

Of Mice and Men

Steinbeck's Classic Novel Shines On Silver Screen

By Ross Owens

A gem of American literature has been turned into a brand new movie that outshines even the novel that inspired it.

Based on the novel by John Steinbeck, *Of Mice and Men*, starring Gary Sinise and John Malkovich, is a tragic, heartfelt Depression-era fable about the strange but wonderful bond that exists between itinerant farmhand George Milton (Sinise) and his addle-brained companion Lennie Small (Malkovich) as they move from town to town in northern California looking for work during a time when employment is scarce and dreams are few and far between.

Battered by the harshness of field work, the pair is sustained by a utopic dream of buying their own farm where together they can escape the world's cruelty and "live off the fatta the lan'" and where Lennie can realize his simple but insistent desire to raise rabbits that he can pet and care for.

With a cocked eyebrow and an agitated stare that makes him seem as though he's consumed too many cups of strong coffee (and perhaps he has), sinewy producer/director Gary Sinise delivers an admirable portrayal of George. But because Sinise is a relative unknown in feature films, it is difficult to gauge this performance in relation to his other roles, the majority of which have been on the stage, not the screen.

The performance of John Malkovich, on the other hand, amounts to nothing short of a tour de force. Frequently cast in roles that necessitate chilly elegance (*Dangerous Liaisons*, par exemple) and even a hint of effeminacy, Malkovich has managed to alter his typical onscreen persona to such an extent that he's almost unrecognizable as an actor, yet totally convincing as a character. Lennie is large, clumsy, strong, and naive. He has a dull gaze, a quivering lip, a volatile attention span, and a tendency to wring his hands while his eyes dart around exploring his surroundings.

As the grizzled farmhand Candy, longtime actor Ray Walston, known to millions of baby boomers as the extraterrestrial Uncle Martin in *My Favorite Martian*, provides what may be the performance of his life. With a withered hand that was injured in a farm accident, leaving him all but useless as a laborer, and a smelly, rheumatic hound dog as his trusted companion, Candy epitomizes the movie's many misfits.

Driven not by bitterness but by a profound sense of tragedy and regret, *Of Mice and Men* provides a poignant look at society's intolerant attitude toward those who don't seem to fit within the strict confines of its unforgiving constraints – people too old, too black, too crippled, too dumb, and even too independent for a world that demands unconditional uniformity.

Although the story is stark, the scenery is striking. The camera's colorful panoramas, which seem to transform the Central Valley into a series of impressionist paintings, are contrasted by the super-realistic shots of the laboring farmhands who behave like automatons, working in the shadows of an inexorable threshing machine as it hungrily transforms vast fields of barley into leaden bags of grain.

Virtually disengaged from the commercialism that has steadily corrupted this country's film industry, *Of Mice and Men* comes close to pure cinema, a priceless realization of the magnificent potential of U.S.-made movies to use powerful acting, solid writing, and breathtaking scenery to go straight to the heart of the American psyche. Like the novel before it, *Of Mice and Men* is truly a classic, a wonderful film that helps to put the moving back in moving pictures.