



**BY MICHAEL SOMMERS**  
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OFF BROADWAY REVIEW

Hardly a show for casual theatergoers, “Sticks and Bones” is best appreciated by ardent students of the American drama.

David Rabe’s Tony Award-winning play from 1971 appears cumbersome and obvious today yet it must have seemed like bold stuff during the time of the Vietnam conflict.

Bill Pullman, Holly Hunter and Richard Chamberlain ably depict seriocomic stereotypes in The New Group’s forthright production of Rabe’s savage cartoon of a Vietnam soldier’s unhappy homecoming.

Rabe employs a satirical mash-up of sitcoms, allegory and Arthur Miller-type shoulda-woulda angst to comment upon the American public’s indifference to Vietnam and its damaged veterans.

David (Ben Schnetzer), returns home from the war literally blind and yet his parents Ozzie (Pullman) and Harriet (Hunter) obviously carry on with their preoccupied lives. His guitar-strumming little brother Rick (Raviv Ullman) blandly pays no attention. The smarmy, double-talking Father Donald (Chamberlain) is useless. Nobody notices the Vietnam waif (Nadia Gan) who silently haunts the veteran.

The two-act black comedy finally concludes in murder and ritualistic suicide.

Back in the day, audiences were tuned into Vietnam protest and aware of the dramatic forms that Rabe subverted. After decades of “South Park” and “The Simpsons” sorts of satire, contemporary viewers are likely to find “Sticks and Bones” an overlong piece that thumps its symbolic points heavily and often. Nor does the deadly seriousness of Rabe’s vision correspond with today’s ironic temperament.

That said, this rarely (if ever) revived play remains an interesting artifact that director Scott Elliott treats with considerable respect at the Pershing Square Signature Theater Center.

Elliott stages the work at a deliberate pace upon a two-level living room-bedroom set by Derek McLane that melds 1950s furniture against a stony background suggesting a tomb. Peter Kaczorowski designs appropriately funereal lighting.

The diminutive Hunter’s tightly-wound, sharp-voiced Harriet contrasts against Pullman’s kindly, vacant Ozzie. The silver-haired Chamberlain smoothly spiels the minister’s banalities. Ullman is chipper as the baby-faced brother. The pivotal character of David is a monster role of self-searching alienation that Schnetzer acquits honorably.

Although “Sticks and Bones” does not speak effectively to our troubled era, The New Group’s revival at least provides an authentic echo of rage from times gone by.

“Sticks and Bones” continues to Dec. 14 at the Pershing Square Signature Theater Center, 480 W. 42nd St., New York. Call (212) 279-4200 or visit [www.thenewgroup.org](http://www.thenewgroup.org) .