

**THEATER REVIEW:
'OF MICE AND MEN'**



JEREMY HOGAN | COURTESY PHOTO

From left, Robert Neal, Mia Fitzgibbon and Mike Price star in Cardinal Stage Company's production of "Of Mice and Men."

Steinbeck lovers will find what they're looking for in latest Cardinal production

By Matthew Waterman
H-T Reviewer

If you go
WHO: Cardinal Stage Company.
WHAT: "Of Mice and Men" by John Steinbeck.
WHERE: Buskirk-Chumley Theater, 114 E. Kirkwood Ave., Bloomington.
WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Saturday; 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; 6 p.m. Sunday.
TICKETS: \$10.95-\$31.95. Available online at cardinal-stage.org or in person at 900 S. Walnut St. Call 812-336-9300.

John Steinbeck's "Dust Bowl Trilogy," a series of novels he wrote in the latter half of the 1930s, is remembered by many Americans as the required reading of their youth. "In Dubious Battle," "The Grapes of Wrath" and "Of Mice and Men" all make frequent appearances on syllabi for high school English courses (especially the last two works).

It was Steinbeck's own stint as a "bindlestiff" (Depression-era jargon for the sort of hobo who sometimes worked as a migrant farm worker) that would instill in him and his Dust Bowl Trilogy a profound empathy for the plight of agricultural laborers.

Cardinal Stage Company opens its 2015-16 season in the Buskirk-Chumley Theater with Steinbeck's own stage adaptation of "Of Mice and Men." Steinbeck, who conceived the work as equally suited for prose and drama, finished the play in 1937, the same year as the release of the novella.

Cardinal's production, ably directed by Randy White, is part of the IU College of Arts and Sciences' 2015 "Themester" program. This year's theme, a fitting one for "Of Mice and Men," is "Work: The Nature of Labor on a Changing Planet."

"Of Mice and Men" is fresh on the minds of theater professionals and audiences after the acclaimed 2014 Broadway revival starring James Franco and Chris O'Dowd, who received a Tony nomination for his portrayal of Lennie.

The play opens on George Milton (Mike Price) and Lennie Small (Robert Neal), two men who travel around California performing taxing farm labor for low wages.

Although he frequently reproaches Lennie for his clumsy mistakes, George acts as a sort of caretaker for Lennie. Lennie is a large man of immense strength and little intellect. The characters in the play simply deem Lennie stupid, but the character is widely thought to be mentally handicapped.

After an incident involving Lennie grabbing a woman's dress, the two men are forced to flee their jobs in Weed, California, and locate a new farm. George and Lennie find employment and shelter on a ranch operated by an unforgiving boss (Gerard Pauwels) and his weaselly son Curley (Zach Decker).

At stake is George and Lennie's dream of own-

ing their own farm, where George can afford luxuries and Lennie can look after the rabbits. Standing in the way of that dream is Lennie's inability to control his own strength.

Indianapolis actor Robert Neal is entertaining and authentic in the very challenging role of Lennie. Neal brings out the humor in the character without mocking him. The part of George is performed simply and smartly by Cardinal's associate artistic director, Mike Price.

The two leads are joined by a somewhat unevenly skilled ensemble. The supporting performances range from sensitive and masterful to sloppy and immature. Ken Farrell brings out many poignant moments as Candy, the washed-up geezer tasked with cleaning the farmhands' bunkhouse.

By far the cutest performance comes from Nandini, the Wonder Dog, portraying Candy's canine companion.

The only woman in the story, Curley's wife (Mia Fitzgibbon), comes across as vapid and incomplete. Whereas Steinbeck succeeds in giving her an honest voice at some points, he fails to unshackle the character from the jejune patriarchal mold of a woman so ingrained in the literature of the time.

That being said, we ought not forget what makes "Of Mice and Men" the memorable classic it is. Steinbeck pushes his characters to the edge of the Earth in the pursuit of their unattainable dreams. At the heart of "Of Mice and Men" lie simple hope and complex pain.

With "Of Mice and Men," Cardinal Stage Company continues its tradition of bring literary classics to Bloomington stages. Steinbeck lovers will find what they're looking for in this enduring tragedy.