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## Directing of Mice and Men

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DIRECTING OF MICE AND MEN

by

James Leavell Edwards

A Thesis Submitted to the  
Honors Department in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree of  
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Project and Thesis Advisor

Utah State University  
Logan, Utah

1973

To Lynne,  
and to the company  
of this production

## INTRODUCTION

The work of the playwright is necessarily an interpretation and reflection of his time. The work of the company in a theatrical production is necessarily an interpretation and reflection of the playwright as he is seen through their own time. These works are readily perceived by the audience in the living theatre experiences through the sensory impressions of their eyes and ears.

In contrast to that which the audience perceives, the world of the director is unknown. Despite the fact that he is the premier artistic coordinator, his job is completed when the curtain rises, with the spectators viewing the finished product and knowing little of its inception and creation.

This thesis will show what goes into and comes out of the director's analyzing, interpreting, and mounting of a production of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men.

ANALYSIS:  
The Director's Concept

Of course, the first step for any director is the careful screening of plays in order to select one for production. His choice will be based on a complex combination of considerations: his personal tastes, a knowledge of the qualities and structure of drama, the characteristics of his prospective audience, a thorough knowledge of his own capabilities and limitations, the casting pool, the physical facilities and materials available, and a myriad of other aspects. I chose to direct Of Mice and Men because it is a profoundly moving, vital piece of American drama that has a potentially volatile emotional impact. Its interest in and portrayal of the common man and the rural United States could easily be identified with by audience members. It was a show that would not suffer from being staged inexpensively and would require little, if any, expenditures beyond the payment of royalties. It would offer an excellent testing and training ground for actors to work on the deep, well rounded characters supplied by Steinbeck. I could cast from the available personnel, and it was not so large a cast as to cause logistics problems. The conflict and plot progression supplied a strong scaffold upon which to base a play. Finally, because of all of these elements combined, it offered a definite challenge to my training and abilities as a director, affording me a wide field for experimentation and learning.

The analysis of the selected play is the next step of production, before any casting or rehearsing. This is similar to the maestro who must know his symphony score thoroughly, each movement and every note,

before conducting his orchestra in its performance. This analysis of the play is more than a literary exercise in that the script must not only be delved into as a written work, but also as the very basis for mounting the piece as living theatre. Even at this early stage of analysis, the director is formulating ideas and pictures that will be used in his work on the production.

Of Mice and Men is an intense melodrama with some psychological and emotional touches similar to Arthur Miller's theoretical "tragedy of the common man."<sup>1</sup> Its statement on the treatment of fellow human beings extends far beyond the story of George and Lennie and the confines of the Salinas Valley. Steinbeck condemns those who prey on the infirmities and/or inferiorities of others in an attempt to bolster and brighten their own ego. Secondly, the redeeming qualities of mankind are to be found in the fact that an attempt is made to help other men in spite of the impossibility of helping one another. In the face of the futility of extending a helping hand, a union can be formed to combat all that life can throw. Optimism is an eternal constant, for it is not the results of the bond between men, nor the almost inevitable loss of the battle against the forces of life, nor the lack of these results that are important, but the fact that one always strives on, never yielding to unbearable odds. The undertaking of the quest is the ultimate significance of man. In a way, Steinbeck was looking ahead to the existentialist philosophy.

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur Miller, "An Introduction to Collected Plays," in The Modern Theatre, ed. by Daniel Seltzer (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967). Also "The Tragedy of the Common Man," in Tragedy: Vision and Form, ed. by Robert W. Corrigan (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing Co., 1965).

Of Mice and Men is a profoundly moving study of love, loneliness, hope, and despair, compact in form and subtle in movement and change. There is hardly a respite given from the opening scene to the closing curtain in the accelerating intensity of emotion and dramatic action. And when we do glimpse some relief, it is only to increase the strength of the next blow. The dramatic questions of the play linger in the forefront throughout the work, and their answers leave us with more questions, including those concerning all mankind.

The play's premise of the all-important quest is shown through the relationship of the two characters, George Milton and Lennie Small and through their encounters with the other characters in the play. We are shown and feel their love, hope, despair, and loneliness. It is a play of many levels, and all too often the obvious is overlooked in an attempt to get at what is supposedly deeper and more profound. In the case of George and Lennie, that which is readily apparent is as profound, and possibly more so, than any conclusions or insinuations that may be imposed on the author's work. Because there is so much to this play, the director may find it more difficult to show the importance of the obvious, which is, in this case, a great factor in the success or failure of the production of Of Mice and Men. The obvious is the very nature of the characters of George and Lennie and the bond of love and dependence between them. They are not like all the other drifters who have no one and nothing, because they have each other. The affectionate devotion of the child-like Lennie and the masterful controlling care of George make them each stronger together than they could ever possibly be apart. It is not only the

events or actions that carry the impact of this play, but the complexities of this seemingly simple friendship, complexities which must be played. This can be difficult, for though George and Lennie share the play, they each have their own life dramas to play out: Lennie in his awkward and often disastrous dealings with a world he cannot understand, and George in his attempt to live an independent life style while caring for and unconsciously depending on Lennie. This ironic dependence of George on Lennie is one of the most profound ideas of the play, quite obviously inherent in their characters and relationship though often overlooked. Without Lennie and without their pipe dreams, George Milton would be just another migrant farm worker, going nowhere.

Modern drama focuses directly on the imitation of a small excerpt of a common life in its most extreme, and in doing so it all too often excludes the auditors, their fears and pities, while occasionally promoting a little excitement through suspense and/or violence. It is generally accepted today that the modern theatre's general pattern of development has been one of a gradual but steady shift away from universal philosophical and social concerns towards the crises and conflicts of men's inner and private lives. This usually means the decease of great drama, for we are no longer in the time when great men greatly endure great hardship, but where a common man suffers interminably with no relief and for no reason. On the other hand, the works of O'Neill, Ibsen, early and middle Miller, Steinbeck, and a few others leave the auditor not with the limited vision and memory of a little man's private life, but with an understanding and insight of the universal, that which is in all men. Until modern man became



so self-important and independent as to believe that he and only he controlled his destiny, there was the belief that something greater, more powerful and important shaped the lives of men - Fate. The philosopher Hegel said, "Fate is what is devoid of thought . . . Something in which justice and injustice disappear in abstraction."<sup>2</sup> This it is George and Lennie's friendship and struggle in the face of an unbearably unavoidable Fate are more important than the details of their private lives. If this is not communicated through the characters, then the emotion and finality of the ending of Of Mice and Men become senseless, sadistic brutality, uncalled for under any but the most barbaric circumstances. Their joint struggle against a seemingly inevitable Fate allows them to transcend the station of the common man, joining them in a heroism with few men, going past justice and injustice to the point of creating a catharsis of fear and pity for the audience, something seldom achieved in contemporary theatre and drama.

In considering George and Lennie, let us not forget the other characters in the play. Steinbeck has skillfully portrayed examples - almost stereotypes - of the ranch people, while making each a complete, individual character. Each not only has his part in the play to carry out, but each makes a statement on George and Lennie's lives and pipe dreams by his very existence. Whit is a young man, less earthy and less knowledgeable than the rest and not quite sure as to where he is going. Carlson is a mouthy jokester and trouble maker. He accepts his

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<sup>2</sup>G.W.F. Hegel, "The Works of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel," in Tragedy: Plays, Theories, and Criticism, ed. by R. Levin (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1965), p. 201.

lot, but is bored with it, and tries to find or make excitement wherever he can. Slim is the all-around nice guy, but his lot is as hopeless as the rest. He has nothing and he will never have anything. His acceptance of this and his enjoyment of his life-style make it easy for him to continue the irresponsible life of a ranch hand. Candy is the embodiment of the ultimate end of the ranch worker, what men like young Whit will become. He is useless, hopelessly holding on to a meaningless existence. The black stable buck Crooks shows that anyone can live this type of life, though he may not be a part of the system. Life is harder for Crooks, since he has no one to share this existence with in order to ease it. The Boss seems to show that some people are a little better off than others, but position and money do not ease their life, perhaps even make their lot tougher by isolating them from those around them. Curley shows energy, strength, and power without direction or authority. And finally, Curley's wife portrays the dreamer who believes there is something better. She also shows us that the tinsel and lights of her dreams are no better than the dirt and small talk of the bunk house. Her untimely demise emphasizes the fact that no one gets out of this situation except by death, thus preparing us for the end of the play and foreshadowing Lennie's death. Though this is over simplifying the characters, these are the main ideas and must be played in order to fulfill the potentials of the play.

Structurally, the play is based on a series of movements which alternate between intense scenes and relatively peaceful, pastoral scenes. There are two reasons for this: first, to offer needed relief from the dangerously intense scenes which transport the viewer to an

uncomfortable and sometimes painful emotional peak, and second, to heighten the impact of the final scene of the show, which is seemingly of the pastoral type, but which has the deepest, most intense undertones of the whole play.

A difficulty could arise in making the intense scenes build properly to ultimately reach their full, potential impact. If used properly, these scenes can create and sustain the inherent emotion and action. If improperly handled, they could become farcical and ineffective. Rhythm and variety become problems, for though the scenes of quiet and those of intensity are fairly well defined, there must be variety in the way each scene is played and variety within the scenes themselves.

Part of the director's analysis of the play is the decision on the style of the production. The script calls for total realism, and the play does seem quite realistic at first glance. But is it really necessary to have the realistic detail in the settings, sound effects, and properties, or can the proper environment for the action be created by suggestion and imagination? There are three elements of the play that are very important:

1. An impression of heat abounds which adds to the taut nerves and oppressive atmosphere. This impression can be created by lighting and acting techniques.
2. The swiftness with which the play moves is so great that any long breaks to change sets would cause detrimental delays in the dramatic development of the play and in the emotional involvement of the audience and cast.
3. The universal concepts of the play lend themselves to a

suggestiveness which selective realism and characters' inner tempos (the reality of the character's thought processes, his inner life) can communicate to the audience, allowing them to use their imaginations. The play is therefore not bound solely to the Salinas Valley, but is one involving characters and relationships everyone recognizes and experiences.

Because of these considerations it was immediately decided to eliminate the total realism of the Salinas Valley settings, while keeping the characters and selectively realistic properties totally true and believable.

With this analysis in mind, the director's next step is to set in motion the mechanics of mounting the production.

DIRECTION:  
An Afterview

As Hubert C. Heffner said, the director.

" . . . must be an interpreter, as well as a creative artist. He is a creative artist in that he employs all of the arts of theatre in the creation of unified, harmonious, and predetermined effects in audiences. He is an interpretive artist in the staging of plays in that his first aim must be to render for audiences the full meaning and effects of those plays which he directs."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, as the director, my next step after the analysis of Of Mice and Men was the employment of all of the arts of the theatre in order to render full meaning and effect of the play. This includes the consideration and implementation of all technical and aesthetic aspects of a production, as well as the handling of the related problems that arise.

A proscenium stage allows and forces a director to use the most fundamental rules and theories of directing while giving him a wide range of freedom in creating effects through these rules and theories. These include balance, sequence, emphasis, attention to rhythm, pace and variety, as well as picturization and visualization. An intimate theatre affords a closeness between audience and cast that enhances the communication of the play. For these reasons I chose to use the Old Lyric Theatre, instead of the Acting Lab, which would have eliminated the proscenium and cut out the aesthetic distance which is required to keep some of the brutal action in the play from being too painful for the audience. The Thrust Stage, which would have removed the

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<sup>3</sup>Hubert C. Heffner, Modern Theatre Practice (4th ed.; New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1963), p. 31.

audience too far and spread them too wide, was also eliminated.

Next came the casting and with it the first major problems. The Utah State University Theatre had presented a series of productions during the 1971-72 season that required large casts and crews. In a relatively small theatre department this type of season means the total involvement of everyone, with the most capable and the most advanced being totally and continually involved. The combination of such a work load and a full school schedule can drain even the best of people, making them tired and often far behind in their educational obligations. Thus it was very difficult at this point to find anyone of vast experience who had the time, energy, or inclination to participate in still one further production. Those who were willing to take on the awesome task of an all-student production were, for the most part, longer on ambition and desire than on experience and expertise. I accepted this, and used it to my best advantage with coaching, intense character development, and extra rehearsal substituted for experience and learned acting technique. This paid off well in the end, though during performance many of the actors never had total stage presence, a sense of ease and sureness.

There is no credit offered at Utah State University for work in a "second season," those productions not supported by the budget of Utah State University Theatre as part of their season. This credit is not only incentive for casts and crews, but often a source of leverage for the director. In this case the desire and enthusiasm of our company was worth much more than academic credit could have been, for we were gathered together to jointly create a show and to prove

what we could accomplish together and separately when given the opportunity. Many of the cast took on added crew responsibility and thus freed me to devote my full time to coaching and directing.

Since the cast had so little experience, a six-week rehearsal schedule was set up to allow us time for rehearsals as well as coaching to develop technique. This is two weeks longer than the hurried, four-week period to which most of us were accustomed. The first rehearsals for rough blocking went very smoothly, the business having been thoroughly worked out and planned ahead of time. This gave us a foundation upon which to work with more detailed business and line readings while working on character development. There is a second type of directing, that which comes from intuitive insights into the play and characters that the director develops while observing and working with his actors and their characters during rehearsals. This came surprisingly well through an ensemble, a rapport of mutual respect and common purpose, which had evolved throughout the year and then throughout the rehearsal period. The planned and the inspired directing meet and form their own particular type of wonder leaving only that which is correct and fitting after new things were tried, discarded or set, and repeated until polished.

The successful director has a sense, if you will, of that which is appropriate and which is "working" in all aspects of his plays. He may not always be totally correct, being only human, but he uses this sense in his role as interpreter and creative artist to develop the play as he sees fit. If he does not have this sense of drama and theatre, then his productions will fall short of their potential effects

on the audience. This sense is not an inborn instinct, but a cultivated talent that is developed only through participation in and observation of a wealth of theatre experiences. Through this directing project, I see that I am developing the directorial sense. Working with some excellent directors and companies and viewing a wide range of works has helped tremendously to enrich this and thus give me a basis upon which to expand and improve.

I recognized and set about to correct the problems of working with green recruits on a difficult piece of drama. These problems usually fell into two related areas: general acting techniques and training, and individual character development and portrayal. In working with trained, experienced actors, one takes for granted the actor's knowledge of his art and techniques of acting and can therefore spend the rehearsals working on the individual character and the play. Inside and outside our scheduled rehearsal sessions there was extensive work on the basics of voice projection and variety, character development, rhythm and pace of the playing, and overall stage presence. Though the knowledge and consistently successful practice of these basics can only come from experience and carefully studied training, they can be implemented to a large extent by continued intensive, concentrated practice during the rehearsal period of a particular show. This practice is only for one particular character and a single play, yet it can make just as successful a production as reliance on a wealth of experience. Because there was so vast an area to work on in the character and the overall acting techniques, it was often difficult for the cast to absorb large doses of intense training. We repeatedly



worked on the basics of acting while also developing the production itself. Particular attention was paid to the extensive coaching for character development, for all drama and theatre are inherent in and spring from the individual character in conflict. We first found and stabilized character traits and portrayals and we then made sure the characters' interplay with each other extended through each action and through the whole of the play, for both the minute details and the entire production must be considered. If they are not, neither will succeed.

The audience, and in particular those who know the theatre, seemed quite impressed with the characters. Some of the actors did not achieve the levels they had attained in rehearsals. This, again, is due to the lack of stage presence, something which can come only from experience on the stage. The detailed character work and extensive rehearsing kept these young actors from groping for their characters and relationships, but the fear and apprehension of facing an audience with a new production kept them from performing as they had without that audience.

There were times in this production, as in others, when some cast members did not put forth the total effort that was needed. Surprisingly, these were the more experienced people. Everyone must do his equal share, for, as Clurman says,

"The theatre is a collective art, not only in the sense that many people contribute to it, but in the subtler sense that each of the contributors to the final result actually collaborates in his partner's function."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Harold Clurman, "In a Different Language," Directors on Directing, ed. by Toby Cole and Helen Chinoy (revised ed., Indianapolis; Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1963), p. 273.

Thus, when an individual does not contribute his full share, all that he is capable of giving, he hurts the entire production.

Simplicity was to be the main ingredient in the technical aspects of the production. The only funds available came from the Honors Department to cover the royalties; everything else was borrowed. The Theatre Department furnished us an advisor, a theatre, most of a set, the costumes, and the lights. The members of the company contributed some of the set and costumes and most of the properties.

The script calls for a totally realistic setting. In discussing this with the project advisor I decided on a selective realism somewhere between the life-like reproduction of the Salinas Valley and the cubes I had originally intended to use for convenience. The props were an unorthodox mixture of mimed and physical ones. Though this is out of the ordinary, the audience readily accepted it and the actors found it comfortable and not unnatural.

Simplicity was the rule in lighting also, using few instruments and few gimmicks. Through the use of properly colored gels on the lighting instruments, the necessary feeling of oppressive heat was obtained.

The lights were used to create another effect. At the end of the play George pulls a gun from under his jacket, intending to use it on Lennie to keep him from being captured and caged. My intention was to black out the lights at the instant Lennie and the audience can see in their minds the dream farm while George lifts the gun to the back of Lennie's head. The gun would then discharge in the dark giving the shock and impression of the killing without forcing us to view it. This would also save me the near-impossible task of staging blowing someone's head off

in full view of the audience. On the first night of the two-night run, this light cue was not performed as we had set it, and the effect was one of laughter arising from the fear that darkness and gunshots often create. Though Professor Call believed this laughter was natural and unavoidable, I felt the piece of action would be effective and moving if performed as conceived and practiced. The second night, I made certain the light operator was prepared to do the cue correctly. At the proper instant this business was executed precisely as planned. No one laughed.

The curtain call was simply done, also. The lights came up dimly on the river bank scene with only Lennie's hat lying there. This, too, was very effective, the mood unbroken by the conventional bows.

An interesting aspect of the play and of our production is the cutting that I did and did not do. For the most part, I removed the offensive language. Yes, this swearing may serve to show an aspect of the ranch hand's life, but a suggestion of this will accomplish more than a deluge of oaths offending the audience and reducing their receptiveness. Lennie was allowed to use references to God. This, by the way, was quite ironic, because he had no concept of the Deity.

I had originally intended to cut the scene in Crook's bunk room because I was not certain that I could find a capable black actor and I felt the scene interrupted the progression of the play. I was wrong on both counts. I found the actor and I found that the scene was needed to give an emotional respite between the violence of the hand-crushing scene before it and the death scenes after it, easing the first and building to the latter. The scene also furthered the plot tremendously, adding to the conflict and heightening the tension.

As we neared opening, I could see that a style was definitely developing. It was exactly what I had wanted and intended, though the production was a little short of my hopes. The audience reactions were quite pleasing. During the show there was very little restless movement in the audience. They were quiet and attentive until the end. There was laughter where we had aimed for it. There is a large amount of humor in the play, much of it black comedy. We are laughing during a tragedy at those very things which make it so tragic. This irony is the essence of tragi-comedy. There was a long pause at the end before the applause finally came. It came quite loud at that. I took this pause before the enthusiastic applause to be a result of the successful communication of the emotional impact of this production, and in particular the effect of the final scene, which we had taken great pains to achieve.

We had felt that magic of the theatre that one experiences when involved in a vital piece of living theatre. It had come from the use of the established rules and theories and helped to reinforce these, but it also came from human relations and communications that no planning, training, or rule books can teach. Combine all of this with hard work and you have the elements of a good show.

In working with inexperienced actors I found the individual coaching to be the basis for the direction procedures and the success of this production. It gave the actors ways to develop their characters and their play while keeping in mind the overall picture as well as the small details.

Ours was a creditable production, true to Steinbeck's script and

the director's concept of Of Mice and Men. Many of the problems of production were foreseen, all were met head-on, and most were conquered. At this stage of my development as a director, what may be more important than conquering problems is the ability to recognize these problems and to search out ways of attacking them. The elements of characterization, stage presence, individual performance and overall rhythm could possibly have more work had there been more time, but the directing and coaching of the young actors - along with their desire and labor - allowed us to reach an acceptable plateau. Judging from the comments of the theatre department staff, the audience, and the company, the production was unquestionably an artistic and popular success. More than this, it supplied the necessary environment for the practical training of the actors and director in their art and craft.

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