

# Straightforward Approach to 'Mice, Men'

## THEATER REVIEW

By LAURIE WINER  
TIMES THEATER CRITIC

In both novella and play form, "Of Mice and Men" is a study in simplicity. One can read the story of Man—or just the story of two men—in John Steinbeck's tightly crafted, metaphor-rich prose. It's easy to understand the play's popularity with small theaters: It gives them a chance to show their stuff on an American archetype, as well as display the unbearable poignancy of Lennie, the mentally deficient giant in the tale who always kills the things he loves.

Breaking off from its home base at the Mark Taper Forum, the Antaeus Company makes its debut as a stand-alone company with this off-produced work at the Ventura Court Theatre. Director Frank Dwyer has taken an utterly straightforward approach, as if to say it doesn't matter how many times you've seen this play (or the two movie versions), we'll make you see its essence as if for the first time.

In truth, the company succeeds only variously. Actors will change in some parts from night to night,

but the two main roles of George (Tuck Milligan) and Lennie (Eric Allan Kramer) remain the same. (Also, the role of Candy's dog is always played by the brilliant and heart-rending Kevin the mutt.)

The play follows the sad, inevitable path of this odd couple, two itinerant workers trying to earn money and avoid trouble by doing manual labor on a Salinas ranch. The small community they fall into is a microcosm of humanity, rife with kindness, jealousy and loneliness, marked by the perceived need for mercy killing, whether of an old dog or a human oddity.

Looking like a wiry John Garfield with an early-Mickey Rooney haircut, Milligan is a solid and unaffected George, animated, kind and smart. His tender and instinctual devotion to the giant simpleton Lennie is as natural and easy to understand as is basic kindness to a child. So is his longing for a home of his own, a place where you could just sit around and listen to the rain hitting the roof.

As Lennie, Kramer strikes a nice chord, but then doesn't play on it. He is careful to avoid stereotypical "retarded" behavior; he has a sweetly childlike stare, with long blond hair sweeping ethereally past his face and blue eyes that glow whenever a kind word is said to him. Those eyes disappear under a huge brow at the first hint of

displeasure from George, who is his king, or from anyone else. But Kramer never moves beyond this surface portrait to connect Lennie with a deeper mystery, with a primordial and eternal child that is unaware of its destructive power, and we never do plumb the full tragedy of the play.

Kramer is not helped by Marsha Dietlein, who plays the half-innocent cause of Lennie's downfall, a character known only as Curley's Wife (Janellen Steinger also plays the part). Dietlein's ennui is both too modern and inert, and her fatal scene with Lennie has a flat, acting-class quality.

John Michael Morgan is good as Slim, a decent guy, and Dakin Matthews (Antaeus' co-founder) is an imposing presence as the Boss. Geoff Korf's lighting for the bunkhouse at night and barn during the day is lovely.

Though it doesn't have a burning *raison d'être*, this is a perfectly decent "Of Mice and Men" probably most affecting for those looking to experience the play for the first time.

■ "Of Mice and Men," Ventura Court Theatre, 12417 Ventura Court, Studio City, Thursday-Sunday, 8 p.m. Sunday, 2:30 p.m. Ends Aug. 25. \$16. (213) 466-1767 or (818) 953-9993. Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes.