

OF MICE AND MEN

at the Ventura Court Theatre



Reviewed by Madeline Shaner

John Steinbeck's beautifully crafted play rises again in a brilliant production by the Antaeus Company, the professional ensemble of classical actors founded in 1990 under the aegis of the Mark Taper Forum. A splendid cast breathes new life into the story of itinerant laborers George and Lenny, uncharacteristically bonded in a society of transient loners.

The inherent symbolism of the play rests lightly in the hands of these experienced actors, who are clearly there for "the work," not to showcase their individual careers. Each performance is a gem, though none overwhelms the vibrant honesty and simplicity of the whole. The giant Lenny has enormous strength but the mind of a slow child and a dangerous capacity for literally loving small animals to death. As Lenny's self-appointed protector, George is burdened with the responsibility of keeping him out of trouble, but is bound by a kind of love and his own need for human companionship.

Tuck Milligan gives the role of George a deeply sensitive reading, drawing out the very essence of Steinbeck's mythopoetic language. Eric Allan Kramer dives into the soul of the simple giant Lenny with direct honesty, avoiding gimmicks and quirks. The vulnerability of men who have given up hope is exquisitely expressed in tiny details—in the back of Candy's (Ralph Drischell) neck as he turns away from the others when his old dog is shot; in the out-of-place laughter of a slightly skewed Whit (J.D. Cullum); in the painful anger of Crooks (Hawthorne James), the black

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stable boy whom no one knows or cares to know; in the careful attention to grooming paid by Slim (Vaughn Armstrong), the head mule skinner; in the hyper-irritation of Carlson (Martin Ferrero), whose liquor and Luger are never far from his grasp. Dakin Matthews is fine and solid in the smaller role of the Boss; Jonathan Nichols as Curley and Marsha Dietlein as his restless wife also score well.

Frank Dwyer's direction is straightforward and unobtrusive, lending enormous credibility to a poignant play that has earned the title of "classic."

"Of Mice and Men," presented by the Antaeus Company in association with the Ventura Court Theatre Alliance at the Ventura Court Theatre, 12417 Ventura Court, Studio City, July 6-Aug. 25. (213) 466-1767 or (818) 953-9993.