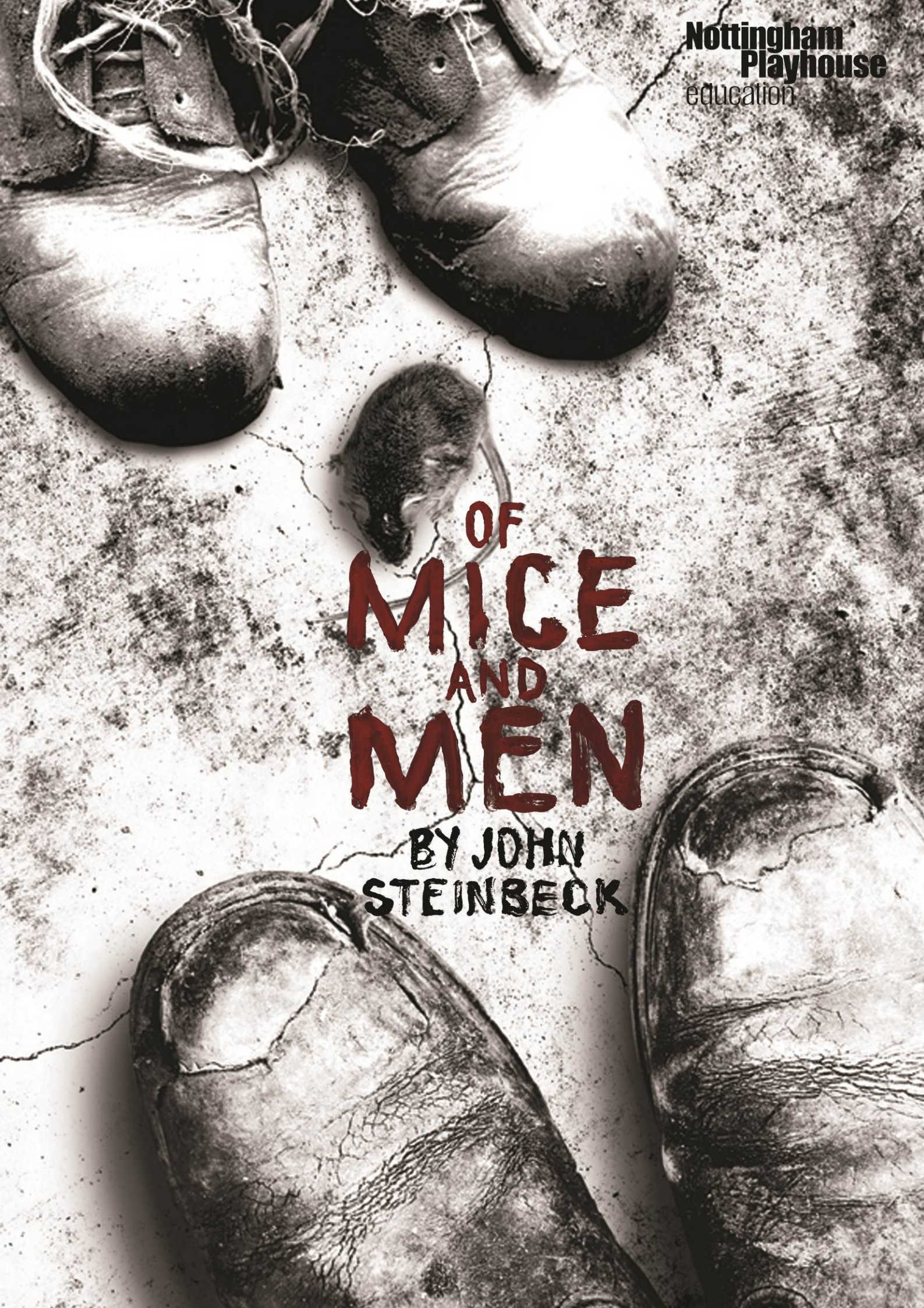

Nottingham
Playhouse
education
OF
MICE
AND
MEN
BY JOHN
STEINBECK

Education Resources

Created by Sarah Stephenson

with Kiran Beri, Beth Flintoff, John Good, Erica Wallis and Kitty Parker

Contents

Introduction

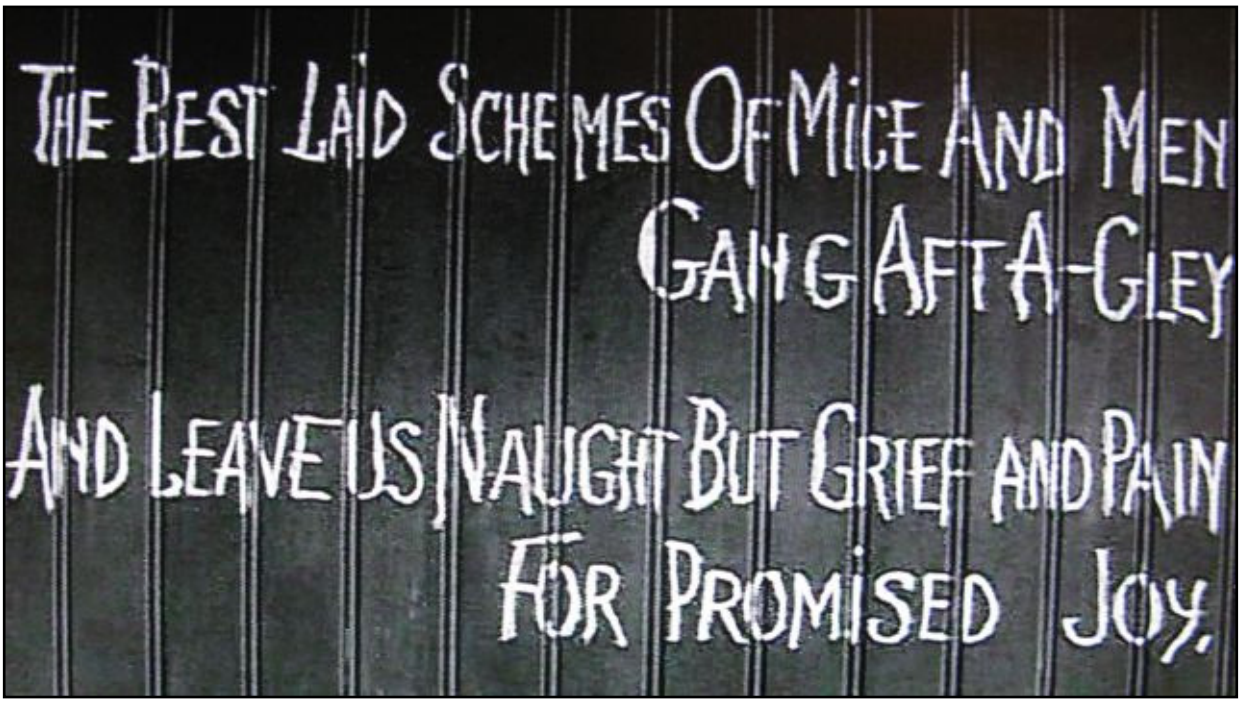
This education pack is designed to support your visit to see *Of Mice and Men* at Nottingham Playhouse in 2012.

The pack is aimed primarily at those studying Drama or English, but there are articles that we hope will be useful for anyone with an interest in the play. Whilst there are some images, the pack has been deliberately kept simple from a graphic point of view so that most pages can easily be photocopied for use in the classroom.

Your feedback is most welcome, please email **sarahs@nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk**

Don't forget that we offer a large range of Take Part programmes for GCSE students including our Upstart Work Experience scheme, half-term Youth Theatres and Critics' Circle groups. We also offer Shakespeare workshops to schools, post show discussions on all of our Playhouse productions and masterclasses, pre-show lectures, and additional schools workshops on productions with educational potential.

Sarah Stephenson
Education Officer



SECTION I

Of Mice and Men: The Novel and its Context

To a Mouse

By Robert Burns (1785)

Wee, sleekit, cowran, tim'rous beastie,
O, what a panic's in thy breastie!
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,
Wi' bickering brattle!
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee,
Wi' murd'ring pattle!

I'm truly sorry Man's dominion
Has broken Nature's social union,
An' justifies that ill opinion,
Which makes thee startle,
At me, thy poor, earth-born companion,
An' fellow-mortal!

I doubt na, whyles, but thou may thieve;
What then? poor beastie, thou maun live!
A daimen-icker in a thrave 'S a sma' request:
I'll get a blessin wi' the lave,
An' never miss't!

Thy wee-bit housie, too, in ruin!
It's silly wa's the win's are strewin!
An' naething, now, to big a new ane,
O' foggage green!
An' bleak December's winds ensuin,
Baith snell an' keen!

Thou saw the fields laid bare an' wast,
An' weary Winter comin fast,
An' cozie here, beneath the blast,
Thou thought to dwell,
Till crash! the cruel coulter past
Out thro' thy cell.

That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble,
Has cost thee monie a weary nibble!
Now thou's turn'd out, for a' thy trouble,
But house or hald.
To thole the Winter's sleety dribble,
An' cranreuch cauld!

But Mousie, thou are no thy-lane,
In proving foresight may be vain:
The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men,
Gang aft agley,
An' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain,
For promis'd joy!

Still, thou art blest, compar'd wi' me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But Och! I backward cast my e'e,
On prospects drear!
An' forward, tho' I canna see,
I guess an' fear!

The novella's title comes from the poem *To a Mouse (on turning her up in her nest with the plough)* by the Scots poet Robert Burns (1759-1796)

The Life of John Steinbeck

John Ernst Steinbeck was born on 27 February 1902 in Salinas, a rural settlement in California, which was to be the setting for *Of Mice and Men.* He attended Salinas High School and, in 1920, began intermittent attendance at Stanford University, where his studies included literature and biology. He could not attend full time, as he had to earn his course fees.

His first pieces of writing were published in the *Stanford Spectator* in 1924. The following year, he left Stanford without a degree and went to New York, where he worked as a construction labourer and, briefly, as a reporter on *The American.* In 1926, he returned to California, where, in March, he had some of his humorous verse published. He had already decided to become a writer.

Over the next few years, until 1935, he worked at a succession of labouring jobs, and it was during that period that the foundations for *Of Mice and Men* were laid. As Steinbeck wrote later, "I was a bindle stiff 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."

Steinbeck's first novel was a historical drama entitled *Cup of Gold,* which finally saw the light of day in 1929. The next year, Steinbeck married the first of his three wives, Carol Henning, and in that year, too, he met his lifelong friend, the marine biologist Edward Ricketts. The Steinbecks settled in California, where the writer spent most of his life. His second novel, *The Pastures of Heaven*, was published in 1932, and in 1933 he brought out a third, *To a God Unknown,* and two short stories, later to become part of his collection *The Red Pony,* which were published in the *North American Review.*

Steinbeck's second novel to be published was his first to employ naturalism; and his third (written before the second), although a fantasy, is set in his native California, the background of all his strongest writing. In 1935, he published *Tortilla Flat,* about the mistreatment and exploitation of Mexican-American labourers, a subject still relevant today. It was an instant success, bringing Steinbeck the financial stability to rely on his writing for a living, and the fame that, for the rest of his life, he was to find difficult to handle. He was a shy, modest man, who was embarrassed by publicity and preferred his work to speak for itself.

The reputation for controversy that this novel brought him was confirmed when, in 1937 (after the appearance of his fifth novel, *In Dubious Battle*), he published his sixth, *Of Mice and Men.* It confirmed Steinbeck's strong sympathies with the working people, but what made it a departure for him was its style. In a letter, he called it, "a tricky little thing designed to teach me to write for the theatre". This intention is clear from various aspects of the novel: the amount of dialogue; the restriction of locations; the way that machinery and horses, for instance, are described only through their sounds so that they need not appear on stage; and the careful shaping of the "scenes" all point to an idea of

the story presented to a theatre audience. In a matter of months, Steinbeck found himself commissioned to write a stage version. As the director of the Broadway production, George S Kaufman, told him, the book "drops almost naturally into play form and no-one knows that better than you".

Of Mice and Men was recast for the stage with few major changes, apart from the building up of the part of Curley's wife, suggested by Kaufman. It opened at the Music Box Theatre in New York on 23 November 1937, less than a year after it had appeared in print, and was an immediate success. Not only did it play to full houses every night, but it also won for Steinbeck the Drama Critics' Circle Award. The film rights were soon acquired by Lewis Milestone, the director of *All Quiet on the Western Front,* and the screen version was released in 1939.

This was a prolific and successful time for Steinbeck. *The Red Pony,* his acclaimed book of linked short stories, was published (incomplete) in 1937. The following year saw the publication of another book of tales, *The Long Valley,* and of the last story of *The Red Pony.* This was also the time of Steinbeck's major works, and he next decided to attempt his "big book" about the plight of America's itinerant workforce, in particular the migrants from the dust bowl of Oklahoma. In 1939 this masterpiece was published as *The Grapes of Wrath.*

It was a huge sensation. Clergymen and senators wanted it banned, school teachers were avid that their pupils should not read it, and the furore ensured that half a million copies were sold within a year. Steinbeck was attacked both for being a communist and for selling out to the right-wing status quo because he didn't advocate a revolution. Nevertheless, in 1940, the book won him the Pulitzer Prize.

The roots of *The Grapes of Wrath* lay in a series of stories Steinbeck had published in the *San Francisco News* in October 1936 based on observations of squatter camps near his Californian home. The following year, in order to bring the stories up to date, he joined the migrants, living with them as they made their journey from Oklahoma to California.

His experiences formed the basis of an illustrated pamphlet, *Their Blood Is Strong*, and many of the incidents in *The Grapes of Wrath* can be seen to have originated from this little known work. *Their Blood Is Strong* demonstrates two important things about John Steinbeck: firstly, that he was able to offer solutions to the problems he raised in his fiction; and secondly that, in writing *The Grapes of Wrath*, he knew first-hand what he was talking about.

As an escape both from his growing fame and from thoughts of the war in Europe, Steinbeck reverted to his scientific interests and spent two months of 1940 with Ed Ricketts, collecting marine invertebrates in the Gulf of California. As a result, they collaborated on *Sea of Cortez: a Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research*, published the following year. At this time, Steinbeck was at a crossroads in his personal life, and divorced Carol in 1942. In 1943, he married Gwyndolen Conger, who was to bear him two sons.

Despite domestic turbulence, however, the 1940s were a productive period. His "play-novelette" *The Moon Is Down*—written in a similar style to *Of Mice and Men*—appeared in 1942, and *Cannery Row* in 1944. Meanwhile, he wrote *Bombs Away* for the Army Air Corps and spent several months in the European war zone as a correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. 1945 witnessed another (finally complete) publication of *The Red Pony;* 1947 produced two more novels, *The Wayward Bus* and *The Pearl,* and 1950 another "play-novelette", *Burning Bright.*

In 1948 he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. All the same, after *The Grapes of Wrath* or *Of Mice and Men,* the standard of his work had declined. It was as though he had delivered his strongest

messages and was now lost for direction. This may well have been partly due to a double tragedy Steinbeck suffered in 1948: his close friend Ed Ricketts died, and Gwyn divorced him, parting him from his beloved children. Soon afterwards, he was married again, to Elaine Scott, but—in the eyes of most critics—his fiction never regained its earlier heights.

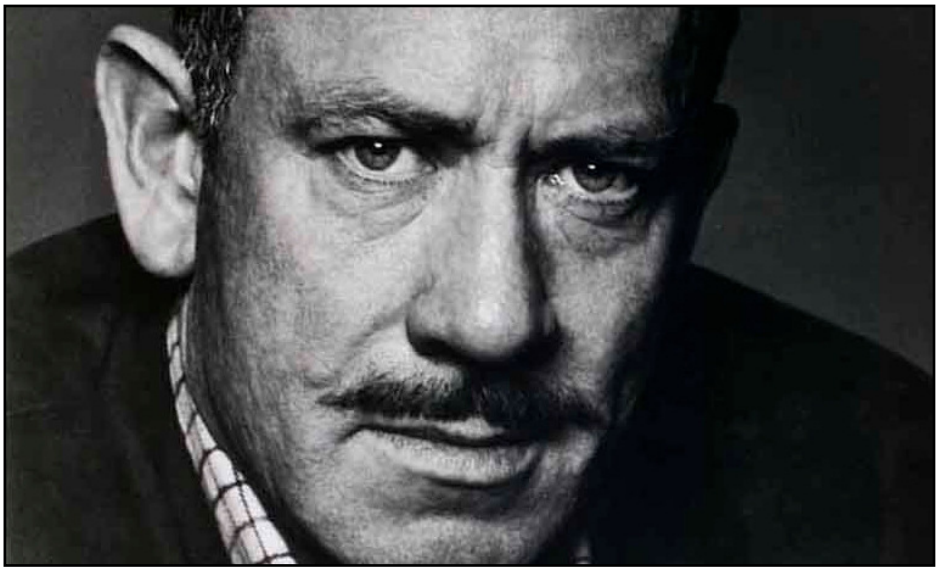
In this decade, Steinbeck also began to write for the screen, including an adaptation of *The Red Pony*. In 1955, he wrote the screenplay for *Viva Zapata!,* which was directed by Elia Kazan. It was an excellent script and his last really impressive piece of writing.

Before that, in 1952, Steinbeck had made a final attempt to write a heavyweight novel that would be critically acclaimed. This was *East of Eden*, a neo-biblical epic, which had some success but failed to achieve the resonance of his two great earlier books. In his last years, he produced *Sweet Thursday* (1954), *The Short Reign of Pippin IV* (1957) and *The Winter of Our Discontent* (1961), but these novels were received with little interest from the critics. Nonetheless, in 1962, the year of his non-fiction book *Travels With Charley,* Steinbeck received his Nobel Prize for Literature. He died four years later, on 20 December 1968.

Since then, his work has been continuously read and performed, and he is required reading in American schools. When *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared, Charles Angoff wrote, in the *North American Review*, "With his latest novel, Mr Steinbeck at once joins the company of Hawthorne, Melville, Crane, and Norris, and easily leaps to the forefront of all his contemporaries." Even Malcolm Cowley, *The New Republic*'s reviewer who never over-praised, conceded that the book "belongs very high in the category of the great angry books like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* that have roused people to fight against intolerable wrongs".

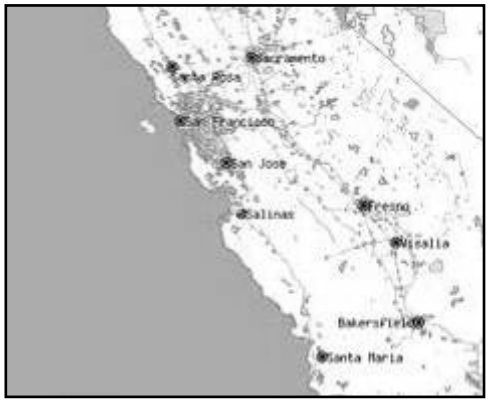
Steinbeck's deceptively simple style and his genius for speaking directly to the reader has inevitably influenced many later writers, from Cormac McCarthy (*Blood Meridian* and *All the Pretty Horses*) to S E Hinton (*Rumble Fish* and *That Was Then, This Is Now*). As far as Hollywood is concerned, one of the main themes of *Of Mice and Men*—the pain of the conflict between friendship and duty—has inspired films such as *The Wild Bunch* and *Billy the Kid.* Even the songs of Bob Dylan, largely indebted to Woody Guthrie, show the marks of an acquaintance with Steinbeck's prose. The basic fact is that he is part of American literature; like all great writers, his is a unique voice without which modern writing would be the poorer.

Julia Elliot © John Good



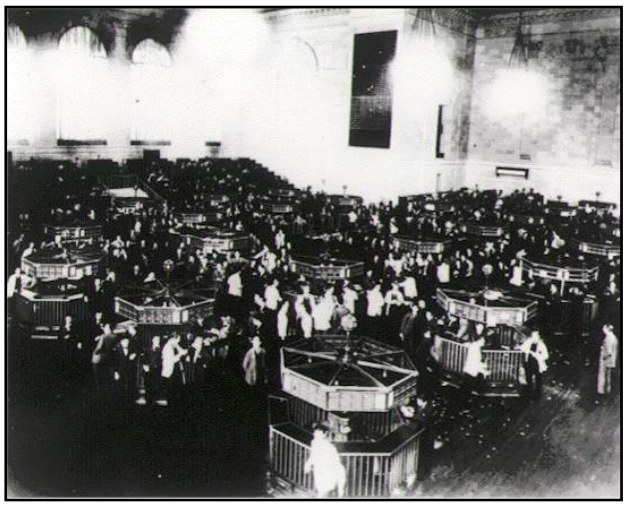
John Steinbeck in Context

1902	John Ernst Steinbeck born in California
1917	America enters the First World War
1919	Steinbeck goes to Stanford University
1925	Steinbeck leaves university and goes to New York
1929	The 'Great Crash' on Wall Street, leading to the start of the Great Depression; Steinbeck publishes his first novel *Cup of Gold*
1930	Steinbeck marries Carol Henning
1937	*Of Mice and Men* published
1939	*The Grapes of Wrath* published
1939 – 45	The Second World War
1940	Steinbeck's first marriage breaks up and he almost immediately remarries; *Grapes of Wrath* wins the Pulitzer Prize.
1948	Steinbeck's friend is fatally injured after a car crash, and shortly afterwards his second wife asks for a divorce.
1950	Steinbeck marries Elaine Scott
1962	Steinbeck awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature
1968	Steinbeck dies of heart disease



The Great Depression

In 1928 the new Republican president Herbert Hoover confidently stated, 'We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land.' Within a year, all the confidence had ended and America was plunged into the Depression.



Top: The trading floor of the New York Stock Exchange just after the crash of 1929.

On Black Tuesday, 29 October 1929, the stock market collapsed. In a single day, sixteen million shares were traded and thirty billion dollars vanished into thin air. The "Era of Get Rich Quick" was over.

Middle: Police stand guard outside the entrance to New York's closed World Exchange Bank, March 20, 1931.

When firms and banks went bust, people lost their life savings and unemployment figures rose to 13 million, nearly a third of the population. There was no dole or support for unemployed people, so food was in short supply and people lost their homes. Many people lived in shacks made out of scrap metal and boxes in shanty towns that were nicknamed Hoovervilles, after the President.

Bottom: Unemployed men desperately compete for jobs at the American Legion Employment Bureau in Los Angeles during the Great Depression.

Causes of the Great Depression

The Depression of the 1930s was a phenomenon which affected the whole of the developed world. The event which most dramatically triggered it was the **Wall Street Crash of October 1929**, itself the result of wild speculation on the New York Stock Exchange. The effects were felt not only in America, but in Britain and Europe, too, where there were also other causes of economic depression, including the collapse of the Austrian credit, Anstalt.

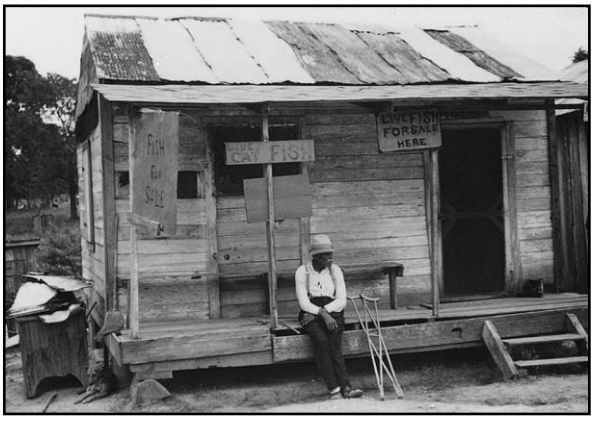
Europe, particularly, had been suffering for some time from **an industrial decline**, due to a shortage of capital and a drop in consumption. World War I had demanded high levels of output that were no longer necessary, affecting, for instance, the shipbuilding industry. All this—as well as the increase in mechanisation—led to **a large decrease in jobs**, resulting in mass unemployment.

The immediate effects of the Wall Street Crash were dramatic. On 24 October 1929, or Black Thursday, billions of dollars were wiped off share prices. A thousand banks went bust, wrecking countless businesses, and at least eleven people were known to have committed suicide because of their losses.

From New York to California, America reeled from a financial disaster of unprecedented proportions. The effects were felt throughout the nation. In the cities homelessness and food shortages, large-scale unemployment and rioting were the order of the day. In the countryside, the hardship was most starkly reflected in disproportionately high infant mortality rates.

In the United States, some of the worst-hit areas were the arid farming regions of the middle states, like Oklahoma, which had been hit by both the Depression and years of drought. When Wall Street crashed, one of the major casualties was the oil industry, whose heartland was on the Texas and Oklahoma Plains. The Boomtowners, who had moved in to make the area one of the most prosperous in the South, promptly moved out again, leaving the indigenous population to sort out the mess.

Another factor in the South's decline was the **rapid mechanisation of the farms**. The land had always been owned by a few, but previously they had rented much of it out to tenant smallholders who would eke out a subsistence livelihood. By the 1930s, this scenario had changed, with most landowners buying up tractors and other machinery and evicting tenants to open up the land into vast fields which they could cultivate themselves. Because of this heavy investment they looked for a quick return in terms of crop yield and so began a period of intense one-crop farming. The effect of this was to take vital nutrients from the soil while returning nothing. The soil was weakened and its natural structure broken down so that the great winds—none stronger than on Black Sunday, 14 April 1935—quickly removed the topsoil, leaving the earth barren; thus creating the **Dust Bowl**.



Migration

It was this combination of factors that led to a surge of poor unemployed Southerners, or "Okies" as they became known, moving West to seek security in California's fertile Plains. Most came from Oklahoma, while the rest mainly originated from Texas, Kansas, Arkansas, Missouri and Colorado. This huge internal migration became one of the greatest the developed world saw in the 20th century—much of it into California. Almost a million people left their Plains' farms in the first half of

the decade, with 2.5 million leaving after 1935. It is estimated that in the second half of the decade almost 300,000 poor people crossed the state line by automobile alone. Indeed, in one 15-month period, over 85,000 destitute migrants entered the Golden State—more than had moved there in the two years after the discovery of gold in 1849. This great migration was not all towards California, but with urban unemployment still high, especially in the Northeast, there were few places left to go. It is among these migrants that Steinbeck placed the Joad family, in *The Grapes of Wrath*.

As they reached California, many were simply turned back. The lucky ones were greeted by the Los Angeles Police, who met them with a "bum blockade" at the point of entry. After allowing a certain number through, first checking they had a reasonable amount of money on them ("reasonable" to an LA policeman being "fantastical" to an Okie), the police simply closed the border. If they were unlucky they were met by vigilantes: local people armed with whatever they could get hold of and ready to protect their slice of the Californian pie. They were not too particular about how they persuaded the migrants to turn round and head back home.

Once in California, the situation for the migrants did not necessarily improve. Competition for jobs was fierce, with two-thirds of the travelling workforce out of work at any one time. With the indigenous Californian population keen to protect their interests, there was extreme hostility aimed at the Okies—a hostility never previously experienced by white people in California. Steinbeck himself noted, "there are riots in Salinas and killings in the streets of that dear little town where I was born".

So there were thousands of itinerant labourers, like George and Lennie, who were unable to find steady work. Large numbers of these men weaved across the state trying to find employment where they could. Many found seasonal work for themselves as fruit pickers. Others took jobs as ditch diggers or building workers. As itinerants, the workmen were wide open to exploitation by their employers. Besides being forced to work long hours for low wages, they were often obliged to sleep rough under the stars. Considered a romantic lifestyle by those who didn't have to live it, the harsh reality of the itinerants' lot is captured by Steinbeck in *Of Mice and Men*.

Most farms would provide temporary lodgings of one form or another, but with only three state inspectors to 8,000 camps, standards were not high. As the journalist Lorena Hickok reported, "Although the growers are supposed to provide decent housing and sanitary conditions for these people, they don't. Most of the workers live in tent colonies, with no water and no sanitation. Many of them live on the banks of the irrigation ditches and drink the ditch water." As the combined picking season lasted only six months and pay was only around subsistence level, the strain on the relief organisations became immense.

The Government's Response

The government did try to intervene. In 1930, President Herbert Hoover, appalled that within the space of a year, unemployment had risen by 200 per cent, allocated funds for the creation of special works programmes. He was painfully aware that he had exacerbated America's problems by claiming earlier in his presidency that there were jobs galore to be found in the cities. The vast shanty towns, or Hoovervilles, that had risen up on the outskirts of most American metropolises contributed in

no small part to the wholesale rejection of Hoover and his policies at the 1932 presidential election.

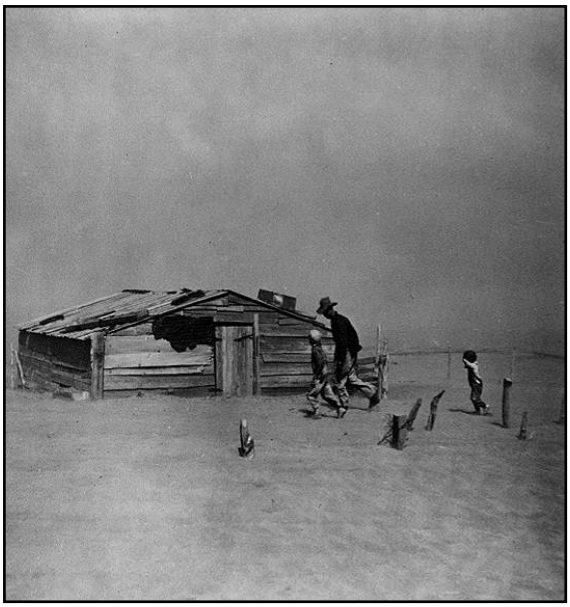
Fortunately, Hoover's successor, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was a man of action. He promised America a 'New Deal', and within the first hundred days of office, in 1933, launched a thousand pieces of legislation. The New Deal was a package of policies which included subsidies to farmers and the setting up of agencies. It gradually made a difference. By the time Steinbeck's novel was published, the economic tide was beginning to turn, although few outside the West had any idea of the true extent of the hardship faced by working people there. Ironically, what really put an end to the Great Depression, on both sides of the Atlantic, was World War II, with its demands for armaments, transport and troops.

It is against the social and economic background of the Depression as Steinbeck himself experienced it, that the personal tragedies of his characters should be seen. As single men, George and Lennie are better off than some, economically; they can make their wages stretch further and can afford to save money. Their dream of buying a smallholding and living "off the fatta the lan'" harks back to a sense of the American dream—the ideal of the self-made man. In the devastation of the 1930s, it is perhaps not surprising that some American thinkers really did advocate this back-to-the-land philosophy. After all, it is a natural reaction for some people to revert to golden idylls when times are bad. In an opinion poll in 1937, 40 per cent of the population still believed America was "a land of opportunity". They still believed in the American Dream, despite all that had happened in less than a decade. They had, after all, little else in which to believe.

Chris Kramer © John Good

Photographs from the 'Bound For Glory' Exhibition: America in Color 1939 – 1943.

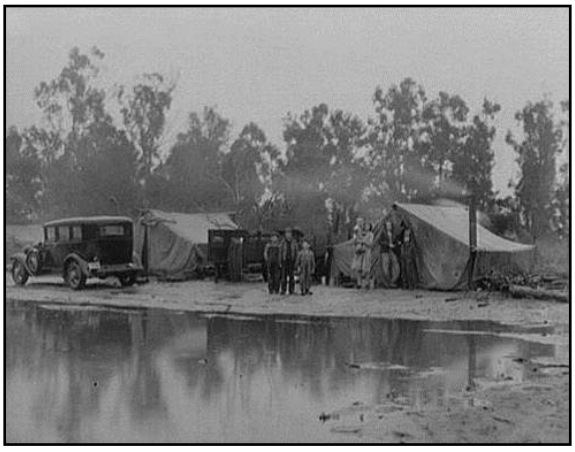
Migrant Farm Workers



Top: A farmer and his sons in a dust storm, Cimarron County, Oklahoma, 1936. Photographer: Arthur Rothstein.

A drought in the central USA crippled agriculture during the Great Depression. It was the worst in the climatological history of the country, made worse by over-farming drying out the land and losing the top soil. By 1934 it had desiccated the Great Plains, from North Dakota to Texas, from the Mississippi River Valley to the Rockies. Vast dust storms swept the region and crops failed.

Poor crops meant that many farmers were unable to repay the loans they had taken out for their land.



Middle: Migrant pea pickers camp in the rain. California, February, 1936. Photographer: Dorothea Lange.

As a result of the drought, workers started moving away from the Dust Bowl to find work. By the end of the decade there were millions of migrants on the road.

Bottom: Migrant workers walking towards Los Angeles, California, in 1937. Photographer: Dorothea Lange.

The Salinas Valley

Steinbeck was born in Salinas, a descriptive name indicating the salt marshes at the mouth of the Salinas River. Some fifty miles south of San José, Salinas lies in the middle of a fertile agricultural region where mainly lettuce and sugar beet but also fruit and vegetables of all kinds are grown. The house in Salinas where Steinbeck was born is now a lunch restaurant, where you can dine surrounded by Steinbeck memorabilia.

Whilst the fishing industry is still important, the incredibly fertile land and favourable climatic conditions make California the producer of almost half the fruit and vegetables in the USA.

The Salinas Valley today: it is dubbed by locals 'the world's salad bowl'. Agriculture is still the chief industry here: in particular lettuce, strawberries, tomatoes, spinach, and vineyards.

Major US food companies Dole, Naturipe and Fresh Express have farms in the Valley, where much of the global fruit and vegetable trade emerges in neat green fields just over the hills from the Pacific coast.

SECTION II

Of Mice and Men: The Production

Turning a Novel into a Play

While John Steinbeck was working on *Something That Happened* (the first title for what became *Of Mice and Men*), a story which he originally intended for children, he said to a friend: "Between us, I think the novel is painfully dead. I've never liked it. I'm going into training to write for the theatre, which seems to be waking up. I have some ideas for a new dramatic form I'm experimenting with."

He worked on the story through to May 1936, when his new puppy Toby took a shine to the manuscript and, as he later told his publisher, "made confetti" of about half of it. He estimated that it would be two months' work to redo it. During that time he and his wife Carol moved to a new house 50 miles north of Monterey, California where Steinbeck was very happy and worked well in his new study.

It was not plain sailing however and Steinbeck spoke of problems to be resolved and searching to "find the beauty to put into it". The story itself had its origins in Steinbeck's own experience of hoboes or 'bindlestiffs' as they were called, and migrant workers. In his earlier life he had been in daily contact with such people and had plenty of opportunity to find out how they thought, felt and behaved. George and Lennie represented two such 'lost souls', but Steinbeck worried that his telling of their story might be too simple.

Steinbeck finished the book, a novella rather than a novel, in the second week of August 1936 and sent it off to his publisher. Their reaction was mixed and, while Steinbeck could not detect any great enthusiasm, *Of Mice and Men* was eventually published in the winter of 1937 and given a considerable boost when, in January 1938, it was chosen as a main selection by the Book of the Month Club; it was soon selling 100,000 copies a month.

Critical reviews tended to be respectful and sometimes complimentary, but *Time* magazine called it a "fairy tale" and negative responses were pretty much summed up in *The Nation*: "All but one of the persons in Mr Steinbeck's very brief novel are subhuman if the range of the word human is understood to coincide with the range thus far established by fiction." But *The New York Times* called it "completely disarming" and another critic nominated it as "the finest bit of prose fiction of this decade".

Steinbeck had always considered *Of Mice and Men* a "playable novel", although the producer who had optioned his previous work, *In Dubious Battle,* was not at all interested in a stage version. However, it was not long before Broadway playwright and director George S Kaufmann asked Steinbeck to create a working play from his story. He had suggestions too, worth quoting in full, as Steinbeck took his advice: "It is only the second act that seems to me to need fresh invention. You have the two natural scenes for it - bunkhouse and the negro's room, but I think the girl should come into both these scenes, and that the fight between Lennie and Curley, which will climax Act 2, must be over the girl. I think the girl should have a scene with Lennie *before* the scene in which he kills her. The girl, I think, should be drawn more fully: she is the motivating force of the whole thing and should loom larger."

Steinbeck trusted Kaufmann and, after handing him the script, did not wish to be involved in rehearsals. Kaufmann was surprised and a little hurt, as he was by Steinbeck's refusal to attend the opening night or to see the New York production at all. Steinbeck was never comfortable with his own celebrity, but sent Kaufmann a friendly congratulatory letter, saying: "…you have done a great job. I knew you would. It seems that for two hours you made your play far more real than its audience and only the play existed."

Of Mice and Men opened at the Music Box Theatre on Broadway on 23 November 1937. *The New York Times* said: "*Of Mice and Men* is the quintessence of commercial theatre and it is also a masterpiece." It ran for 207 performances.

When the play was produced at London's Gate Theatre in April 1939, John Mills played George and what might have been a potentially difficult transition of a wholly American world to the British stage seems to have been a great success. In a review for *Life and Letters Today* in July 1939, Anthony Merryn wrote: "The production, with its superb timing and pregnant silences (helped by a fine economy of dialogue), lifts the whole significance of the drama far beyond the narrow confines of its setting."

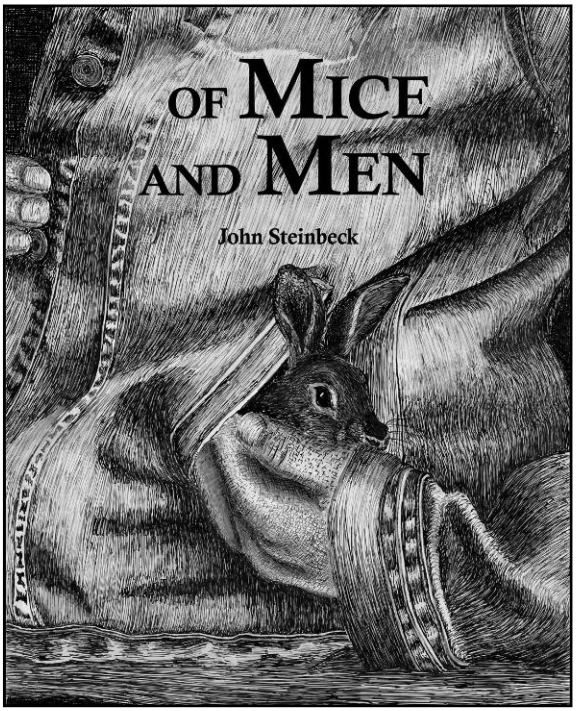
Of Mice and Men was also filmed for the first time in 1939, directed by Lewis Milestone. It was ahead of its time in having the action start before the credits and, with music by Aaron Copland and Lon Chaney as Lennie, and despite later film versions and a 1981 television film, this is still considered the definitive film version of the piece.

Elaine Peake

➲ TASK

Discuss with a partner what you think the main differences are between a novel and a play?

In your answer think in particular about how the story is portrayed to the audience, and characters, lighting and set.



The Characters

Lennie (Daniel Hoffman-Gill)

- A "simple" character, who relies on George to help him live and survive.
- The best way to describe him is as a tame dog, with George as his master. Steinbeck portrays him as animal, describing his movements as a "…bear who drags his paws". Like a dog, he is also very loyal, he does what he is told and can "bite when needed".
- He has the mind and mannerisms of an inquisitive animal.
- The only way he can work is by being instructed to do tasks – not from his own initiative.
- He is a caring individual, demonstrated by the way he is with animals.
- He relates to animals most because they do not have a voice or opinions. When he is with them he can feel secure and be himself, and relate to his "own kind".
- One of his more obvious characteristics is his height and strength.
- Much like an animal, he has no moral system. He doesn't understand the implications of his actions, or the consequences.
- Lenny does not really change through the novel: he is always essentially the same.

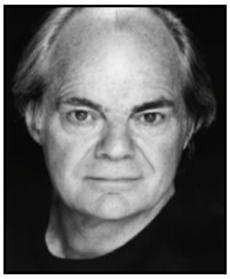
George (John Elkington)

- He takes on the role of parent with Lenny, but despite needing Lenny's company, he is haunted by own loneliness.
- He wants to have simpler life, but this would only be possible by leaving Lenny. "If I was alone I could live so easy."
- George and Lenny "… kinda look after each other". This gives George a sense of security – people don't want to mess with him when Lenny is around.
- Through the play he grows as an individual. He re-evaluates his relationship with Lenny and the way he has used him ("He made me look god damn smart"). This leads to the point where he removes Lennie from his life completely, thus killing the paternal part of him. This makes him less sensitive and "more of a man".

Slim (Mark Jardine)

- The intellectually superior character.
- He is very thoughtful. There are two sides to him: rough and ready; skilful and tender.
- He is like a priest to the other characters, holding an impartial view of situations and offering advice to them all. We see in the play when he and George discuss what George is going through.
- He considers what would be the best for the majority, not just for himself, like the choice to kill Candy's dog.

Candy (Robin Bowerman)

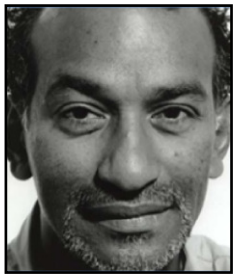


- The oldest member on the farm.
- Knows about anything and everything that goes on.
- The most important person as regards the "dream", because he has the money.
- A metaphor for the idea that people should not be judged from the outside (his disability) but from their internal qualities.

Curley (David Beckford)

- The main antagonist in the play.
- The boss's son, which gives him gravity and status.
- He is a metaphor for the injustice that the migrant workers suffered.
- His character is a metaphor for how women are treated (the glove on his hand): "…ol' glove full o Vaseline…says he keeps it for his wife".

Crooks (Jim Findley)

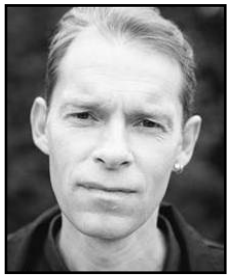


- Crooks is a black stable hand.
- His character is a metaphor for how people who are 'different' fit in within the society of the West.
- His pessimism about the 'dream' and opinion that the ranch hands will never change provide a reality-check.

Curley's wife (Bridie Higson)

- The young, attractive wife of the Boss's son, Curley
- She makes Curley jealous by flirting with the ranch hands – she is seen as 'jail bait' by them
- She creates tension in the bunk house
- She is killed by Lennie, and is therefore the reason George has to shoot him

Other Characters



Whit (Karl Haynes)

Carlson (Robin Kingsland)

Interview with the director, Giles Croft

What initially attracted you to Of Mice and Men as a play?

I saw the old 1930s film when I was young, and I remember it being very powerful. Several years later I read the novella, which I enjoyed; so, when I had the chance to direct the play, I took it. I've liked it for a long time, but I've never had the chance to direct it before.

When you were directing, did you want the protagonists George and Lennie to be portrayed differently to how they had been in the film or did you want them to be shown in a similar way?

The actors will have to find their own way of representing the characters, of course, but of the two films I found Lewis Milestone's 1930s version much easier to watch and a much more honest portrayal of what I think the story is about. I don't find the later version very convincing, it seems to me that it's a bit too Hollywood. I feel John Malkovich tries too hard in his performance to make Lennie someone with a mental illness instead of someone who is just simple minded. I won't be encouraging the actors to watch the films, but they probably will.

Do you think that your version has contemporary relevance? If so, how did you ensure that it remained relevant to today's audience?

I think that because the story is based on relationships, everyone can relate to it. You don't need to bring that up to date, it will always remain relevant – you just have to tell the story truthfully. The other thing is that Steinbeck wrote the story in a straightforward unembellished form, so it doesn't need any stylistic tricks.

How did you work alongside set designer Michael Vale ?

I've worked with Michael Vale before and I know his approach to plays. He and I had a meeting early on, where we discussed potential ideas for the play and I spoke about some of the things I felt were important. When he put forward his initial idea for the design, I felt it was right – we hardly made any changes. The set will appear non-naturalistic, but I think it conveys the isolation of not just the two central characters but all the characters in the play. Funnily enough, when I was auditioning actors for the play, one of them said that the characters' lives are very similar to an actor's. You have to make relationships very quickly and you're always living in anticipation of the next job. And so with that, we decided that the idea of isolation is very important to the play.

➲ TASK

Imagine you have the opportunity to interview the director of *Of Mice and Men*. Make a list of five questions that you would ask him, including about any elements of the production that puzzled you. Swap question lists with a partner and see if you can imagine what the director's answer to each of your partner's questions might be.

Interview with the set designer, Michael Vale

What initially attracted you to Of Mice and Men?

It's important to remember that, like all designers, I was approached to design the play by the director. At that point you have to decide whether if it is something that actually attracts you. In that respect my first contact with *Of Mice And Men* was through seeing the film when I was a teenager and being very moved by the way in which it expressed the real trap that Lennie and George were caught in as poor, itinerant workers. This encouraged me to read the book and the play, both of which are written with a beautiful economy.

➲ QUESTION

If you were designing for a theatre production of *Of Mice and Men* what choices would you make?

The set appears to be simple but very authentic and effective. How did you come up with this idea?

Designers don't so much as 'come up with ideas' but rather they try to absorb the content and 'feel' of the play, through the writing, in order to produce a physical world for the story credibly to take place in. These physical worlds can be as many and as varied as there are actual designers and plays and so, in form, they vary from the naturalistic to the abstract and expressionistic – but each time they are an attempt to serve the content of the play in collaboration with the director, cast and all of the other skills involved in mounting a production. In this instance, for myself, I was interested in how this simple story of two men sits in a larger landscape.

Did you work with director Giles Croft on the initial idea or did you pitch your thoughts to him?

As usual, the designer begins a conversation with the director to find out what he or she thinks the play is about and then they move onto quite broad strokes about what it could actually look like. From there the designer develops these thoughts in more detail and returns with them to the director. Very early on both Giles and myself felt that the story had to be played in a big space. I developed this into a simple wide, deep stage with a seamless transition between floor and back wall.

➲ QUESTION

What do you think are the hardest jobs are for a set designer?

What is the thing you enjoy most about your job?

Reading the play for the first time and letting it stimulate and excite me into wondering what it could possibly look like.

Interview with actors Bridie Higson (Curley's wife) and Jim Findley (Crooks)

What drew you to your character when you first read the play?


Bridie Higson

Bridie: I studied the book for GCSE. I wasn't particularly drawn to Curley's wife in the novel, but when I got the play script for the audition, I liked her instantly – she comes across very differently. I liked her because she's misunderstood, and I saw a lot of similarities between her as a character and me as a person. I felt quite protective of her; that she needed a fair chance to get her voice out. Hopefully that's what's happening in the rehearsal room.

Jim: My character is black and the novella mentions how badly treated he is. One of the things that drew me in is his independent spirit: he tries to stand up for himself. Hopefully, the audience – especially the younger members – will understand that people were segregated in America at that time. Crooks even had to sleep in a separate place.

What challenges does the role pose for you?

Jim: I'm playing a man with an injured back – Crooks has been kicked by a horse. Luckily I knew well in advance that I would be playing this character, so I've been trying different ways of moving and researching ways people with this kind of injury walk. I've now developed something I feel is right.

Bridie: I suppose for me, going back to the answer to the previous question, the challenge with my character is making her seem more sympathetic, as opposed to what people know of her from the book. She is completely different in the play. There is much more of her back story, you understand a lot more about her situation and her life, and I have to get that across. She was so unsympathetic in the book, not a layered character at all; major changes were made in the play and you now see different aspects of her character.

Jim: Steinbeck has changed things in the play about my character, too, things that I think make him stronger – which I won't reveal. Steinbeck is a truly great writer and the fact that he can take those months or years in between and then go back and say "This is what the people feel about the work and I want to change it" is really good.

Bridie: I speak for Jim as well: the fact that I'm playing a woman and he's playing a black man in those times, and the play gives us both a voice and a story to tell, is really important.

Jim Findley

Jim: We are outcasts, the two of us. It's a white man's world. Neither of us have a place in it.

What hooks, clues or ways of thinking have helped you interpret your character? What is the portrayal of your character beginning to look like?

Jim: I look at the text for weeks or months before, but my interpretation is also shaped by the other actors and how they approach it. You can't answer all the questions before you begin work on it in rehearsal; you build it together. I come from a village and lived on a farm as a kid, and Crooks works on the land as my grandfather did, so I guess I've got that in my mind. And I lived in the West Indies, in a hot area, so I picture that – I picture the earth.

Bridie: That's how I bridge a character as well, I begin by identifying aspects of her personality with aspects of mine. I like to have a relationship where we are joined. Then it's a case of looking at what has been said about the character in the text, and what she has said about herself. Also, how that comes across: a line can have a completely different meaning, depending on how you say it.
Jim: Another thought is that there are a lot of comments made about Bridie's character before she actually comes on stage, so there's a certain expectation there. There are also comments made about my character before you see him about what he excels at, and that also sets up expectations – and then when you see how he looks physically there's a contrast, because he's disabled by his injury. So that's interesting. But in the end, you can't play what is said about you – you can only play what's there in your lines.

What discoveries were made about your character through rehearsals that perhaps weren't explicit in the script?

Jim: One instance is about Crooks reading and having books. In the script it says "books ain't no good", but when I started working the piece, and looking at Lennie and Slim, I realised Crooks is probably the most educated person in this place – yet he's treated as the lowest. I hadn't even thought about that when I was reading the script, it just occurred to me in rehearsal a couple of days ago.

Bridie: I think for me, it was when we stood the script up and started working without the text. It's obvious from the script that Curley's wife has a hard time living there, but the level of hostility towards her, and the atmosphere that she creates when she walks in a room, is something that you can't get from the text. For instance, there's a moment when she is trying to build a relationship with the other characters, trying to have a conversation with them, but they're not looking at her and not giving anything back. As an actor you don't really feel it properly until you've got five pairs of eyes not looking at you – and when they do look at you, it's as if you were something they'd scraped off the bottom of their shoe. Then you really feel it, you really understand how awful it would have been for her.

Interview with actor Daniel Hoffman-Gill (Lennie)

What drew you to your character when you first read the play?

I suppose the childlike nature of the part, Lennie's sweetness.

What challenges does the role pose for you?

Daniel: Massive challenges. I've been acting for fifteen years and it's probably the hardest part I've ever had to play, because he's disabled and I'm not. It's fraught with danger and that's the hardest thing. It's unlocking his disability, it's unlocking how that affects the way he thinks, and moves, and sees and hears and touches things.

Daniel Hoffman-Gill

What hooks, clues or ways of thinking have helped you interpret your character? What is your portrayal of the character so far?

I've just tried to understand the part. I tend not to think about things too much, I just do it and see whether it fits. I've worked with some actors with Down's syndrome and I've got some of their characteristics at the back of my mind, but I'm not at all doing an impression of them.

What discoveries were made about your character through rehearsals that perhaps weren't explicit in the script?

The level of fun and play in Lennie. That's what's come out in rehearsals. We also discovered a little thing about him being quite vain as well – he's always combing his beard.

You are playing a very iconic character who will mean a great deal to many audience members. Will you be influenced by any previous performances of your character, either on stage or film?

No. I've never seen anyone do Lennie, and I've never seen any of the films. It's completely based on the text and my imagination: those two things meet, and that's it.

➲ QUESTION

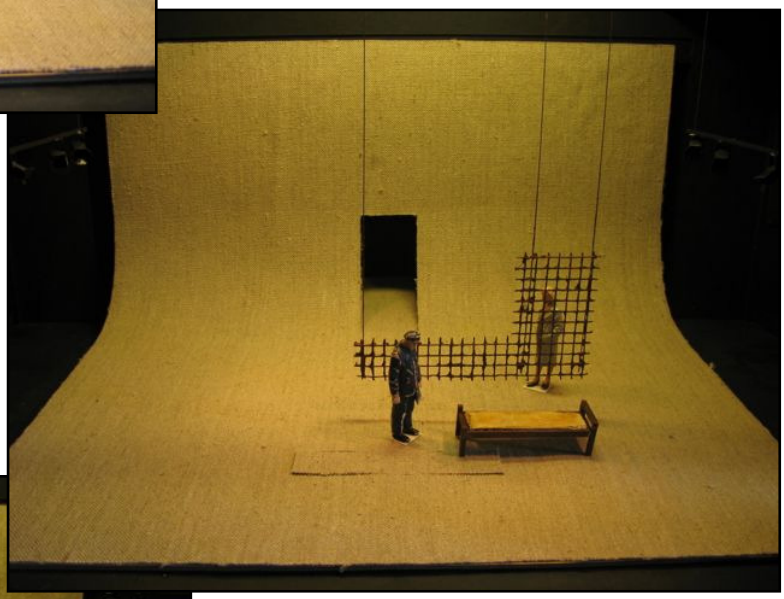
Do you think there is a difference in the way society views people with a learning disability now compared to the 1930s, when the play was written? If so, what things have changed? Is there anything that hasn't?

Rehearsal Photos

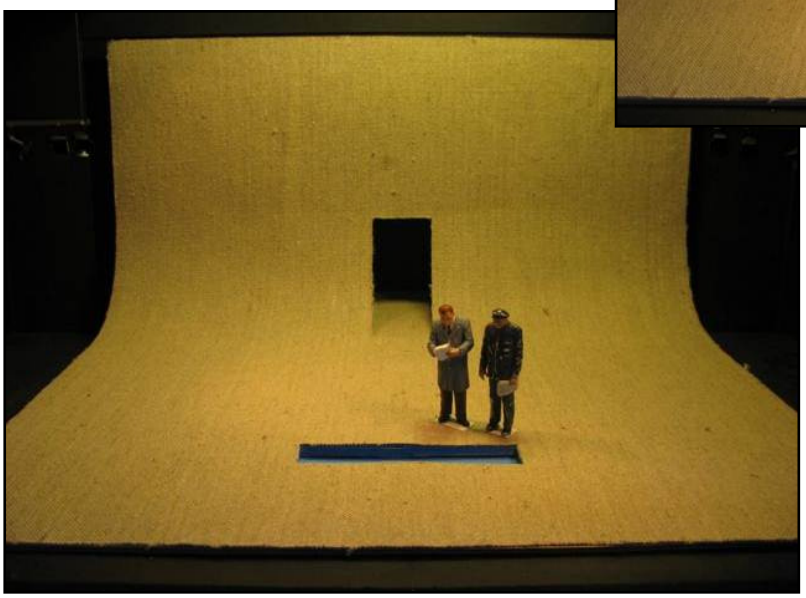
Set Model Photos

The Barn

The Bunkhouse



Crookes's Room



The Riverbank

➲ TASK

Compare Michael Vale's design with these previous stage productions and your own ideas.

The design of a piece should reflect the themes that the director wants to highlight within his/her interpretation. Consider first what themes you want to make prominent and then consider your design for the key scenes on the previous page: The Riverbank, The Bunkhouse, The Barn and Crooks's room.

SECTION III

Exercises & Assignments

Themes

- **The American Dream**
- **Social Status**
- **Migrant Workers**
- **The Great Depression**
- **Racism**
- **Friendship**
- **Dreams**
- **Loneliness**

It's a play about:

- **Migrant workers**
- **A banking crisis**
- **Discrimination**
- **The American Dream and a personal dream**
- **The past, the present, the future**
- **It's performed by a group of people who make their living from travelling from place to place, living a transient lifestyle – migrant workers themselves**

➲ TASK

Pick a theme that you think represents each of these quotes:

Guys like us, that work on ranches, are the loneliest guys in the world. They got no family. They don't belong no place...With us it ain't like that. We got a future. We got somebody to talk to that gives a damn about us. We don't have to sit in no bar room blowin' in our jack jus' because we got no place else to go. If them other guys gets in jail they can rot for all anybody gives a damn. But not us.

"Well, we ain't got any," George exploded. "Whatever we ain't got, that's what you want. God a'mighty, if I was alone I could live so easy. I could go get a job an' work, an' no trouble. No mess at all, and when the end of the month come I could take my fifty bucks and go into town and get whatever I want.

There is a path through the willows and among the sycamores, a path beaten hard by boys coming down from the ranches to swim in the deep pool, and beaten hard by tramps who come wearily down from the highway in the evening to jungle-up near water.

Lennie said gently, "George… I ain't got mine. I musta lost it." He looked down at the ground in despair. "You never had none, you crazy bastard. I got both of 'em here. Think I'd let you carry your own work card?" Lennie grinned with relief.

➲ TASK

Compare the play, novella and film

Watch one or both of the feature film versions of Of Mice and Men (1939, directed by Lewis Milestone, and 1992, directed by Gary Sinise, who plays the part of George). Look at the way the directors present the narrative, and compare this to the presentation in the novella.

➲ TASK

Choose one of the following assignments:

Compare the opening of the play with the opening of the film and novella, focusing on how the directors achieve their effects. In what ways does the play add to your understanding of the book?

The press-kit for the film claims that:

'The character of Curley's Wife was written more sympathetically in the screenplay than in the book. The film version is intended to allow audiences to discover some insights into her motivation.'

Write a dialogue between two students discussing the differences in the way Curley's wife is represented in the book, the play and the film.

➲ TASK

Persuade a producer to finance the film or play

For this activity you will need to work in pairs and then groups of six.

Half the pairs write an outline of *Of Mice and Men* as film directors who want to persuade a producer to put up the money for a film version. Your outline should emphasise the positive qualities of the story and its potential as a film. You may want to make some casting suggestions.

The other pairs write the outline of a conversation when a freelance director approaches the Artistic Director of a theatre in the hope s/he will commission them to direct the play.

Hold a meeting to discuss the proposal to make the play and film with group members taking on different roles: -

Film Version
The director; members of the director's team; the producer; members of the producer's team, with someone chairing the meeting. Justify whatever decision your group reaches.

Play version
The director, Artistic Director, Chief Executive, Arts Council funding panel member

Report back your decision to the class, giving your reasons for it.

'The fall out of the current crisis has yet to be fully appreciated, yet a certainty is that the impact upon our emotional and psychological temperaments will be great.'

➲ TASK

Think about why there should be another version?

Of Mice and Men has been staged and filmed several times before. You may have seen one or more of these versions. In the light of the ideas you have considered during the previous activities, why do you think anyone would make a new play or film version in the 2000s? Which of the issues and themes are current today?

➲ TASK

Questions to consider with reference to the play and today's society

What it is like to be a man?

'"What does being a man mean?" This is a good question, and yet one not easily answered. You can speak of taking responsibility, stepping up, being brave, or just showing up. There are endless descriptions, and while most will have elements of truth to them, they will also lack something. They may truly describe a man, but they will never describe all *men.'*

March 7 2012. Article in The Good Life: 'Is being a man in 2012 different from being a man in 1982?'

What it is like to be an outsider?

www.youtube.com/watch?v=j-LGlou9aEA
Sidney Poitier talks to Oprah on being the only black actor in Hollywood

www.cbsnews.com/video/watch/?id=7389012n
CBS news. Taylor Swift talks about being an outsider.

How do gangs work?

"There is no purpose in joining a gang. It's just a lot of lonely people looking for a place to belong and feel wanted"

Discuss with reference to last year's riots and compare with the gang mentality of the ranch workers in Of Mice and Men.

➲ TASK

More questions to consider

- Using the evidence in the novella, describe the lifestyle and possessions of the ranch-hands. Compare what they lack to what you have.

- Discuss ways in which John Steinbeck argues that 'the best-laid plans of Mice and Men' often go wrong.

- The novella dates from 1937. Does it still have anything to say to us? Who are the 'loneliest guys in the world' today? Are we more or less able to realise our dreams than the characters in this story?

SECTION IV

Contacts

Nottingham Playhouse

Wellington Circus
Nottingham
NG1 5AF

Box Office

0115 941 9419

Administration

0115 947 4361

Participation Team

Sarah Stephenson, Education Officer
0115 873 6231
sarahs@nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk

Allie Spencer, Education Officer (Tues-Thurs)
0115 873 6241
allies@nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk

Kitty Parker, Participation Administrator
0115 873 6203
kittyp@nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk

Nottingham Playhouse Roundabout

Kitty Parker, Participation Administrator
0115 873 6203
kittyp@nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk

www.nottinghamplayhouse.co.uk