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“Something that Happened” at The Temple Theatre in Sanford, North Carolina

Reviewed by Kenneth H. Holmes

I’ve heard that *Of Mice and Men* is performed every day on stage somewhere in the world. So why review another production? This one was a bit different, an innovative adaptation, and it worked.

First, let me disclaim expertise as a drama critic. My interest is Steinbeck. I’ve seen the 1939 screen production of this work featuring Burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney Jr., the 1981 television production with Robert Blake and Randy Quaid, and the 1992 film starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich. I’ve also attended performances of the Carlisle Floyd operatic adaptation by the New York City Opera at Lincoln Center and the Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown, as well as several stage productions of the play. And I enjoyed them all.

Of course, the reason for that popularity and enjoyment is Steinbeck’s haunting story of Lennie and George, and his own terse acting script adaptation of that story. Who will forget Louis Owens’s insightful last study of the richness and complexity of that work? In Susan Shillinglaw’s Introduction to the Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics edition of the novel, she observes:

Steinbeck’s greatness as a writer lies in his empathy for common people—their loneliness, joy, anger, and strength, their connection to places, and their craving for land. *Of Mice and Men* and *Cannery Row*, arguably the best of his short novels, owe much of their appeal to Steinbeck’s ability to orchestrate this thematic complexity within the context of the abiding commitment between friends that is love at its highest pitch. (vii–viii)

The Temple Theatre production of the play, in collaboration with Raleigh’s Burning Coal Theatre group, used no curtain, had a Stage Manager on stage complete with clipboard and headset microphone, and employed a Woody Guthrie song and pantomime—all to provide context and setting and scene change breaks. Stage settings were minimal.

At the beginning, the Stage Manager, dressed in modern work clothes, comes on stage with full house lights still on. He looks out above the audience and says "House to half," and the house lights dim, and then "House out. Preset out," and the performance is on. With no curtain, only lighting changes and the Stage Manager's brief comments mark the beginning or end of a scene. Halfway back is a simple flat partition across the stage, adaptable to have openings representing doors, windows, or, as in the opening scene, five picture frames through which the audience sees work on the ranch. Through the center frame is Slim, almost grotesquely pantomiming the swinging of his reins as the "jerk-line skinner" driving a team of mules. At the sides are other characters groaning and straining with the hard work of "bucking barley." And Candy, in front of the partition, sings a mournful rendition of Woody Guthrie's "I Ain't Got No Home" about a tired, hopeless migrant worker.

The Stage Manager then announces:

Hundreds of men come by the road, bindles on their back. There is a beaten path through the willows from boys coming down from the ranches to swim in the deep pool...a path beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle up near the water.

In front of the low horizontal limb of a giant sycamore is an ash pile made by many fires. The limb is worn smooth by men who have sat on it...men who come, work, quit and move on. And every one of em's got a little piece of land in his head. And never a one of 'em ever gets it.

Then, as the Stage Manager departs, he instructs "Lights up," the stage lights come on, Lennie and George appear, and the traditional dialogue from the Dramatists Play Service script begins.

Where did that Stage Manager speech come from? You won't find that in Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men: Play in Three Acts*. But you will find a Steinbeck description of that setting, from which this is closely adapted, in the beginning of the novel (3-4). Jerome Davis, directing this production, reaches all the way back to the 1937 performance at San Francisco's Green Street Theatre to once again use the text of the novel for, this time, scene

L. G. C.  
Chicago

To thank you for your charming letter  
for the telling to back of  
my heart and beauty and  
my heart of my consolation  
has that with me  
from that to  
the entire country  
made of the world  
He would make  
between his  
change that knowledge I find  
happy in my having the  
you thank you for your nice letter  
I am thinking



but by this  
promise. She knows she had to be hard to come back  
and not a play. It was her own choice. She was a  
girl to try to make. She has never had a man  
of any conversation. She is not highly  
knows instinctively that of others to be

Dear Marie Lane  
I have been very busy since we arrived about  
put Gladys away although from the summer it will  
play it occasionally. You really put it off  
a threat for your feeling about the play. You have  
more than it ever before (ask)  
I had heard  
little bit about her as I had  
the prospect of fighting me myself  
I was heart very with last  
is a natural thing for me to  
I don't, who got about the summer  
you and me that she cannot  
I am also glad to get a husband  
It becomes a fun when I am  
here. She has only that one  
to. Has she been treated by that  
any about it for a number of  
years. She knows she had to be hard to come back  
and not a play. It was her own choice. She was a  
girl to try to make. She has never had a man  
of any conversation. She is not highly  
knows instinctively that of others to be



**ACT THE  
NUMBER I:**

-----he likes it there.  
(The window center back-stage swings  
you look on)

-----start bumps on herself.  
(In the first part of the speech by  
starts to step out of sight but at U  
your face darkens with anger.)  
Who you callin' a tart! I come from a nice h  
by nice people. Nobody never got to me before  
was straight. I tell you I was good.  
(A little plaintively.)  
I was.  
(Angerly again.)  
You know Corley. You know, he wouldn't stay  
sure. I tell you Corley is sure. You got  
a tart.

-----no trouble from you.  
(Fleedingly.)  
Sure I got a man. He ain't never home. I  
I got nobody to be with. Think I can just  
my cook for Corley? I want to see somebo  
talk to 'em. There ain't no woman. I can  
Corley don't take me to no dances now. I  
talk to somebody.

-----rippin' your can around?  
(Sadly.)  
I wants to nice.

# THE MUSIC BOX



descriptive inserts. Most of the Stage Manager's announcements throughout the production are brief. The result is extremely minimal settings and setting changes, very quick scene transitions, and a terrific pace for the performance. (Mr. Davis provided me with a copy of the emendations to the standard script, which are quoted here with his permission.)

Even before any of the actors arrives on stage we learn that the hopes and plans of the characters will not come about: "men who come, work, quit and move on. And every one of em's got a little piece of land in his head. And never a one of 'em ever gets it." Where do we find this gem of prophetic Steinbeckiana? Not in the play, and not in the novel either. This is just a little ember from Burning Coal. But it does seem to fit in fine.

Throughout the play, characters who are not "on stage" sit quietly on simple wooden benches placed like bookends at either side of the stage, facing center, as if they were observing those "on stage." Occasionally, one of the "off stage" characters stands and facing center stage describes a sound effect in monotone—"scratching under the floor," followed in that case by George's "Sounds like there was a rat under there. We ought to set a trap there."

Just before the closing scene, after the plans of so many have gone awry, there is a reprisal of Candy's song and picture frame pantomimes, this time of Curley and others hunting for Lennie. Then comes the final scene, up to the point where George takes out the gun and Lennie exclaims, "I can see it, George. I can see it! Right over there! I can see it!" (70). The Stage Manager instructs "Blackout" and the entire theatre is darkened. The Manager then intones from steps off the side of the stage:

As Lennie beheld the vision painted by George's words, a fat old woman appeared on the opposite riverbank. Putting her hands on her hips, Aunt Clara frowned disapprovingly at Lennie.

"You do bad things, an' never give a thought to George," she said. "He been doin' nice things for you alla time. When he got a piece of pie you always got half. If they was any ketchup, he's give it all to you." She peered at Lennie through her thick bull's-eye glasses. "All the time he coulda had such a good time if it wasn't for you. He woulda took his pay and

raised hell in a whore house an' set an' played snooker...but he got to take care of you."

A gunshot rings out on the blackened stage and, after a moment, the Stage Manager announces: "End of Play."

Here again, Lennie's imagined apparition of his dead Aunt Clara is found only at the end of the novel, not in the play.

The performances in this production were sound and professional. Lennie (David Dossey) and Candy (James Fleming) were exceptional. The people of the Carolina Sand Hills—an area far better known for its golf than its theater—had a real treat. I believe Steinbeck would have applauded this innovative effort.

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