

Of Bindlestiffs, Bad Times, Mice and Men

The New York Times; September 27, 1992

By JAY PARINI

1 In John Steinbeck's 1937 classic *Of Mice and Men*, two bedraggled hobos (or bindlestiffs) wander through the shimmering rural landscape of northern California during the Great Depression, taking odd jobs as they move from farm to farm. Lennie is mildly retarded but strong. His best (and only) friend, George, is smart and paternalistic, though he sometimes wonders aloud if his life wouldn't be easier without Lennie.

2 "Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world," George says. "They got no family. They don't belong no place." What they do have, they discover, is each other.

3 Lennie and George take a job bucking barley for a ranch owner and his neurotically defensive son, Curley. And the story -- like Greek tragedy -- moves toward the wrenching conclusion that has reduced eighth-grade English students to tears, year after year. A new film version of the novel opens on Friday, directed and co-produced by Gary Sinise, who also plays George. The sad-faced John Malkovich appears as Lennie.

4 A revival of *Of Mice and Men* would have seemed out of place in years of Reaganomics, Donald Trump and Michael Milken, a time when Rambo supplied millions of filmgoers with a fantasy that masked what was really going on in their lives. Today the mega-deficit has hit home, and the streets are littered with Georges and Lennies. They dawdle in the parks, sleep in doorways and wait in line at soup kitchens. *Of Mice and Men* -- indeed, most of Steinbeck's work from the 30's -- speaks to the condition of these homeless, powerless and neglected people in a manner that compels us to look again at their plight in wonderment and pity.

5 Steinbeck's vision of the disenfranchised is curiously apolitical -- whether he writes about the good-hearted bums of *Cannery Row* (made into a film in 1982 starring Debra Winger and Nick Nolte), the paisanos of *Tortilla Flat* or the lost wanderers with a secret dream of paradise in *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Of Mice and Men*. Instead of overtly blaming government policy, Steinbeck addresses the eternal issues of human isolation and the power of friendship.

6 Although the story of George and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* ends on a depressing note, there is a peculiar aura of human dignity in it, a hint of redemption. "I think we can all learn from this story," says Mr. Sinise. "It's a story about two people excluded from the American dream, which is a dream of owning a little piece of land."

7 John Steinbeck -- novelist, playwright, scriptwriter and sometime reporter -- was born in Salinas, Calif., in 1902. The product of a middle-class family, he went on to catalogue the anxieties and depredations of the Depression era in the American West in a dazzling sequence of novels and short stories. (He died in 1968, at the age of 66.)

8 Perhaps because his imagination was essentially dramatic, Steinbeck enjoyed a long relationship with the stage and screen. *Of Mice and Men* reached the screen first, followed closely in 1940 by *The Grapes of Wrath*, with Henry Fonda as the endlessly resilient Tom Joad. Although Steinbeck did not provide the script for that celebrated film, he did write the original screenplay for *The Forgotten Village*, a docudrama set in Mexico in 1940; for *Lifeboat*, a 1943 patriotic film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, and for *Viva Zapata!* in 1950, for his friend Elia Kazan.

9 Steinbeck and Kazan continued to work on various projects, including the film version of Steinbeck's 1952 allegorical novel *East of Eden*, set in turn-of-the-century California. Released in 1955, the film introduced James Dean, who played one of two brothers competing for their father's love. Though the film was a hit, and Steinbeck went on to win the Nobel Prize in 1962, nothing matched his early Depression-era fiction.

10 *Of Mice and Men*, Steinbeck's fifth novel, adheres to a simple dramatic structure, which observes the classic Aristotelian unities of time, place and action. While working on the book in 1936, Steinbeck wrote to a friend: "After two months of fooling around, my new work is really going and that makes me very happy -- kind of an excitement like that you get near a dynamo from breathing pure oxygen."

11 As with all great works of literature, *Of Mice and Men* moves with the inexorability of a huge river, and it pours itself, exhausts itself, in the sea of our unconscious. Having read it, we carry the book inside us forever.

12 The novel received a warm reception when it was published, but the character called Curley's wife (who is never given a name) remains somewhat abstract and undefined. Except for her low breeding, reflected in her speech patterns, she is largely unrealized. Elaine Steinbeck, the writer's widow, recalls: "I asked John once, 'Why didn't you name Curley's wife?' And he said, 'For one good reason. She's not a person, she's a symbol. She has no function, except to be a foil -- and a danger to Lennie.'"

13 Recognizing the dramatic potential of George and Lennie's story, Steinbeck quickly turned the novel into a play (under the tutelage of George S. Kaufman) and expanded the role of Curley's wife to add more of a love interest and to enhance the melodrama. *Of Mice and Men* opened on Broadway in November 1937 at the Music Box Theater with Wallace Ford as George and Broderick Crawford as Lennie. The expanded role of Curley's wife was played by Claire Luce, to whom Steinbeck explained the role in a letter: "She is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because someone finds her sexually desirable. . . . Her craving for contact is immense."

14 And it is, of course, this craving that brings her, and Lennie, down. The power of the writing comes from the fact that Steinbeck knows much more about his characters than he says. He has dropped a line down into their souls; fishing there, he found what he needed. The play became a hit, running for 207 performances, and won the New York Drama Critics' Award.

15 Steinbeck explained the origins of the story in an interview with *The New York Times* in 1937: "I was a bindlestiff myself for quite a spell. I worked in the same country that the story is laid in. The characters are composites to a certain extent. Lennie was a real person. He's in an insane asylum in California right now. I worked alongside him for many weeks. He didn't kill a girl. He killed a ranch foreman. Got sore because the boss had fired his pal and stuck a pitchfork right through his stomach. I hate to tell you how many times. I saw him do it. We couldn't stop him until it was too late."

16 The rights to the novel were acquired by Lewis Milestone, who produced the 1939 film adaptation with Burgess Meredith in the role of George and Lon Chaney Jr. as Lennie. Milestone's *Of Mice and Men* moves back and forth rhythmically between Curley's marital problems at the farmhouse and the story of George and Lennie, which is largely set at the bunkhouse. Today, that film seems melodramatic, and the simple dignity of the George-Lennie story muted.

17 In the current adaptation by Horton Foote, Curley's wife (played by Sherilyn Fenn, of *Twin Peaks* fame) is written with an eye to an audience that would not tolerate the simplistic and sexist rendering in Steinbeck's book. In the novel, Curley's wife is somewhat dumb. In the screenplay by Mr. Foote, who won Oscars for *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Tender Mercies*, she is more intelligent and innocent and a bit pathetic. Nonetheless, Mr. Foote follows Steinbeck's novel more closely than Milestone's earlier adaptation did.

18 Gary Sinise first encountered *Of Mice and Men* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis when he was 16, and since then he has loved Steinbeck, particularly the story of George and Lennie. Mr. Malkovich and Mr. Sinise played the two men in 1980, in a Steppenwolf Theater Company production in Chicago, and they wanted to do the parts again. But first Mr. Sinise found himself appearing as Tom Joad in Steppenwolf's *Grapes of Wrath*, a stark, highly praised production that won the 1990 Tony Award for best play.

19 One night, as he was leaving the Broadway theater, Mr. Sinise casually asked Mrs. Steinbeck if he and Mr. Malkovich could have the film rights to *Of Mice and Men*. "People had been asking for the film rights for years," Mrs. Steinbeck says. She had just seen Mr. Sinise's performance, and agreed on the spot.

20 To replicate the book's period detail, Mr. Sinise had a whole field of rye planted on location near Santa Barbara. But it is the emotional landscape of the film that is its heart. Steinbeck felt a deep empathy with the hobos and drifters, the field hands and destitute families of the Depression era; their stories still resonate today. Perhaps his novels from the 30's keep selling, and movies and plays continue to be produced from them, because no matter how well off we may feel ourselves, something whispers to us that the Georges and Lennies, though removed by 50 years, are not that far away.