

Theatre review: Of Mice and Men/Royal Lyceum Theatre (****)

☒ There's a strong feeling of fatalism and inevitably that pervades John Dove's quietly masterful new production of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* at the Lyceum. It's as if the play's tragic ending is already there in the fragile hopefulness of its opening, as itinerant drifters George and Lennie move on to yet another low-paid, insecure farming job in Depression-era America.

William Ash's nervy George seems trapped between compassion and exasperation for his friend, the simple-minded Lennie (a soulful, sincere performance from Steve Jackson). Yet he sticks with him, even after Lennie's actions at their previous job almost got the pair lynched. George opens himself to hope when their plans of settling down on a farm of their own finally seem within their grasp, but another unintended yet brutal act by Lennie sends their lives down a very different path.

Ash and Jackson are strong leads, and thoroughly convincing as the mismatched duo, their touching exchanges in stark contrast to the lonely insularity of the other farmhands.

Peter Kelly stands out as one-handed old-timer Candy, who visibly brightens when he finds his future entwined with the hopes of George and Lennie, and Garry Collins is a knot of seething rage and jealousy as Curley, the boss's son. Melody Grove, the only female cast member, brings a convincing complexity to her role as Curley's wife, gradually shedding her flirtatious persona to reveal a desperation for escape every bit as deep-seated as that of the men.

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Colin Richmond's towering wooden barn of a set manages to evoke both the farm's wide open spaces and the confining intimacy of its interiors, whether it's the ramshackle bunk beds of the men's dormitory or the precarious stack of hay bales that serves as the setting for Lennie's terrible deed.

Dove's previous Arthur Miller productions at the Lyceum have confirmed his credentials as a voice to be listened to in 20th-century American drama. In *Of Mice and Men*, he has created a taut, intense production that likewise manages to combine the specific with the mythic, conveying Steinbeck's classic as a vivid, parable-like story whose central message holds hope and despair in a delicate balance.

[Of Mice and Men](#) is at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, until 17 March 2012

Photos by Douglas McBride