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**Pigalus, The Pentagon, and *Viet Rock*: How Did Protest of the Vietnam War Become Performance, and How Did Theatrical Performance Become Protest?**

Opposition to the Vietnam War created a great deal of turmoil in the United States that rippled across the globe. Opposition to the war led to a thin line between the protest theatre that grew out of the conflict and the actual protests that were taking place on the streets. The theatre became protest, and the protests became theatre. Megan Terry's play *Viet Rock* was one of the first plays protesting the Vietnam war, and also serves as a mirror to into the society of the time, and to the hopes and fears of those who were protesting. Outside of the traditional theatre setting, groups like the Youth International Party were embracing guerrilla theatre tactics, which helped to distinguish their protests from the hundreds of others that were happening at the time, and raised them to a political and theatrical spectacle.

*Viet Rock* premiered at Café LA Mama on Armed Forces Day, 21<sup>st</sup> May 1966. The show is episodic in structure, with each episode pertaining to different war themes (Fenn 37-38). When writing *Viet Rock*, Megan Terry worked with actors in the Open Theatre's Saturday Workshop to create a piece of theatre that reflected how they were feeling about the war in Vietnam. In the production notes of *Viet Rock*, Terry explains her process;

We used material that bombarded us every day from television and the newspapers. We acted out our personal stories and tried to get to the roots of our drives toward anger and aggression. To deal with the bewilderment, shame, and

confusion created by this war. I felt we had to explore our negative feelings, drives, and fantasies...we tried to get at the essence of violence (Terry 21).

After its opening, Terry defended her play against critics who thought that it failed to make its point and didn't have a strong enough anti-war message. Throughout the play, Terry frequently plays devil's advocate and takes both sides on the war debate. She countered these criticisms by explaining that the play was written to show the real anxieties and experiences of the people who were dealing with them in the real world. Terry wanted to use the visceral emotions stirred by the text as her protest. She sought, in *Viet Rock* to "formalize those sensations in a purely theatrical context (Fenn 43)."

The play's opening begins with a very powerful image; the entire cast is laying on the floor, acting like babies. After several minutes, the women in the cast transform into mothers, who begin to take care of the male characters. They undress them, as mothers do their babies. When all of the men are in their underwear, a Sergeant enters and the scene abruptly changes, and the sons are in their army physical (Terry 29-31). With very little dialogue, Terry creates the image of young boys being ripped away from their mothers and given up to the Army.

At the end of *Viet Rock*, in a cacophony, the actors pose several questions and statements; "Who needs me. Who needs this. Who needs war. Who needs this shit. I'm in the shit. Who needs me. Who. Who needs. Who needs. Who," They then repeat the word "Who" as though they are a beating heart, before entering the audience to touch the audience members and "communicate the wonder and gift of being actually alive together at the same moment," (Terry 104-105). The desire to incorporate the audience, and celebrate being alive together, comes from Terry's desire to use the show to interpret the feelings of fear and anxiety felt about the draft, the Vietnam War, and the uncertainty of the time, through a "communal sharing of the experience

(Fenn 42).”

One instance of society influencing the action of *Viet Rock* appears in the first act, when Terry stages a protest, much like the protests that were happening in opposition to the war outside of the theatre walls. A protestor places an Army Sergeant under citizen’s arrest for “genocide, criminal conspiracy, and carrying on a full-scale war under the guise of an “expeditionary force (Terry 43).” The head protester then goes on to compare the acts committed by Vietnam soldiers to the war crimes committed by the Nazis, before the protesters begin a frenzied chant of various popular anti-war chants (Terry 44).

After *Viet Rock*, Vietnam protest theatre became very common and frequently utilized. The most notable example of Terry’s influence on American theatre can be seen in the hugely popular Broadway musical, *Hair: The American Tribal Love-Rock Musical*, written in 1967 by James Rado and Gerome Ragni (who was in the cast of *Viet Rock* at La Mama,) (Fenn 43).

*Hair* borrows many elements from Terry’s play, both shows have the cast directly interacting with the audience, and have a similar, postmodern nonlinear narrative. The tripping sequence in the second act of *Hair*, specifically mimics the form and language of *Viet Rock*. In a nearly identical scene; both plays see a drill sergeant give an impassioned monologue about “getting” the Vietnamese before they “get you,” followed by several soldiers jumping from a helicopter as they voice their anxieties. (Rado 68-69),(Terry 49-50).

While traditional theatre was embracing the protest, the protest outside theatre walls was also embracing theatrics. The guerilla or street theatre movement was popularized by many anti-war groups (Alter 10). The Youth International Party (Yippies,) often used guerilla theater and pranks as a method of protest (Faber).

Vietnam was the first “television war.” Images of the horrors faced by soldiers were being broadcasted directly into the homes of regular Americans for the first time. To combat the barrage of images of war, anti-war groups needed to escalate the scale of their protests to receive media attention, and get their word out just as loudly (Alter XIII).

The Yippies added elements of performance, spectacle, and ritual to their protests. With the eyes of other protesters, and the watching eyes of the nation, the Yippies had an audience. One notable example of all of these coming together occurred during the 1967 March on the Pentagon, when 50,000 people gathered to protest the Vietnam War. Abbie Hoffman, the founder of the Yippies, attempted to “levitate” the Pentagon. Temple University Professor, David Farber discussed this in his book, *Chicago '68*;

Hoffman, with [Jerry] Rubin’s strong backing, had brought an element of guerrilla theater to the Pentagon demonstration by organizing an elaborate exorcisement... [they] passed out noisemakers, wild costumes, and witches’ hats to intrigued protestors. It was comic theater and a genuine hunger for the liberating force of the irrational lined up against the fierce and deadly reason of the Military Machine. All together they chanted, sang religious songs, and attempted to levitate the Pentagon three hundred feet in to the air in order to shake out all its evil spirits. The hippie movement was joined to the straight anti-war movement and all understood—do your own thing but make sure you do it where it can be photographed and recorded. It was a mass media hit (Faber.)

The Yippies also held several, similar protest-performances; at the 1968 Democratic Nation Convention, Jerry Rubin, a leader of the Yippies, tried to nominate a 145-pound pig for

president. He stated in a press conference that if “Pigasus” was elected, they would then eat him. This was meant to stand in opposition to the usual trend of government at the time in which a “pig” is elected and then “eats the people,” (Lee 215).

To display and protest American greed associated with the era, the War, and the country’s banks, Abbie Hoffman and several others took a tour of the New York Stock Exchange and proceeded to throw hundreds of dollar bills onto the exchange floor. In response to the falling currency, the stockbrokers created chaos and disrupted the workday as they tried to collect the bills from the floor (Farber).

Just as Megan Terry’s *Viet Rock* characters (such as the Sergeant) show both sides of the pro-war/anti-war dispute, Hoffman, Rubin, and the Yippies used the symbols and the ideas they protesting to prove their point. “[Hoffman and Rubin] actually chose to engage themselves with the very American symbols they were protesting rather than simply reject them. By dropping dollar bills onto the floor of the Stock Exchange... they took the chief symbol of the American economy and politically protested in a culturally radical fashion (Duree 5.)”

Nora Alter, a professor at the University of Florida, states in her book *Vietnam Protest Theatre*; “[Vietnam Protest Theatre] demonstrates that it is possible to, during global crisis to forge a community of response and resistance to war... (Alter 186).” Forging a community, getting the message of their projects to a wider audience, to inform and persuading were all goals of both Terry and the Yippies.

In *Viet Rock*, Megan Terry saw the need for theatre that voiced the reservations and fears of society regarding the war. She took the opinions, fears, and political views of her actors-young adults for whom Vietnam and the draft was a very real concern- and channeled them into a play that then became a vehicle to share their message with the public. This made way for

countless other plays and works that demonstrated the anti-war message. Through this, Megan Terry paved the way for the theatre to become a platform for protest.

Conversely, the efforts of anti-war groups such as The Youth International Party took traditional protesting and marching, and added an element of theatricality and spectacle, forcing the media and the nation to take notice. By embracing guerilla theatre, and approaching their cause with the desire to gain an audience, the efforts of the Yippies and similar groups became just as much performance as they were protest.

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