

# British Theatre Guide

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## Of Mice and Men

John Steinbeck

Birmingham Repertory Theatre

Curve Theatre

23–28 May 2016

“Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world.”

In 2014, John Steinbeck’s classic *Of Mice and Men* survived Michael Gove’s (alleged) wrath to remain a firm fixture on the GCSE and A level English curricula.

Published in 1937, initially as a novella, Steinbeck wrote this tale of loneliness and friendship, harsh reality and impossible dreams with an eye and ear to transfer to the stage, referring to it as the “playable novel”. Steinbeck’s dream became reality when it opened on Broadway later that year to positive reviews.

Place and time are the essence of this piece; two migrant workers trying to beat the Great Depression, hoping to benefit from Roosevelt’s New Deal as they look for work across California. Liz Ashcroft’s set design successfully evokes the confines of a farm bunkhouse as well as a wide space: a small door on the edge of the horizon in an expanse of sky under a metal scaffold proscenium ‘arch’.

Ashcroft’s design also adds a contemporary feel to the play, combined with choreographed scene changes and actors sitting in character in the open wings, half-hidden in the semi-dark.

George (William Rodell) and Lennie (Kristian Phillips) travel and work together, often moving on to escape Lennie’s latest misdemeanour rather than a lack of work. George looks out for Lennie, a giant of a man and hard grafter, but who is “none too bright”. They share a dream to own a smallholding and be free from the constraints of a boss’s rules.

Landing work at a farm, the two friends soon encounter their new boss’s son, the controlling and fight-ready Curley (Ben Stott) and his wife (Saoirse-Monica Jackson), a lonely woman in an ill-advised marriage and clearly not suited to life amongst rough farm hands. Misunderstandings lead to tragedy as George and Lennie’s friendship is put to dramatic test.

Phillips totally convinces as Lennie, difficult as it is to portray an individual with learning difficulties without resorting to overacting and cliché. He is charming, frustrating and commanding of respect. Likewise, Rodell’s hard-edged George shows a softer side and the final scenes with Lennie are lump-in-the-throat stuff.

Jonah Russell is a quiet, calm and wise Slim, the kind of man they should all listen to, but of course, people don’t always do what they should. Dudley Sutton as Candy shows sweetness with offers to help George and Lennie, yet reinforces the prejudices of the time with harsh attitudes towards the realist black farm hand Crooks (Dave Fishley) and women.

*Of Mice and Men* is all about the man; he needs to work, the work is invariably hard, physical and tough and women are a distraction. The sole female, known only as "Curley's wife", proves to be just such a distraction with women referred to in the context of 'floosies'.

The Touring Theatre Company's co-production with Birmingham Repertory Theatre takes Steinbeck's authentic characters and dialogue, adds a strong cast and new touches via the confident direction of Roxana Silbert. It may be of its time, particularly in its attitudes towards women, however, here is proof there is no time like the present to revive a classic, with *Of Mice and Men* reflective of the effects of a failed economy on a community.

Woody Guthrie's plaintive "This Land is Your Land" opens the play, rubbing in the fact that, for many, owning your own land remains an impossible ideal, with Lennie and George just two more grains of sand in a Californian desert of dreams.

**Reviewer:** [Sally Jack](#)