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Theater review: 'Of Mice and Men' is simple, poignant

Steinbeck's compassion for and the humanity of his downbeat characters shine through, even in a by-the-numbers staging at Park Square Theatre.

By [Graydon Royce](#), Star Tribune

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Park Square Theatre last produced "Of Mice and Men" in 2003 for school audiences, with only a few general performances. Students again are at the heart of a new staging. That makes sense, given the simple poignancy of John Steinbeck's script. It's a perfect introduction to theater.

However, wider audiences can get in this time. The show opened Thursday, and Steinbeck's essential affection for his downbeat characters shines through, even if Richard Cook's staging feels workmanlike.

From the opening moments, when George (Terry Hempleman) and Lennie (Zach Curtis) reconnoiter after narrowly escaping an angry mob, Steinbeck's central question pokes into our consciousness: Why does George stick with a lummoX who endlessly puts them in peril?

The answer -- and the key to Steinbeck's genius -- never gets more complicated than companionship and decency. With whom could George share his dreams of a little house, two acres, a cow, rabbits and alfalfa? Who else would respond with such an unaffected affirmation of those purposeful delusions (dreams) necessary to sustaining life? In return for such an eager sounding board, George shoulders another man's burden. More important than wealth and success, Steinbeck says, is our duty to each other. George finds that obligation has horrible implications when, after yet again another calamity, he has to acquiesce to the blunt realities of a mean world.

Curtis' Lennie has a childlike innocence, though he's not been pushed to explore the earnest adult lurking inside. Lennie's tragedy, after all, is the awareness of his limitations and his fearful inability to do anything about them. Hempleman similarly might find a wider emotional range in what is generally a fine flinty compassion as George. Among the ranch denizens, James Noah stands out as Candy, the one-handed swamper who is wiser than his station in life. Steve Sweere's Slim is a commanding slice of humanity, and we give a nod to Warren Bowles as Crooks, the stable buck. Carolyn Pool as Curley's wife shades her portrayal with more loneliness than sexiness, which seems a smart choice.

It is in key moments that this staging suffers. The bunkhouse fight, the strangulation, the final tableau -- all could benefit from sharper direction. The first two happen so fast that the tension is over before it builds. The ending seems cluttered, with ranch hands crowding around the dead Lennie. How much sweeter would that scene be if left only to George and his fallen friend?

Graydon Royce • 612-673-7299

Graydon Royce • groyce@startribune.com

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