

Of Mice and Men (1992) Sinise

P Michell, Sept 2019

Director: Gary Sinise. Cast: John Malkovich, Gary Sinise, Ray Walston, Sherilyn Fenn, Joe Morton, Casey Siemaszko, John Terry, Noble Willingham, Richard Riehle, Alexis Arquette.

115 min. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures.

Filmed in 'Steinbeck Country'. Sinise and Malcovich reprise their Steppenwolf roles.

The plot centres on George and the intellectually disabled Lennie, two farm workers who travel together and dream of one day owning their own land. The film explores themes of discrimination, loneliness, and the American Dream.

The second of the theatrical films for the year. This one courtesy of Steppenwolf in Chicago. Different acting style than Brando's 'method' style.

The acting and production talent reflect the European style of film making. Multi-talented, alternating between film and theatre. Good support cast in technical and acting roles – esp Walston playing Candy and Fenn playing the lonely Curly's wife.

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John Ernst Steinbeck Jr. was an American author. He won the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature "for his realistic and imaginative writings, combining as they do sympathetic humour and keen social perception." He has been called "a giant of American letters," and many of his works are considered classics of Western literature.

During his writing career, he authored 27 books, including 16 novels, six non-fiction books, and two collections of short stories. He is widely known for the comic novels *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *Cannery Row* (1945), the multi-generation epic *East of Eden* (1952), and the novellas *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and *The Red Pony* (1937). The Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is considered Steinbeck's masterpiece and part of the American literary canon. In the first 75 years after it was published, it sold 14 million copies.

Most of Steinbeck's work is set in central California, particularly in the Salinas Valley and the California Coast Ranges region. His works frequently explored the themes of fate and injustice, especially as applied to downtrodden or everyman protagonists.

Horton Foote – Screenplay (39 films)

Credits include *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1962) Robert Duval has described him as the 'Rural Chekhov'.

Horton Foote's success can be attributed to his honest examination of the human condition, and why some people survive tragedies while others are destroyed. His central themes of the sense of belonging and longing for home have resonate with audiences for 60 years.

Gay Sinese - (54 film / tv credits)

Film debut not only as actor, but producer and director! Though had been in TV since 1978. Cast in Forest Gump (1994) because of this role.

Is musical and plays in band. Unusual for theatre people, is a Republican and passionate about fate of returned military veterans. However is strongly anti-Trump.

In 1974 with some friends founded the Steppenwolf Theatre Co. in Chicago. The company now has three theatres in the complex in that city.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steppenwolf_Theatre_Company

John Malcovich - (119 film / tv credits)

Major film actor. Joined Steppenwolf in 1976. Friends with Sinese. For decades both alternated between acting and directing at Steppenwolf.

Quotes:

For me, movies are like a quick sketch, a doodle. Theatre is like a painting. It involves more craft. It has more depth, more texture, and it changes every single night because it's a living, breathing organism. It commands my respect that much more.

What we were doing [at Steppenwolf] was better, that's all. We started out to try and do good work for its own sake. That has nothing to do with theatre in New York. Yeah, they want to do good work once they're doing it, but basically it's more to do with where that'll get them. That's perfectly natural, but not necessarily acceptable or right.

I'm not a Method actor. I don't believe acting should be psychodrama. I look within myself and see what I can find to play the role with. If I'm playing a blind man, I don't go around blindfolded for days. A lot of good actors would, but I don't go in for that very much, principally because I'd rather make it up.

The first acting teacher I had taught me the worst sin was to be boring. When it comes to how I think a character views the world, I'm fairly decisive. But for me, there has to be inherent in the act of presenting that view something which didn't exist before. Something an audience won't have seen - commensurate, of course, with the writing.

Ray Walston (155 film & TV credits)

Multi award winning actor. Plays Candy. Famous for My Favourite Martian on TV. Included films: Fast Times at Ridgemont High (1982), The Sting (1973), Paint Your Wagon (1969).

Won Broadway's 1956 Tony Award as Best Actor (Musical) for "Damn Yankees!", a role he recreated in the film version of the same name, [Damn Yankees](#) (1958).

Quotes:

(on being labelled a character actor) *I'm an actor and that's it -- period. Producers and studios have thrown many things at me over the years: comedy, tragedy, drama, drawing-room comedy. I've managed to keep my head above water in most of these genres, but I don't put myself in any one category like "comic actor" or "musical-comedy" actor.*

Kenneth MacMillan – cinematographer.

Scottish with early history of BBC documentaries. Cinematographer on Branagh's *Henry V* (1989). Much British TV work inc *Smiley's People* (1982), *The Borgias* (1981)

Robert L Sinese – Editor

Father of Gary. Work in TV inc *Tour of Duty* (1988, 1990), *Miami Vice* (1988-89), MGM: *When the Lion Roars*, documentary 3 part (1992) [busy year for him].

Analysis - Some minor thoughts from litcharts.com

George & Lennie's Farm:

Symbol of the American Dream.

Rabbits:

Lennie's dream is to tend the rabbits on the farm that he and George hope to one day own. This dream establishes Lennie's complete innocence.

Candy's Dog:

Candy's once powerful sheepdog is now old and useless. Carlson's killing of the dog makes it clear that during the Depression only the strong survive.

Lennie's Puppy:

Just as Lennie is dependent on George, Lennie's puppy is entirely dependent on Lennie. Like Lennie, the puppy symbolizes the fate of the weak in the face of the strong.

Reviews:

Grouchreviews.com

In 1936, John Steinbeck wrote to his agents, "The work I am doing now is neither a novel nor a play but is a kind of playable novel." And so it was that the novella *Of Mice and Men* was published February 25, 1937 and already on stage (at the Theatre Union of San Francisco) by May 21, 1937, before a playscript had been penned specifically for the stage. By November 23 of that same year, an official adaptation by George S. Kaufman (penned with the epistolary input of Steinbeck), opened on Broadway. It took two more years to get a film version into movie theaters (Lewis Milestone's classic starring Lon Chaney, Jr. as Lennie and Burgess Meredith as George); telefilms followed in 1968 (with

Nicol Williamson and George Segal) and 1981 (with Randy Quaid and Robert Blake). But the version that remains most celebrated is the Palme d'Or-nominated 1992 film by Gary Sinise. Maybe that's because Sinise and co-star John Malkovich had played George and Lennie on stage in 1980 at the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, where Sinise was a founding member.

And although the script was penned by a screenwriter at least as well known for his playwriting (Pulitzer Prize and Oscar winner Horton Foote), the deep-set theatrical roots of *Of Mice and Men* don't make Sinise's film feel in the least bit stagy. If anything, this version of *Of Mice and Men* could benefit from a slightly more lively take on the material, but it's impeccably cast and mostly quite faithful. Migrant workers George Milton and Lennie Small make for a study in contrasts as well as a symbiotic pairing. Steinbeck describes George as "small and quick, dark of face, with restless eyes and sharp, strong features" and Lennie as "a huge man, shapeless of face, with large, pale eyes, and wide, sloping shoulders." In addition to being good physical matches, Sinise captures George's coiled intensity (if softening his hot temper), and Malkovich ably inhabits the childlike quality of Lennie's mental challenge. Add Ray Walston as old swamper Candy, Casey Siemaszko as pugnacious Curley, Sherilyn Fenn (*Twin Peaks*' Audrey Horne) as Curley's Wife, and Joe Morton as stable buck Crooks, and you have yourself the makings of a fine ensemble.

Of Mice and Men is about faint hopes and dashed dreams (hence the title, derived from Robert Burns' "To a Mouse"). Sinise somewhat underplays this theme, excising the novel's sad final page ("Now what the hell ya suppose is eatin' them two guys") and giving no weight to the ranchers' thrilling discovery that former rancher Bill Tenner got his letter to the editor published in a pulp magazine, as Tenner promised. Sinise's focus rests more with the story's characterization of George and Lennie, and the tragic punch of a handful of key events. The story's racism, sexism, and ageism also feel a bit undernourished, contributing to the film's classic-literature-adaptation demureness: the film misses the opportunity to evoke the backbreaking labor of today's migrant work, instead presenting a day's work bucking barley in a sunny, oddly cheery montage (Mark Isham's score never quite gels to the material, either).

For all these micro-frustrations, Sinise's *Of Mice and Men* successfully tells its story in broad strokes and cinematic terms, serving as a prime vehicle for actors. *Of Mice and Men* is about as close as we get to American Shakespeare: it's deathless material, as proven by the 2014 Broadway revival (also recorded for special movie-theatrical exhibition) starring James Franco and Chris O'Dowd as George and Lennie. Perhaps that duo will commit their performances to a full-fledged film production, but until then, many a student studying (though not necessarily reading) *Of Mice and Men* will think of Sinise and Malkovich as their George and Lennie.

Olive Films does a fine job of bringing *Of Mice and Men* to Blu-ray. The transfer looks good, despite probably dating back to 2001 (a bit of telecine wobble makes for a dead giveaway). Detail and texture are substantial, and there's no mistaking this photography

for digital, given the preservation of film grain. Shadow detail isn't great, and color doesn't appear to be wholly true (flesh tones tend to red), but all around, we see a significant and very welcome improvement over the standard-def DVDs. The DTS-HD Master Audio 2.0 soundtrack can be considered definitive, maximizing the dialogue and music within the range of a stereo mix.

Roger Ebert

October 2, 1992

(He writes for Chicago Sun Times ... perhaps a little bias to Steppenwolf!)

“And will there be rabbits, George?”

“Yeah, Lennie. There'll be rabbits.”

There is a certain curse attached to the most familiar lines in literature. Because we know them so well, we tend to smile when we encounter them, and they can break the reality of the story they're trying to tell. What stage Hamlet has not despaired of getting through “To be, or not to be?” in one piece?

In John Steinbeck's novel “Of Mice and Men,” made into an enduringly popular movie, the lines about the rabbits have become emblems for the whole relationship between George and Lennie -- the quiet-spoken farm laborer and the sweet, retarded cousin he has taken under his arm. I would not have thought I could believe the line about the rabbits one more time, but this movie made me do it, as Lennie asks about the farm they'll own one day, and George says, yes, it will be just as they've imagined it.

Lennie is played by [John Malkovich](#) and George is [Gary Sinise](#), who also directed this film, using an adaptation by [Horton Foote](#). The most sincere compliment I can pay them is to say that all of them - writer and actors - have taken every unnecessary gesture, every possible gratuitous note, out of these characters. The story is as pure and lean as the original fable which formed in Steinbeck's mind. And because they don't try to do anything fancy -- don't try to make it anything other than exactly what it is -- they have a quiet triumph.

The time is the Great Depression. Men ride the rails, living in hobo camps, looking for a day's work. Two of them are George and Lennie, who together might make a perfect person, Lennie with his great strength and simplicity, George with his intelligence and cunning. George does the thinking for them, and Lennie does a lot of the work. In the harvest season, they find themselves working on a place with a lot of other guys, and a foreman named Curley, and Curley's wife (who is never named by Steinbeck, nor here, either).

Curley's wife is sexy, and she knows it. Played by [Sherilyn Fenn](#), she enjoys her little starring role on the farm -- likes to know the eyes of the men follow her as she walks across the yard, just as in Paris a woman walks a little differently past a cafe. Curley ([Casey Siemaszko](#)), a sadistic brute, does not enjoy the show so much.

Lennie does not quite understand all of the implications of the situation, but he knows that he feels good when Curley's wife asks him to stroke her soft brown hair. George warns him to stay clear -- she's trouble. But Curley's wife makes that hard. She enjoys teasing the dim-witted giant, as if he were a dog tied up just out of reach. One day she handles him wrong, and although he is only trying to be nice to her, he gets confused and frightened and doesn't know his own strength. And then the men and the hounds are after him, and George won't be able to settle this one with his quick thinking.

What is this story really about? There are a lot of possibilities, from the Lennie-as-Saint theory, to the feminist deconstruction that has no doubt been performed more lately. The highest praise I can give the filmmakers is that none of them seem to have any theories at all. They give us characters, a milieu, some events. The central tragedy of the story is that these two men have formed a friendship that works -- they have a synergy in which each takes according to his needs and gives according to his abilities -- and when George isn't there Lennie gets into trouble through no fault of his own, and then the world slaps them down.

Sinise says "Of Mice and Men" was his favorite novel as a young man. It led him to a love of Steinbeck, and he eventually played Tom Joad on stage in the famous Steppenwolf production of "[The Grapes of Wrath](#)." Then he directed his first movie, "[Miles from Home](#)," about two brothers who grow up on a farm in Iowa. One is more sober and responsible, the other more reckless. They can't find the balance, and get into a lot of trouble. The buried theme is similar to the one in "Of Mice and Men": Two men together form a workable partnership, but neither is complete separately. You can sense how important this material is to Sinise. So important that in this movie he doesn't fool around with it; the story itself says all he wants to say.