

# Theater: Bill Pullman Shines in Sticks And Bones

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**STICKS AND BONES** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**THE NEW GROUP AT SIGNATURE THEATRE**

David Rabe's Sticks And Bones is unquestionably a dated play. But what does that mean? People often use "dated" to refer to a work that simply isn't good. But a bad play is a bad play -- "dated" is often merely a polite way of saying everyone was wrong the first time around. In fact, it should refer to a play like this one. It's a work that is fascinatingly dated as you imagine the power and impact it had at the time and suss out why it falls so flat today.

Vietnam veteran Rabe wrote it while a grad student and saw it staged at his college Villanova in 1969. It jumped to the Public Theater in 1971 and then right to Broadway in 1972 where it won the Tony Award for Best Play and ran for a respectable seven months. In the blink of an eye, it was turned into a TV movie and aired in August of 1973. Clearly it struck a nerve.

Surreal, soap box-ish and satirical, Sticks and Bones doesn't just take on Vietnam. It also tackles the indifference of people back home to what's happening overseas, the paper tiger of the happy nuclear family embodied in sitcoms, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and the desperate demands of domesticity on men who feel trapped by their responsibilities instead of ennobled. Rabe would write far better plays (including ones on Vietnam, like Streamers). But none are as personal and passionate as this one feels. Though watching it, you feel almost nothing.

Surely even in 1971 the idea of mocking conformity by zeroing in on the sitcom was old hat. But here we are, introduced to the happy family of Ozzie (Bill Pullman), Harriet (Holly Hunter) and Ricky (Raviv Ullman). In 1971, the reference to the ultra-bland sitcom The Adventures of Ozzie & Harriet would be immediately clear. Today, it only slowly dawns on most of the audience and remains a modest meta nod, rather than shocking.

Life seems easy. Guitar-slinging son Ricky walks in the door, greets his folks with a banal and indifferent "Hi mom! Hi dad!" and grabs some fudge while they trade small talk. Hints of turmoil are already present with some asides by Ozzie that almost don't register. But things really implode when repeated phone calls raise Harriet's anxiety to new heights. Their older son David (Ben Schnetzer) is away in Vietnam and when Ozzie acts squirrely, Harriet fears the worst. Is their son coming home in a body bag? It's odder than that. Their son is blind and Ozzie either wants to ignore this terrible situation or simply wants to not accept the "package" and hope the problem goes away.

David is just as disconcerted. A remarkably gruff Sergeant (Morocco Omari) dumps David in their laps despite David's hysterical claims that this isn't his home, these aren't his parents. Tagging along is the ghost or the memory of the Vietnamese girl Zung (Nadia Gan) that David fell in love with but was too timid to marry. She wanders around the house, hiding from the others at times, even though they (mostly) can't see her or even sense her presence. David starts declaiming speeches skewering their indifference to Nam and their empty existence. Zung pops in and out and then they toss in a warm chat with Father Donald (Richard Chamberlain) just so we can skewer religion as well.

It builds to a disconcerting climax where a mysterious convoy of military trucks are dumping off the unclaimed, unwanted, unacknowledged wounded and dead all around them. Normalcy of a sort is restored by strangling the

memory of what happened, refusing to speak of it at all. They sink into a euthanized state, the TV meekly playing in the background while they stare dully away.

If that sounds tiresome and heavy-handed, well it is. Rabe's play seems to have 18 different things on its mind and incoherently blasts them all. He insists it's not an anti-Vietnam War play; that is, a play that hopes or intends to stop the war. Fair enough; he's got bigger fish to fry, like only a young playwright can. It's an ambitious effort and falls on its face with admirable overreach.

So why is it fascinatingly dated? Because it must have had some incantatory power at the time. People weren't inured yet to the idea that television's depiction of America was somehow false. (Even though *The Brady Bunch* was a primetime hit?) Vietnam was still ongoing, but that shouldn't matter either -- war is always with us in one way or another. And constraints versus the pleasures of family life will always be a ripe topic. You spend the play trying to gauge how it spoke to people back then rather than for a moment thinking it speaks to us now.

One tantalizing hint is that it's sometimes described as a black comedy. Because of how it's played now and perhaps the audience reaction, this production of *Sticks and Bones* is by and large deadly serious. Perhaps a more anarchic approach would have brought out some humor? But since it was satirized by Christopher Durang in 1977, it's doubtful even back in the early 1970s that Rabe's work was given a broad treatment. Surely you don't satirize a satire.

The set design by Derek McLane is deft: David's bedroom hovers over the living room and stairs seem to head in every direction. At key moments, it almost fractures as light reveals the fissures in the walls or highlights the bamboo-like echo in the material around the front door. The sound design and original music by Rob Milburn & Michael Bodeen also help immeasurably to give the climactic approach of trucks a genuine power otherwise lacking in the play.

The cast is fairly consistent and despite the exhausting proceedings, several shine. Gan as the ghostly Vietnamese presence has a thankless role. At least she doesn't speak. Schnetzer (who stars in the current movie *Pride*) has the impossible part of truth-sayer, oracle, Angry Young Man and a lot more. Rabe barely gives him any dialogue; it's more like polemic or pronouncements. The fact that Schnetzer is as watchable as he is proves a testament to his commitment and innate appeal.

Chamberlain is a waspish, strong presence as a local priest and family friend. His scene confronting (he's certainly not comforting) David is the best of the night for Schnetzer. Despite the very heavy-handed prejudice -- almost no one can even mention the yellow peril of Vietnamese "whores" without spitting -- their sparring has a realistic back and forth where David actually seems like a real person and Father Donald seems like a real jerk. It's a delight to see Holly Hunter as Harriet on the stage though she seems torn between all-out nuttiness and relative realism.

Yet despite the awkward dramatics, two actors stand out. Ullman is a lot of fun as Ricky. If there's any hint of a more satirical, out-there take on the play, it surely begins with Ricky, who goes from a bland teenager to a guy telling his dad he just got a great piece of tail to urging his brother towards suicide. The handsome Ullman navigates the humor smoothly, tossing off lines with aplomb and garnering most of the show's laughs.

But Bill Pullman is the one who will stay with you. It's a shame how little we've been able to see him on stage. He's a theatrical actor to his bone, delivering memorable work in the absurdist comedy *The Goat...* by Edward Albee, where Pullman was so good. Here he manages to find a beating pulse in this work and it's the terror of a man who feels trapped in his domesticity. The simmering anger that lashes out of him at his wife and sons isn't just an authorial device when Pullman delivers it. His stories of a wandering youth, of the life he might have led or might still lead are haunting. Pullman is so good that you might easily believe this play has almost nothing to do with Vietnam and David but everything to do with Ozzie.

How he does it is one of those alchemical mysteries of the theater, surrounded as he is by often wooden dialogue and sentiments that were obvious or trite forty years ago. Director Scott Elliott clearly did something right if one actor could be this strong with this play. The only question is whether the rest of the production let the play down or whether Pullman simply rose above it. At best, a new production of a dated play might allow us to see what it meant to audiences back then. And when we're lucky, a great actor can make it mean something to us today.

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