

VARIETY

Of Mice & Men

By JOEL HIRSCHHORN

John Steinbeck's reputation rests on his classic novels, yet in 1937 he scored a double coup by bringing out "Of Mice and Men" as a bestselling book and utilizing the material as a New York Drama Critics' Award-winning play. Steinbeck approached writing for the stage with trepidation, claiming, "I don't know yet whether I'm capable of writing for the theater. Just have to learn." On the basis of this riveting production, it's a loss to the legit world that he didn't make playwriting a stronger priority.

Director Gene Reynolds, writer-director of such TV series as "MASH" and "Lou Grant," has a feel for the lonely, rootless, financially deprived existence of migrant workers and a keen grasp of his principal characters. He establishes the odd-couple connection between frustrated dreamer George (David Guzzone) and bulky, sweet-natured but mentally challenged Lennie (Andre Hotchko) with sensitivity and off-kilter humor.

Touches such as Lennie marching obediently behind George, like a youngster playing toy soldier, or mimicking his behavior and lines, deftly dramatize the dynamics of leader and worshipful grownup child. Reynolds sustains a subtle sense of danger even while Lennie giggles, cries and expresses his desire to pet mice, puppies and rabbits.

The darkness increases when George and Lennie accept a job and have to cope with a tough boss (Watson Watring) and the boss's vicious son Curly (David O'Donnell). Lennie's fatal flaw is a physical strength he can't control, and when Curly attacks him and Lennie finally fights back, he breaks every bone in Curly's hand. George's efforts to keep Lennie quietly in the background repeatedly fail.

The most perilous threat arrives in the form of Curly's seductive wife, whom aging fellow worker Candy (William Schallert) refers to bitterly as a "goddamn tart."

Although tragedy is inevitable, Reynolds is careful not to make the storm signs heavy-handed. He shapes subsidiary characterizations beautifully, aided by an admirable cast. Schallert's Candy is as much a dreamer as Lennie and George: Old, battered and poor, he still clings to the notion of sharing a ranch with both men, and the veteran actor conveys a lifetime of struggle in every gesture.

Portraying Slim, the compassionate mule skinner, Jack Minor achieves an unqualified triumph as symbol of strength and genuine friendship. Minor, who has the charisma for leading roles, subdues that magnetism and becomes every inch the hired hand who lives without illusions.

Also plodding through a bleak present is Crooks (Ski Carr), a black man ostracized for his color; he's a wrenching combination of resentment and loneliness.

Tracy E. Wilson, the show's one female protagonist, perfectly embodies a deluded, aspiring movie queen. Lush, blonde, slinking around in Shon LeBlanc's vivid low-cut dresses that suggest Marilyn Monroe, she sends out provocative sensual invitations and injects reality into her talk about "a guy who wanted to put me in pictures." Her climactic dance of death with Lennie is grippingly performed and directed.

The relationship between Lennie and George works powerfully because Hotchko's Lennie is so excruciatingly eager to do the right thing, to avoid trouble and follow George's directions. When he says, "George, are you gonna give me hell?," he movingly demonstrates his inability to comprehend the enormity of his final crime.

Guzzone is a stirring study in frustration, and his flying, athletic leap to topple Lennie and silence the clueless giant, before a bloodthirsty mob can catch and kill him, is a stunning piece of acting.

Along with other excellent portrayals by Eric Christie and J.K. Palmer as ranch hands, the production gains from J. Kent Inasy's softly effective lighting. David Bartlett's sound design, highlighting hoofbeats, a horseshoe competition and Muddy Waters' bluesy guitar cues, heightens the gritty ambience of day-to-day struggle in a Northern California agricultural valley.

Sets, Victoria Proffitt; costumes, Shon LeBlanc; lighting, J. Kent Inasy; sound, David Bartlett; stage manager, Dean Kreyling, Elizabeth Donaldson, Amandah Reyne. Opened, reviewed May 14, 2005. Runs through June 12. Running time: 2 HOURS, 25 MIN.