

'Mice and Men' acts like a brand new tale

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Park Square Theatre's production of "Of Mice and Men" is a deft and delicate work, a simple, unvarnished staging that, put simply, packs a wallop.

John Steinbeck's story of drifting farm workers Lennie and George is one of those iconic stories deeply rooted in the American psyche. Even if you somehow managed to avoid reading it in high school, you know about the tried, true and tragic friendship between the big, strong, not-very-bright guy and the buddy who looks out for him.

The Park Square production, though, treats it as a brand new tale. It takes nothing for granted and doesn't deconstruct. By trusting in the story - and executing it almost flawlessly - director Richard Cook and his company allow the freshness, the urgency and the wrenching poignancy of this 70-year-old story to ring anew.

Being a big guy of the right age and an actor of merit, Zach Curtis has played Lennie and a number of Lennie-esque characters before in his career. He's brought those experiences to the Park Square stage in a stellar performance that captures all of Lennie's vulnerability and humanity.

Curtis' lumbering carriage, his only-slightly-halting speech pattern and the way his eyes are fixed at once on the here and now and on something just past the horizon are all precisely on the mark, never even hinting at caricature. A good Lennie will play on the audience's sympathy. Curtis' very fine Lennie earns our empathy; we can't help but pull for this guy, even though we know how it will end.

Playing George, Terry Hempleman looks like a Walker Evans photograph come to life. Bandy and bent, Hempleman's careworn George exudes a wary astuteness, an all-too-clear awareness of what the score is. His sighs come from the depths of his soul; his rare, pinched smiles barely dare to steal across his beleaguered face.

Though Steinbeck never makes explicitly clear what keeps this unlikely duo together, Hempleman has found a subtle-but-crystalline through-line: In the rough-hewn devotion we see that, limitations and aggravations and all, Lennie is George's physical manifestation of hope. When Hempleman's George carries out what he believes to be the ultimate act of kindness for his friend, his own sacrifice is palpable and immense.

Director Richard Cook modulates these performances well, but he doesn't allow the remaining characters to fade into the woodwork. The supporting cast is, by and large, very strong, from Steve Sweere's stoic ranch hand Slim to James Noah's decrepit and heartbreaking old man Candy to Warren C. Bowles' bowed-but-still-proud blacksmith Crooks.

As the only woman on stage, Carolyn Pool shows both the flirtatiousness and the lonely desperation of Curly's wife, a character so isolated that Steinbeck doesn't even give her a name.

"Of Mice and Men" is playing a limited public run, with a longer engagement of matinees for school kids who are studying Steinbeck. Park Square's staging does more than justice to the source material. It gives flesh, bone and bleak, brimming life to the tale, reinforcing to young and old why the story is a classic.

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IF YOU GO

What: "Of Mice and Men"

When: Through Dec. 15

Where: Park Square Theatre, 20 W. Seventh Place, St. Paul

Tickets: \$36-\$18

Information: 651-291-7005

Capsule: A classy staging of a classic.