

‘Of Mice and Men’ Packs a Wallop

By Kurt Wenzel

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Ordinarily, the talents of playwright and fiction writer are mutually exclusive. Rare it is that a writer shows a gift for both, though there are exceptions: Chekov, of course, was a genius who juggled drama and fiction effortlessly, and Oscar Wilde’s novella “The Picture of Dorian Gray” stacks up well against his numerous plays. Add to this list John Steinbeck, who adapted his own novel, “Of Mice and Men,” into a very effective drama in 1937, the same year of the book’s publication. Its simple, tragic material is a perfect fit for theater, and in many ways the drama is more powerful than its fiction counterpart.



Preston Truman Boyd and Joe Pallister, above, star with Georgia Warner, below, in Bay Street Theater’s production of the John Steinbeck story “Of Mice and Men.”
Jerry Lamonica

Evidence of this is currently on display at Bay Street Theater in Sag Harbor, where a stellar version of “Of Mice and Men” is running through Nov. 28. This is a production that elicited more than one set of gasps from the audience during a recent Sunday afternoon performance. It packs an emotional wallop.

On paper, the elements of the play can sound like the stuff of pulp fiction. Two down-and-out migrant workers (one mentally handicapped) arrive at a farm to bale hay. The plan is to work and save enough money to one day buy a place of their own. At the farm, however, they encounter a bunkhouse full of roughshod fellow farmhands and the landowner’s spoiled and violent son, Curly. Curly’s Lolita-ish wife, meanwhile, likes to hang around the bunkhouse in high heels ogling the men and showing her legs while complaining of loneliness. What could possibly go wrong?

But “Of Mice and Men” transcends its pulp pedigree to reach something on the level of Greek tragedy, and Bay Street’s production does well to rip every shred of the pathos from the text. This is a play that lives and dies with the chemistry of its two leads, and Joe Pallister, playing the levelheaded George, and Preston Truman Boyd as the handicapped Lennie are so good together that you could hardly believe that Mr. Boyd was a last-minute replacement for Nick Cordero. The timing and rapport of the two men is nearly impeccable.

Make no mistake: While the mentally deficient but sympathetic Lennie is an actor’s dream, the role is by no means an easy one. Play Lennie too subtly and the play’s shocking climax becomes a wanton act of cruelty; play Lennie too over-the-top and the character becomes a vicious parody. Mr. Boyd’s performance leans toward the latter, with his heavy emphasis on tics and mannerisms, yet never crosses over into caricature. He finds the humor and the goodness in Lennie without sacrificing the character’s more terrifying flaws.

And Mr. Pallister, a veteran in the role of George, seems utterly at ease in a character that is deceptively simple. Yes, George is Lennie’s benevolent caretaker and protector, but Steinbeck was too good a writer to leave it at that. George is simultaneously tormented by thoughts of a better life without Lennie, and occasionally indulges in the fantasy of abandoning the burdensome man-child. Mr. Pallister is completely convincing in undercutting his steady, Gary Cooper-like persona with these all-too-human imaginings, and he accomplishes this without losing the audience’s sympathy, nor its instinct that he is basically a very decent man.

The cast is uniformly good, with special notice going to J. Stephen Brantley as Slim, with his cool demeanor and Marlboro Man mustache. Also notable is Chauncey Thomas as the ever-lonely Crooks, the farm's only black worker, who must live in exile from the others. Georgia Warner has the thankless job of playing Curly's "tart" wife, but manages to bring some humanity to a stock role that is one of the few clichés in Steinbeck's oeuvre.



The set designs are lean and effective, featuring a subtle but inventive use of stage flooring to suggest a drinking pond. And the use of Aaron Copland's music is well chosen in its evocation of a lush, pre-parking lot America.

What is the meaning of the play's title? Steinbeck borrowed the words from the lines of Robert Burns's poem "To a Mouse," which reads, "The best laid schemes o' mice an' men / Gang aft agley" (often go awry). The same cannot be said of this well-acted, highly satisfying version of a timeless literary classic.

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