

Arts

Steinbeck lives once again in the McInnes Room

by Michael McCarthy

Of Mice and Men, now playing in the SUB's McInnes Room, is a magnificent stage production of John Steinbeck's tragic and moving novel. A good deal of the play's strength comes from the writer's insight, his compelling storyline, and the striking characters he created. Director Joel Sapp and his cast add, to this already formidable base, the magic created when talented performers give flesh to imaginary figures and voice to their poignant anguish.

The magic is enhanced by the milieu you enter when you walk through the door. Country music plays over the speakers. Sapp's functional but evocative set dominates the room. The stage is a ranch bunkhouse, with plank-board walls and pine double bunks. Stage left, a few trees and a log cover an extending arm which serves for outdoor scenes. Stage right, another extension is a lonely room with a small bed, some books, and an oil lamp. There is an odour of hay and barnyard, strong enough to make the setting vivid but not offensive. The seating arrangement is spacious, assisting the establishment of a roomy, rolling ranch environment.

The start of the play, and the breaks, are signalled by a haunting recording of a bluesy, lonely sax solo. This is marvellously appropriate cement for the scenes of this tremendously moving tale of tormented isolation. Of those who, for whatever reason, are separate from the mass of their fellows. Of the hopeless desperation of their attempts to find something to hang onto. Of those who survive, and those who bury them-

selves. Of mice and men.

Neither lead actor has previous major experience. Both perform exceptionally well. Especially to be commended is Lloyd Poirier in the arduous role of Lenny Small, the hulking, pathetic figure around whom the story revolves.

The plot follows two drifters, slugging their way from job to job. They have to keep moving because one of them is mentally deficient, with a tendency to cause damage without understanding what he does. They harbour a dream of a place of



their own, a place where they belong and can do what they like. We see them arrive at one more job, and watch the dream shatter.

Poirier is nearly perfect in his realization of a child-like soul, trapped in a huge and powerful body without the mental capacity to control it. The slow yet boyishly enthusiastic speech; the eagerness to please, and the instinctive yet uncomprehending pain at failing; the awkward-

ness of movement, while still displaying the awesome strength underlying it - all the necessary elements to create the severely retarded boy/man - are portrayed with accuracy, conviction, and intense feeling. Nothing more could be asked.

Particularly memorable is the climactic scene where Lenny, not realizing how strong he is, unintentionally kills someone. When it sinks into his weak, inadequate mind that he has done something wrong, he erupts into a spasmodic, child-like tantrum of fear and self-



beratement. The heart-rending reality of the plight of someone like Lenny is driven home with all its pitiable and maddening hopelessness. For Lenny is unable to comprehend what he has really done. His fear and pain is not centered around the murder - rather, he is afraid of upsetting his partner-cum-guardian, George.

It is essential to the play that George and Lenny bounce their emotions off one another, spurring each other to the next

response. They get by because, as Lenny says, "I got you, and you got me, and that's who looks out for us." This production is fortunate in having two actors who play off one another so well.

George is the perfect foil to Lenny - he is small, quick and bright. James Simpson gives the role abundant energy and focus. The frustration of having to look out for his eternally trouble-causing, yet incomprehending, friend is always tempered by deep caring for him. The bond will never break between them while they live, despite George's quick remonstrances. Simpson ably mixes the ire and softness required for the part. At times, his speech was too loud and rapid to permit proper builds or range of emotion, but this improved as the play progressed.

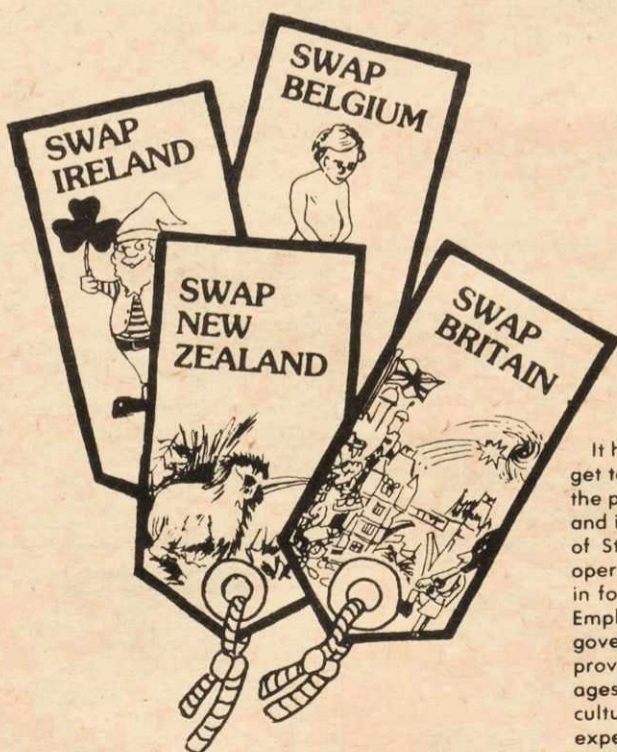
The other showstopper scene is fired by a brilliant performance from professional actor Walter Borden, as the old, black stablehand Crooks. Isolated by his colour, he feels many of the more painful and unjust burdens of being different. Thus are brought out more clearly hardships which Lenny is blissfully incapable of truly comprehending, though he shares in many respects Crook's situation. Borden's rich voice, physical rendering of age and infirmity, and his dynamism are a joy to experience.

Director Sapp also gets good performances from Patrick Gaul, Michael Philips and Steve Tobias as ranch-men. Elizabeth Beeler succeeds as the woman Lenny kills, and is deserving of a larger role in a future production. Hank White is adequate as the "heavy".

John Poulton and Anthony Greenwood are responsible for the few slow and/or unpleasant moments in the show. Poulton has terrible projection, which is just as well since his accent is inappropriate for the locale (there is a distinct tinge of British in his voice). He fails to hold the attention of the audience with his Walter Brennan-ish portrayal of an aging ranch-hand. Greenwood is a bit too nasty and intense, and his responses don't seem to come naturally.

One other problem, although certainly not a fatal one, is the dialogue of this adaptation. It is occasionally repetitive. The female character is given many ineffective lines. As well, the ending could be improved by having George verbalise more clearly the internal struggle over what to do with Lenny, and the factors which make his decision inevitable.

The 60 or so people in attendance on opening night responded appreciatively at the end of the dramatic and affecting performance. Joel Sapp should be thanked for his excellent direction and stage design. The company as a whole deserves praise for the effort put in (they built the set as well as acting) and for the superlative results achieved. This effective production will continue on the 11th and 15th-18th at 8:30 in the McInnes Room, second floor of the SUB. There is lots of room for everyone - four rows of seats at the front and a couple of dozen tables for those who like to watch with their friends (drinks are available just outside the doors). Congratulations to the Dalhousie Student Union who produced this successful theatrical endeavour.



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