scene where Cokes and Rooney come in together, Cokes was played the way he should be played only at the end of the play. He knew too much. It was as if he was playing that scene as though he knew he had leukemia and, therefore, death had a certain weight for him. He really shouldn't know it there. He should only know it in the last scene. That first scene is about the old guys having fun scaring the young guys. The way it was, I felt the film lacked a certain kind of progression, that it didn't get anywhere. And tangentially, the question most often asked me about *Streamers* is whether or not Billy is telling the truth in his story about Frankie, and it is my belief that he is. The story is about Frankie not Billy. Billy tells the truth as best he can at every moment and what the play is about is each character's inability to believe that the other characters are not like himself. Billy cannot believe that Richie is a homosexual; Richie cannot believe that Billy is not. Carlyle cannot believe that Billy and Roger are not like him, living out the things he imagines them to be living. Roger cannot believe that Carlyle is not like himself, just jiving for the most part--and not really serious.

PCK: You have been called "The Playwright of Male Bonding," a playwright who has addressed perplexing issues facing young men and middle-aged men in our culture and yet it seems to me that women play major roles in your work, especially *In The Boom Boom Room*, *Hurlyburly*, and definitely *Goose and Tomtom*. Would you comment on your female characters, the functions they serve and your view of their functions in the works?

DR: I don't think of it that way. The characters are the way they show up. I wrote about a woman in *In The Boom Boom Room* because that's the way it occurred to me. *I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can* had pretty substantial women characters. So did *Hurlyburly*. In *Hurlyburly* the women are a powerful force. They're very strong; their presence has a great impact on the men.

PCK: They're like a conscience.

DR: They're like feelings to some extent. They cause feelings.

PCK: I had asked you about male heroes. Who would you say is your heroine? Which female character would you point to and say this character has the essence of insight and knowledge I value?

DR: If I include my screenplay *I'm Dancing As Fast As I Can* certainly all three of the women in it have, particularly the poetess and the Barbara character. In the plays, I think the only place where there's a woman in that position is *In The Boom Boom Room*. Chrissy actually gets to go the whole journey. She's at the hub of the journey, and whether it's a successful journey or not, it does change her. The heroism is in her effort. From the other plays I would not try to make a case for Lorraine who is a provocateur in the play.

PCK: Lulu, on the other hand, is both spirit and body.

DR: Lulu offers ultimately a kind of spiritual opportunity and Lorraine is a materialist.

PCK: As a playwright do you have a favorite character? Is there a character whose lines and whose stage presence really get to you?

DR: I can't say any given character. There are certain parts of Phil, certain needs and feelings that make me laugh a lot. And Goose and Tomtom as a duo, particularly Goose I have an affection for; as well as Cokes and Rooney in *Streamers*. Sometimes I think Eddie is the fullest character I've ever written. I have to see the play really work with a great actor in it before I could say definitely. William Hurt is a great actor, but I think the production was not supportive of him and he didn't get to play the part fully.

PCK: How do you name your characters? When I was working on my *David Rabe: A Stage History and A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* examining the delightful yearbooks from Loras Academy and then Loras College, I came across a man whose name was Tom Hummel who was, I believe, on the newspaper staff with you. Is there any relationship between him and Pavlo, alias Michael, Hummel?

DR: There's no relationship. Occasionally I'll reach back into that period of time for a name, but it's usually a last name but not with any sense of correlation between the character and person.

PCK: Do you think the adolescent period suggested the name to you--that you knew him when you were in your teens and he was in his teens? That sort of thing?

DR: I don't know. We were college students together. It's less rational than that. It's very, very funny; your unconscious sometimes just presents you with something and you either approve it or disapprove it and somehow the name Pavlo Hummel showed up. I just took it and said, "Yeah, that's what I want." And I was aware certainly of Tom, of course, but there is nothing based on him at all in the character. He phoned me once shortly after the play was first done just to remind me.

PCK: What about Goose and Tomtom? How did those names come to you? They do sound like the names of denizens of the underworld.

DR: The names just show up. Those came with characters as I started writing the play. I didn't know much about it. Those were their names. Once I tried to change Goose because he has reveries about or connections to a frog and somebody complained that naming him Goose was not logical and so I tried to change it to something else but I couldn't. It just made no sense to change it, so it's really instinctive. So were Cokes, Rooney, Carlyle.

PCK: So, except for the kind of tenuous link with the distant past and Tom Hummel, the names aren't really linked to specific individuals.

DR: That's right. I never knew anyone named or nicknamed Tomtom.

PCK: I know you are no Aristotelian, but there's a remarkable mixture in your plays of pity and fear that some of your most famous characters evoke, Pavlo, for example, Carlyle, Goose and Tomtom. Would you comment on these different responses, this sense of empathy and the sense of horror that audiences feel? Why, for example, should an audience both loathe and feel sorry for Carlyle?

DR: I think that strict Aristotelianism really interferes with the arousal of emotions, of the very emotions he claims to want. I'm very opposed to the ideas of Aristotle. He's managed to interpose a definition between the experience of a play and the play itself. You actually end up with people wondering whether Shakespeare wrote tragedies, which is truly absurd. It's sort of sanitizing tragedy as if it isn't supposed to be about inevitable horror. If tragedy is about destiny, and inevitability, if it is about fated dooms, how can it be about appropriate behavior, I mean, behavior that is capable of avoiding tragedy--moral lessons so to speak--how can it be about moral instruction and proportional events and emotions? It is not about reasonable failure but

inevitable irrationality. By falsely claiming to define what the written historical tragedies were embodying, he was really trying to distort how they would be seen and dictate the writing that would follow. By falsely describing the worth and procedures of the tragedies that had been written, it was his goal to prohibit, control and dictate the work that would follow. It was his stance to say that, if you want to write a tragedy, do as I am saying you should do, because that is what the great tragedians of the past did--but that which he defined wasn't what they did--it wasn't even tragic. It in fact prohibited the writing of tragedy and the only great tragedian to follow him, namely Shakespeare, ignored everything Aristotle advised and thus managed to create tragedies. In other words, he came up with this definition which he claims to have accurately derived from Greek plays. He then uses it to measure the Greek's tragic accomplishment, all tragic accomplishment. It's really quite astonishing and circuitous. In addition he reduced the tragic vision to something like a moral lesson. What it's done is to have people become totally unfamiliar with the experience of what real tragedy, real pity and fear feel like, emotions which basically stem from identification and affection for a character for whatever reason. Then you see them headed toward some act that you wish they wouldn't do. You feel like saying "Uh-oh. Don't do that." I guess in my own plays I instinctively try to align the audience with the character no matter what his fate. Any character merits understanding from the audience if you can reveal what they're really about. It's possible for the audience to have some empathy with them. Humor can work that way too. When the character is funny, the audience will align with them.

PCK: That's right. When Pavlo takes the whole bottle of aspirins, it's funny, but you also feel sorry for him.

DR: Right.

PCK: As a theatregoer, I feel sorer for Pavlo than I do for Carlyle, although I can see a great deal of reason to empathize with Carlyle and his predicament.

DR: Carlyle is a kind of very gigantic, nightmare creation and he goes beyond pity. It's almost a reverse technique. When he arrives, the first thing he does is articulate the truth about their common situation and feelings. He's seen as more honest about his feelings. Then he becomes someone that you dislike and fear. Then at the last minute you see his vulnerability or craziness and realize he's a victim, too, that he probably shouldn't even be in these circumstances. He almost reverses our feelings again.

PCK: Do you see Carlyle belonging to any specific tradition of characters? Do you see any ancestors of Carlyle, either in your own work or somewhere else? Obviously, he's the outcast, but he's also the vulnerable target.

DR: I feel that there's a kind of connection with *Hurlyburly*, I guess. Carlyle's a kind of ancestor of Phil--connected through the violence of course and through the ways in which he just can't seem to control his feeling. Carlyle is the outsider; he's in a certain environment that he really doesn't understand. In fact, he totally misunderstands the circumstances he's perceiving and it's that misunderstanding that generates his rage and danger. He thinks that certain privileges that don't exist are being kept from him, but the fact is they really don't exist and that's what makes him feel like everybody's lying to him and making a fool out of him. Phil finds himself in similar circumstances. I think it's really similar to what a child would feel about much of the adult world, that you just don't quite get the rules and know how to behave. Maybe that's where some of the identification comes from.

PCK: Along these same lines, would you say that Eddie or Mickey have any ancestors in your earlier work? Or analogs or parallels or whatever?

DR: There are variations on them. There's a certain connection between Mickey and Harriet and I think there's a certain connection between Eddie and a combination of David and Ozzie if you made them into one character.

PCK: Yes, the groping, trying to find oneself, as you earlier characterized the hero.

DR: Right.

PCK: I wonder if you even went farther back and saw maybe some of Chrissy in Mickey?

DR: Well, not Mickey. No, I don't see that at all. I would say Chrissy again would be a little bit of a Carlyle. I'm trying to think. Mickey's in the tradition of the elitist non-physical person who manages to judge and provoke situations without ever really getting caught up in that situation himself. He's a kind of Iago, I think, somebody who is calculating and very smart and able to manipulate people. He is capable of causing things to happen without even seeming to have been involved at all in them.

PCK: Would you say Susan from *In The Boom Boom Room* and Mickey are soul cousins in that sense?

DR: No. I don't. Harold and Al would again fall into the pattern followed by Carlyle and Phil, the violent types. Susan doesn't really provoke that kind of problem.

PCK: Maybe it's Big Tom himself.

DR: Yes.

PCK: The manipulator who's got the three different bars going. That's one of my favorites because when I lived in Chicago, I heard of people like that.

DR: They're out there.

PCK: Yes, they are. What do you see happening to Eddie or to Mickey or to Darlene at the end of *Hurlyburly*. Let's try with Eddie first.

DR: My guess is that he would have to clean his act up, so to speak, and probably move out of L.A. Certainly he's done with Mickey and he probably will have to try to straighten his life out. I think he's reached a transformational point now. Something transformed him. The more you measure the ways in which the transformational has begun in him at the end of the play, the more you realize he's really done with the way he has been living.

PCK: How should we interpret the stage picture at the end? Is it almost like a Pieta where the girl and he are wrapped in each other's arms?

DR: I think that he's come to a certain kind of peace. He is no longer trying to figure everything out and control everything with his mind. Consequently he won't be as vulnerable to certain kinds of manipulations from people like Mickey. I think he probably will move out of town, try to really reexamine what he's been doing with his life.

PCK: Do you think Darlene changes at the end?

DR: I think Darlene is someone who just sort of wandered into this life with these people. She's probably new in town. I don't think she's going to keep doing that kind of thing.

PCK: I see Chrissy as one of her ancestors.

DR: I hadn't even thought of that. Maybe. I feel like Chrissy's more connected to Bonnie.

PCK: Yes. There's that link too. Surely Bonnie is far more mature and perhaps a little more insightful.

DR: Yes.

PCK: What about Mickey at the end of *Hurlyburly*? Do you see any change in him at all?

DR: No. I think he's briefly shaken by this encounter with Eddie and then probably just moves on and continues the life he's living.

PCK: How would you want a theatre audience, if they were so privileged, to interpret the ending of *Goose and Tomtom*? When I read the play this past summer, I was shocked; for two days, I was just frozen. Nothing but that play and the ending went through my mind--the sparkling diamonds and the crashing of the set. How are we to respond to that ending?

DR: I think that it would again be quite peaceful and beautiful when the set is done right. When the play arrives at that moment right, it's like *Goose and Tomtom* and *Lulu* are lying in some sort of Roman ruins; you see these fragments of wall, and it's like an ancient civilization with all this debris. And then they slowly notice all around them these diamonds and light and stars and then they have their own insight and I think that this is an image that can bring calm and a strange kind of spiritual reassurance.

PCK: Almost like an epiphany.

DR: I feel then they have their diamonds, their hunks of light, which translate into their souls. A lot of people have wondered about this. I used to have long arguments with Fred Zollo, not really arguments, but he felt that the ending should project a sense of illusion. I feel that they actually find that they have their own inner light, so to speak.

PCK: I don't know how you will respond to this, but when I read *Goose and Tomtom* I was reminded again and again of the movie *Cocoon*. There's a new reality in both the play and film that makes the old reality seem sordid.

DR: Right.

PCK: And the new reality is, it seems to me, what great theatre is all about --to present the extra-terrestrial, the epiphantic, the great moment of mystery.

DR: I think that *Goose and Tomtom* can achieve that--at least I hope so. We were very very close to achieving such an effect the last time, but we didn't quite have enough rehearsal time. The play used to bewilder me in terms of how to do it, and that's why I didn't publish it, but this last time out I saw that it was doable, that it can achieve what we're talking about. The ending is quite a magical, beautiful moment.

PCK: Is there any work, let's say, by Shakespeare or by somebody more contemporary like Tennessee Williams that you think *Goose and Tomtom*

relates to? Would it be wrong to say that it was David Rabe's *Tempest* in terms of its magical moments?

DR: I don't know. I couldn't say that. I don't think it's quite like that. But certainly it has similar concerns to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in that people are transformed to animals and all that. I do feel a great passionate kinship with and devotion to Shakespeare in that he is the great master playwright and was, in my view, an enlightened being--sort of one step down from a Buddha or a Christ. His plays are awesomely rich so that I would never aspire toward them. But I have work started that might shadow him a little bit. Certainly the concerns of *Goose and Tomtom* are similar to Shakespeare's play in the sense that you have a transformation to animals and there are certain miracle forces at work.

PCK: Within the levels of illusions and theatricality.

DR: Yes, but it's just more hidden. In other words, it's not as free. It was a breakthrough play for me and then I understood something about how Shakespeare used language in the theatre. I think his language creates a reality rather than reflects one or describes one. It creates one rather than describing something that already exists. When the characters talk, they're doing the same thing.

PCK: Would Lulu and Bingo correspond to the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*?

DR: Yes. In a way they are. They are creatures really in contact with whatever spiritual force there is and they change themselves through that contact. They are also involved in changing these others but not in the way the others would want to be changed or think they should be changed. Yes. I think the fairies and Lulu and Bingo have similar preoccupations.

PCK: We mentioned *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Goose and Tomtom* and the parallels between them. Which Shakespeare play might be paired with *Hurlyburly*?

DR: I don't know. I suppose it's a little like *Hamlet*.

PCK: I guess you know from the title and your comments in the afterword [to *Hurlyburly*] *Macbeth* comes to mind.

DR: Yes, but I think of *Hamlet* more in terms of character and the structure of the play; though, I don't really feel this, except in answer to your question. Eddie's mind strikes me as similar to Hamlet's mind, I guess.

PCK: Almost a decade ago, Tom Adler did a small article on *King Lear* and *Sticks and Bones* arguing that there were parallels between scenes in *Lear* (the blindness and mock trial and Ozzie's inventory) and *Sticks and Bones*. Are you conscious of those kinds of things or is it just part of being creative and intuitive?

DR: No, I think it's unconscious.

PCK: What specific influences on your work can you identify? Is there a particular author who has really influenced you, whose works stay with you and give you sustenance?

DR: In recent years, Shakespeare, but it's strange. My relationship with Shakespeare only blossomed a few years ago. In college and even when I was writing my plays--*Sticks and Bones* and *Pavlo Hummel*--or up until about five or six years ago, around the time of *Goose and Tomtom*--I really didn't understand Shakespeare and I didn't like him. I knew he was great, but I didn't understand him and I couldn't relate to it. I had a lot of people that I admired, different writers. Many of them were novelists and a few playwrights. Certain plays have meant something, had an impact. Of plays of the absurdists, I admired Ionesco's the most. Beckett was never important to me. I find he's sterile in a way that I don't quite appreciate. But, maybe like Shakespeare, I just don't get it yet. I was quite taken with at one point John Osborne's *The Entertainer* and *Luther*, plays that I felt were theatrical and really influential. Certainly they woke me up about certain possibilities in writing. I like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, too, but Williams didn't influence me much because he was such a particular writer who was writing so totally in his own unique way that there wasn't much you could learn from him. He was so much an individual that following him would make one just kind of a slavish imitator. I love a lot of his plays, but I don't know that I learned anything from him. His form and content were so much a reflection of his sensibility.

PCK: Do you have any plans to give *Goose and Tomtom* a public production that accurately reflects your intentions?

DR: Well, I had hoped to reorganize the group I did the workshop with at Lincoln Center--which I directed with Sean Penn and Madonna, Harvey Keitel, Barry Miller, John Korkas, and Lorraine Bracco [in 1986]. I had hoped we could continue. I had hoped to pull those people together and do it. I thought I could then fulfill the play the way I see it, but it's difficult to pin these people down and get them to agree to a date. I'm just beginning to realize that it's probably not going to happen so I may have to try another tactic.

PCK: I know that the published version came out last spring. Has the play been staged recently? Have many people written in for the rights to stage it?

DR: A number of people have. I didn't approve them because I had still hoped to do the production with Sean and Madonna. But I recently approved a couple.

PCK: Do you recall offhand where they might be?

DR: One is up, I think, in Provincetown this summer and one I am not sure if I approved in Chicago. I'm going to start letting it be done, though, and I'm toying with perhaps going up to Providence and doing it, or even mounting a different company in New York.

PCK: Do you have any immediate plans as a screenwriter?

DR: I'm rewriting something now that's supposed to be shot in April called *Casualties of War*, an adaption of the book by Daniel Lang. It looks like it's going to be made. I'm struggling now to do the required rewrites. I also have another screenplay, one that keeps getting optioned, an original I wrote a few years ago called *Just Married*. It's nowhere near as immediate as *Casualties of War*, though."

PCK: As a screenwriter and a former teacher of film, do you find any cinematic effects in your plays, relationships between your work for the screen and your work for the stage?

DR: I don't actually. One could say perhaps that *Pavlo* or *Boom Boom Room* were cinematic--there was a lot of flowing from one scene to another, but I think actually that's just what theatricality can do. True theatricality is very distinct. Theatricality has virtues that film can't duplicate and film has virtues that theatre can't duplicate. For the most part realism in the theatre is defeating. Part of the reason I think musicals are so successful is that they're theatrical. Somehow real theatre can do something with language that doesn't need necessarily a lot of sets and stuff. Shakespeare's theatricality can do the world on one set for the most part, a metaphoric set. That's when it works best--that way when you find that right metaphor for the whole play. Realism came into the theatre at a time just preceding the invention of the movie camera and it was almost like civilization was anticipating the movie. It comes out of Darwinism and a lot of other things. And we're still stuck in it. In other words, realism was supposed to happen in the movies; it got into the theatre and it's still there, but I think that it impoverishes theatre and I don't know how to break out of it myself fully, but I think plays like *Goose and*

Tomtom and *Hurlyburly* are my effort to break out from realistic language even though it might look like a realistic language.

PCK: Would you say that the theatre has an opportunity to present more pure terror for an audience than say a film would?

DR: There can be archetypal forms in theatre which are bigger than life and which resonate in a richer way and so can communicate more directly to and from the unconscious of the material and the audience. There are always exceptions, but generally film is more stuck on the literal surface I think. It's very hard for film to get at and communicate something bigger. It can be done, of course. Great people like Bergman or Fellini can do it, but it's harder and generally film doesn't do it. Theatre at its best, in its older forms is what I'm talking about. It's clear in the plays of Shakespeare or Moliere. It doesn't have to be dark or fearful, either. It can be very funny. It has to do somehow with archetypes and larger than life emotions and characters that somehow communicate what we all recognize about the forces at work in our lives.

PCK: If they were to make *Pavlo* into a movie, who would you like to see play Pavlo? Do you have a favorite?

DR: If they did it immediately, I would get Sean Penn. I'm a big fan of Sean Penn. I think he would be wonderful. But in a few years he'll be too old.

PCK: Would you like to do more directing, especially of your own works?

DR: Yes. I'm going to. I'm thinking of doing a *Hurlyburly* in Los Angeles. Whether I would direct a new play, I'm not so sure. I'm not sure that you can do it when it's brand new. With *Goose and Tomtom* and *Hurlyburly*, I've been through a number of efforts and time has passed--I now have a kind of outsider's understanding plus an insider's understanding. I feel very qualified to direct them.

PCK: Edward Albee has said that only practicing playwrights should be hired as theatre critics. Would you take the job if the *New York Times* or the *New York Post* called?

DR: I was a critic briefly. No, I really wasn't a critic. I worked for the newspaper up in New Haven [*The Register*]. My job was primarily to write features that had nothing to do with theatre, but I had this theatre background and they knew about it. They tried to get me involved in reviewing and I did it for a little bit, but in the long run I found it very uncomfortable. What I did eventually is that I would go to a lot of things and then I would come to them and say, "I want to review this or that," and I would only write about things that

I liked. Prior to that, however, I had written a couple of very negative things, but it made me very uncomfortable.

PCK: Is that because of your experience as a playwright? Or uncomfortable just donning the robe of theatre critic?

DR: Just to sit in judgment like that. There's a high to it, but it takes a certain kind of personality which I didn't have. You really have to enjoy sitting in judgment and that's a very different experience than writing creatively. I can't say I didn't enjoy it a bit, but I reached a point fairly quickly where I wouldn't go out on assignment. I know what Albee means, but it's not a practical solution.

PCK: Some very famous stars--Pacino, Weaver, Hurt, Jill Clayburgh, Sean Penn, Madonna--have appeared in roles that you've created. Have any actors tried to get you to change a script, change a line?

DR: I'm sure there were places where lines were changed over this and that, but I don't think in the sense that you ask the question that any of them came in and said, "I really think the character should be more this and this." With *Goose and Tomtom* we scarcely changed a word. In *Hurlyburly* the changes came in through Mike Nichols who made many textual changes. By the time Pacino starred in *Pavlo* the play was established and published and he just did what was there. I've never had that experience where a star came in and said, "Yeah, I want to do it, but you have to change it radically."

PCK: You've been working on a novel for some years now. Where are you? How does it relate to the plays?

DR: I've actually worked on several novels over the years and I finished one. I've gone to a couple of publishers who said they'd take it, but there was certain work they felt had to be done and I wasn't in the right frame of mind to go in and find out what exactly they wanted.

PCK: Does the novel relate more to your experiences arising out of Vietnam or the experiences arising out of, say, *Hurlyburly* and *Goose and Tomtom*?

DR: The novel I have finished would have a kinship with *Goose and Tomtom* more than *Pavlo Hummel*. It's a fantastic--as in subjective--piece.

PCK: Why do you think we're seeing so many films now on Vietnam? I know that you've written on Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* for the *New York Times* [June 21, 1987].

DR: The fact that Kubrick and Oliver Stone released their movies at similar times was a coincidence. But there's a generation of young people here for whom Vietnam is a kind of curiosity, something about which they don't have a formed opinion and they're sort of available to have their opinion formed. Also, part of the explanation is that certain kinds of works weren't allowed back then, so it's got to happen sometime.

PCK: Do you think it's part of a noble attempt to evaluate history? Or is it more just entertainment?

DR: I think certainly *Platoon* was a personal movie and quite passionate in its right. I don't know, however, why it's showing up now. I don't even know whether there's a real effort to understand Vietnam.

PCK: David Mamet has said that he's just a storyteller who tells narratives. How would you characterize yourself? This is a kind of \$64,000 question, I guess, in that it wraps things up. What is your purpose behind writing for the theatre? What is your overall goal or quest?

DR: I feel like exploding things. I always feel like I'm trying to break something open.

PCK: What are these things? Conventions that are outworn and misleading?

DR: No. It's not technical; it's an emotion. It's not technical about theatre; it's emotional about the content. Plays are expressions of something breaking open in me, I hope, or broken open, and it's a combination of trying to explode things--things somehow closed in people's heads--to explode them open. When I do best, I learn a great deal from what I've written myself. What people don't understand, I think, is that a lot of what they find shocking in my work has shocked me.

PCK: A lot of people said of the early Vietnam plays that they were masterpieces because they weren't advocating anything propagandistic.

DR: No, they didn't.

PCK: They didn't take a line.

DR: I think they're not in the strict sense political anti-war plays; rather they're about a kind of experience. They don't have a hard or simple political line. They don't exclude things that might be contrary to a given political point. For example, if you were writing a political tract about a kid coming home from the war he would be a nicer person than David is. He is a wildman.

PCK: You mentioned "exploding things." Do you have something in mind? Particular types of things?

DR: No. I don't mean literally exploding things. I mean more on the emotional level. Let's say that there's something in people's heads that's closed and you're trying to break it open. That something might be a convention in their minds or in my own and I want to reorganize something that's enclosing and break it open and reorganize it. It's like this thing in science called a perturbation which states--and I don't understand it exactly--but it states that when things get disturbed enough they grow. In other words, chaos is a necessary antecedent to growth. You jump in and stir up a lot of things, feelings and thoughts and then hopefully something comprehensible will come down at the end.

PCK: Speaking idealistically here, what type of growth should take place in the theatre audience after, let's say, seeing *Hurlyburly*? As somebody has said, if all the people talk about when they leave the theatre is where they parked the car, something's wrong with the audience.

DR: I think that if *Hurlyburly* were to work right, the audience would share in a kind of peaceful, thoughtless place that I think Eddie gets to. It's very simple and it's not necessarily going to last very long, but it's a moment when he's no longer trying to figure everything out and doesn't feel responsible for everything. Then he just sort of sits there and enjoys the presence with that girl. There's a way of grasping that kind of surrender, I think, if the play is done right, through the catharsis of certain emotions. Phil is like a tragic character who dies and Eddie is a character who, through that tragedy, can grow--I hate to use that word "grow." He really opens to himself, revealing within himself something he didn't quite know was there and that gives him a certain sustenance and calm.

PCK: What about a play like *Sticks and Bones*? What should the audience be doing or meditating on at the end of that play?

DR: The end of that play is very confrontational. It's very much an assault and again, if the play's done correctly, the audience will be compelled from the beginning of the play through the end to identify with Ozzie. That has rarely been grasped. Most people who came to the theatre at the time of the first production were people with a liberal point of view so they wanted to identify with David and be sympathetic to him. They shunned the parents, but I think the real core of the play is Ozzie. He's the one on the journey. David comes into the play wild and angry; he's trying to compel Ozzie into action. So I think if you were identifying with Ozzie and you reached a point where you too were saying "Shut up" to David and then they did that to him, had him cut his wrist,

you would be an accomplice in a ritual and you would have to see something about yourself. In other words, Ozzie fails; it's too much. He doesn't change. He opts for the way he has been. In many ways it's Ozzie's tragedy as well as David's. For them both there could be a point where we say, "Oh no, don't do that," particularly for Ozzie when he agrees to help them cut David's wrists. But David's demands are unlivable. The truth of the matter is that what David's asking for is impossible. He's gone too far. He's asking for a form of insanity. In the horror of the ending, there is a conflict between David's extreme point of view and Ozzie's extreme withdrawal from that point of view. It's a very confrontational play that basically says that society, or the status quo, is sick and that when it's reestablished, it's sicker. This character David comes in and tries to shatter it and almost does, but in the end, he makes a fatal mistake and underestimates something and is then himself drawn into the society. Are they all dead? I wouldn't suspect or suggest that *Sticks and Bones* could offer the kind of tranquility that I think is possible in *Goose and Tomtom* or *Hurlyburly*.

University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Mississippi



David Rabe. Photo Courtesy of Ed Betz.