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‘Of Mice And Men’: Keen Emotion Never Out Of Style



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Nov 17, 2015 8:51 AM

By **Lorraine Dusky**

Ten minutes into “Of Mice and Men,” I found myself musing how this play couldn’t be written the same way today—too obvious, too maudlin—but the power of the production at Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor quickly immerses us in the poignant and eminently human story of poverty, loneliness, racism, brotherhood and the emotional heft of impossible dreams.

That’s a lot to pack into 90 minutes, but John Steinbeck’s story of two guys adrift during the Great Depression in southern California has all that. As part of the Literature Live! series of drama for Long Island students, “Of Mice and Men” brings to young audiences moral issues against the backdrop of a dark time, when starvation and homelessness were just one paycheck away.

Right there you’ve got a meaty feast upon which to dine, but Steinbeck adds mental disability in the form of Lennie, a big, hulking guy whose understanding of life and human interaction is severely limited; a black man given the unfortunate name of Crooks; and an old man named Candy, who lost a hand in the brutal work of the field.

Lennie (Preston Truman Boyd) and his friend and keeper, George (Joe Pallister), arrive at a new farm on the run from folks chasing Lennie for a misdeed he really doesn’t understand. Their dream is to make enough money to buy their own small bit of land where they can live in peace and keep Lennie out of trouble.

It’s the American Dream writ small, but to them it is everything. Soon they draw in the maimed

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Candy (Terry Brockbank), who will put up his life savings to grasp at straws for a better life. Just as you know they will never get there, you can't stop hoping that somehow the story takes a left turn and they do.

But once you add in Lennie's proclivity for needing to pet soft, furry things—a dead mouse, a puppy, the rabbits they will one day tend, and the silky hair of the bossman's son's wife—disaster is soon to strike. By the middle of the third act, it does.

Though the program says the drama unfolds in three acts, this runs without intermission. Division is a darkened stage as the sets are reworked. Smart sets they are—and that's a real fire on stage to boot!

The play might have been chosen to bring Steinbeck's work alive to teens, but adult audiences can be equally dazzled by the virtuoso performances of the entire cast under the deft direction of Joe Minutillo. Mr. Boyd's childish, innocent Lennie and Mr. Pallister's long-suffering George, who has found purpose for his life by looking after Lennie, are damn near brilliant every second they are on stage—and that's most of the production. Mr. Boyd is fresh from Broadway. Theatergoers here are familiar with Mr. Pallister, who starred in last year's production of "To Kill a Mockingbird." The others in the cast easily match them with bravura.

Steinbeck's 1937 novella of the same name has been turned into any number of productions over the years: a Broadway staging that won the 1938 Critic's Circle award by beating out Thornton Wilder's "Our Town," which picked up the Pulitzer that year instead; several films for the big screen and television, and even an opera. Steinbeck himself wrote the original novella to be acted from its original lines, or a play that could be read as a novel.

Although the highbrows scoffed at the novella's sentimentalism, it became an instant success, thus attracting the attention of the moralizers who saw that it be banned for a while from school and public libraries for its offensive language, promotion of euthanasia, and—this is a hoot—being "anti-business," according to the American Library Association. Now, it is required reading in many schools.

Be prepared, the "n-word" will be used, as it was part of the vernacular of the era. Chauncy Thomas, as the black farm hand, is compelling as he conveys the isolation of his station. He must live alone in the barn, not in the bunkhouse with the white guys. Yes, there are plenty of reality lessons here for young people.

That the novella "Of Mice and Men" is simple and predictable—I haven't read it, but reports indicate it is—matters not matter here. Greek tragedy is likewise studded with forewarning; it is the getting to the end that evokes the human condition and informs in the moral of the story. Sometimes a straightforward message is the most potent. Despite my initial skepticism, I was left wondering how good plays age well—and in the right hands at Bay Street, this one has.

If your emotions hang close to the skin, bring a hanky. I was glad I did.

"Of Mice and Men"

Remaining cast includes Josh Gladstone as The Boss; Jon Kovach as Curley; J. Stephen Brantley as Slim; Georgia Warner as Curley's Wife; William Sturek as Carlson; and Sawyer Spielberg as Whit.

Sets by Gary Hygom. Costumes by Barbara Oldak. Lighting by Jose Santiag. Fight direction is by Rick Sordelet.

The production will stage through Saturday, November 28, at Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor. Public performances will be Fridays and Saturdays at 7 p.m., with a matinee on Saturday, November 28, at 2 p.m. Tickets range from \$27 to \$50, but are free for students with a valid ID. For more information, call (631) 725-9500, or visit baystreet.org.

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