

Written by Thom White

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The Playcrafters Barn Theatre's production of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice & Men* begins with a scene in which Cody Johnson's George and Ed Villarreal's Lenny share a slow and (mostly) gentle conversation about their plans to work as ranch hands, and their dreams of using their money to buy their own piece of land and "live off the fat" of it. The patient way in which Johnson, with obvious compassion, speaks with Villarreal's not-so-bright Lenny leaves no doubt as to George's sincere concern for his daft companion, and Lenny's wide-eyed trust, shown as he hangs onto every word George says, suggests the loving connection Lenny has with George. Their relationship is immediately both clear and touching, and sets the foundation for the deeply emotional events that transpire through the course of this story.

Director Tristan Tapscott smartly maintains this scene's deliberate pace throughout *Of Mice & Men*'s presentation, allowing plot points – including the several deaths that occur – to unfold in a seemingly natural progression, rather than attempting to build up to them and force moments of high emotion. For me, this heightened the anticipation of what was to come during Friday's performance, and gave the climactic moment greater impact; the harsh reality of the ending rang out in distinct contrast to the earlier, leisurely life of the ranch hands, resting and interacting in their bunk house at the ends of their work days.



Much to his credit, Tapscott also drops all pretense of machismo in his male characters. These

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ranch workers are not stereotypical "men's men," throwing their weight around and putting on airs. Instead, each character seems natural, with sincerity emanating from every characterization. I believed them to be true, from Chris Zayner's hotheaded, jealous Curly, the ranch owner's son, to Mike Kelly's amiable, happy-go-lucky Candy, the crippled ranch hand who is worried that his days of usefulness are numbered. (Kelly makes good, consistent use of a sort of giggle at the end of many of his lines that helps define his character's personality, with his high-pitched, nasally deliveries of "hm-hm-hm-hm" rising in tone and inflection on the final "hm"s.)

It's Johnson, however, who drives the plot through George's clearly deep platonic love for Lenny. While his George does lose patience with Lenny and yells at him, those moments never betray his concern, but rather come across in a way similar to how family members lose patience with each other after too much time together. Johnson, caring for Villarreal's Lenny with palpable genuineness, makes it difficult not to sympathize with his character; even knowing what he would go through before it happened, my heart still broke during the play's most familiar (and poignant) moments because of how much I liked and admired this George.



Villarreal, frankly, surprised me here. Given the poise and intelligence of his performance in the District Theatre's *The Agony & the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* last year, I will admit that I expected the actor's intellect to belie this Lenny's ignorance. That is not the case, though, as Villarreal manages to possess the soul of a child in his depiction, and his Lenny is all the more heartrending for it. This is most evident in his attempts to hide the soft, furry things Lenny is so fond of, from the dead mouse to the newborn puppy, cradling them as though nothing else mattered and losing them would be the most painful thing he's ever endured.

Also of note amongst *Of Mice & Men's* cast is Ann Grafft as Curley's (unnamed) wife. Playing the ranch's only (and tarty) female, Grafft seems to blend the pouty delivery of a young Judy Garland with the brightness of Amy Adams, but tinged with a naughty nature filled with sexual undertones. And Jonathan Grafft leaves no question that his Slim should be highly respected by everyone in sight, given the authority in the actor's demeanor and speech and the levelheadedness of his reactions to event – as well as his understanding of the relationship between George and Lenny.

My only disappointment with Playcrafters' *Of Mice and Men*, in truth, was that Friday's performance was poorly attended relative to other opening nights at the theatre. I hope that was

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due to the icy weather and will not be true of subsequent performances, as this effective telling of such a touching tale deserves to be seen. And don't forget to bring some tissues.

Of Mice & Men runs at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre (4950 35th Avenue, Moline) through January 19, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)762-0330 or visiting Playcrafters.com