8.1 New Facets Highlighted in a Classic (Vincent Canby)

... The new film adaptation, directed by Gary Sinise and written by Horton Foote, remains faithful in almost every way to the stark Steinbeck tale. Yet this Of Mice and Men, starring Mr. Sinise as George and John Malkovich as Lennie, emphasizes something in the original work that never before seemed of foremost importance: Of Mice and Men is a mournful, distantly heard lament for the loss of American innocence. This has always been in the Steinbeck novella, but it is the dominant mood of the film, which is gorgeous in the idealized way of beauty remembered. The wheat fields are golden, the skies blinding blue. There is a stylized perfection about the seediness of the run-down Tyler ranch, where George and Lennie find work at the beginning of the film. The hired hands work all day in 90-degree heat, and though they mop their brows, they don't seem to sweat.

This Of Mice and Men doesn't mean to be either realistic or melodramatic, that is, in the manner of Lewis Milestone's far darker 1940 adaptation.

... Mr. Sinise's Of Mice and Men is a recollection of a simpler way of life that was swept aside by the realities of the Depression and all the momentous social changes that followed. In particular it's about the relationship of George and Lennie, which is not all that simple. George is father, mother and brother to Lennie. The two men are a mismatched couple, making do with what fate has dealt them.

Early in the story it seems as if they finally are going to realize the dream of their own spread. The onehanded Candy (Ray Walston), who has $400 saved up, offers to throw in with them. It's almost enough to swing the deal. Then Curley's wife (Sherilyn Fenn), who remains unnamed in the film as in the novel, butts in. Her husband is the ranch owner's cocky, mean-tempered son. She doesn't set out to cause trouble, but she's bored on the ranch. When Lennie accidentally crushes Curley's hand in a fight, his wife becomes attracted to the big, simple-minded fellow. Possibly in keeping with the film's elegiac mood, the character of Curley's wife has been toned down into a lonely cipher. She's no longer the heavily madeup plot function she is in the book. She's sort of sweet and none too bright, which is politically correct. She is, after all, the only woman featured in the film. Yet her moral redemption also removes a lot of the potential for drama.

The movie's most flamboyant effect is Mr. Malkovich's performance as Lennie. I've no idea how it was done, but Mr. Malkovich does look huge. Everything about the performance has been intelligently thought out, from the physical size he somehow has attained to his manner of speaking, which is slow and tortured without being grotesque. The actor's intelligence, however, shows through. It's the kind of performance that might be far more effective on stage than it is in front of the movie camera, which gets too close. Playing dumb is not easy.

That the performance works as well as it does is largely because the rest of the film is equally theoretical Mr. Sinise, who played George to Mr. Malkovich's Lennie on the stage in 1980, gives a strong self-effacing performance, matching his work as the film's director. The supporting roles are all well cast, the script is good and the physical production first rate. ...


8.2 Of Mice and Men
Marianne Cotter

As difficult as it is for a writer to produce a simple unpretentious masterpiece, it is even more difficult for that masterpiece to make it onto the screen with its integrity intact. Yet director, co-producer, and star Gary Sinise has delivered John Steinbeck's short novel, Of Mice and Men, to the screen fully clothed...
in all its quiet strength and humanity. From the central California harvest scenes to the bunkhouse banter at the Tyler Ranch, Sinise balances the progressive cycles of nature against the desperation of simple dreams in hard times.

Lennie (John Malkovich) and George (Gary Sinise) work as migrant laborers during the Depression, trying to pull together enough money to buy a small farm of their own. Lennie is physically powerful but mentally feeble, and his innocent desire to fondle soft things has gotten them into trouble in the past and will get them into trouble again. George is Lennie's protector, having promised Lennie's aunt he would take care of Lennie after she died. When Curley's wife (Sherilyn Fenn) enters the bunkhouse, pretty, lonely, and craving attention, the dye is cast.

Candy, the old, lame handyman who gives every penny he's got to go in on a farm with George and Lennie, is played with an aching simplicity by Ray Walston. In addition, Casey Siemaszko is truly menacing as the owner's son, Curly, while Joe Morton brings a seething bitterness to the role of the black hand, Crooks. Malkovich and Sinise ground the film with their tremendous physical and emotional awareness of each other. Malkovich plays Lennie with remarkable sympathy and accuracy.

Horton Foote's (To Kill a Mockingbird and The Trip to Bountiful) screenplay captures perfectly the tone and pacing of Steinbeck's careful foreshadowing. The desire to tend their own animals and crops is as precious to Lennie and George as the pets that Lennie kills by caressing too hard. The viewer is lead to the knowledge of what will inevitably turn George and Lennie's dream to dust and yet the suspense builds past the obvious and holds tight to the very end. Director Sinise, wisely, finds no need to revise Steinbeck's take on the American dream. The cracks that Steinbeck saw people falling through in the 1930s are fundamentally the same cracks that people are struggling against today. Rated PG-13 for adult situations.

8.3 Of Mice and Men
Roger Ebert

"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. ...

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. ...
8.4 Steinbeck Reborn
Sean Elder

After staging The Grapes of Wrath, Gary Sinise continues his obsession by filming Of Mice and Men, costarring John Malkovich as the slow-witted Lennie. Sean Elder visits the set.

In 1938, Hollywood director Mervyn LeRoy gave John Steinbeck some advice on how to adapt his novel Of Mice and Men for the screen. In the book, a half-wit itinerant farmworker named Lennie accidentally kills a woman, setting up the story's tragic conclusion. What if Lennie were only accused of the killing, suggested LeRoy, but didn't actually do it? Happy endings for everyone!

"I think that is wonderful," Steinbeck wrote to a friend. "I build a job for two hundred pages and he destroys it with a turn of a hand and thinks he has improved the thing." Over the years, many of Steinbeck's books have been brought to film, some (The Grapes of Wrath, East of Eden) more successfully than others. The 1939 movie Of Mice and Men, directed by Lewis Milestone, starred Lon Chaney, Jr., as Lennie, and Burgess Meredith as his long-suffering caretaker, George. The ultimately downbeat story puzzled some in the business; producer Hal Roach reportedly said, "It's like Laurel and Hardy without the laughs."

Yet it was a popular film in its day; Lon Chaney's Lennie ("Tell me about the rabbits, George") even became fodder for cartoons and comedians at the time. Steinbeck, who worried that the working-class people he wrote about weren't reading his books, was pleased. The short novel became a staple of high school reading lists, and was then consigned to that unexamined dustbin labeled American Classics. While the Merchant-Ivory team holds down the classics corner in film today, gamely translating the books of Henry James and E. M. Forster, the prototypically American work of Steinbeck is seldom revived for the screen - though his simple, dramatic stories lend themselves well to film treatment.

Now actor/director Gary Sinise has revived Of Mice and Men for a new audience, starring himself as George and John Malkovich as Lennie. The result is a stark and largely unsentimental retelling of Steinbeck's tale that at least one critic has already labeled "reverential." (He wanted irreverence?) Sinise, a co-founder of Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company, is an unabashed fan of the author and was influential in getting the company to mount an interpretation of The Grapes of Wrath two years ago. (For his performance as Tom Joad in the show's New York incarnation, Sinise was nominated for a Tony Award; the production won Best Play.) It was a hard-eyed look at the poverty, and oppression of the dust-bowl migrants of the thirties - the conditions that had so angered Steinbeck - and was less sanitized and equivocal than the 1940 John Ford-Henry Fonda film version. "There's got to be wrath in there somewhere," Sinise said at the time.

Traveling with that production also gave him a sense of people's ignorance of Steinbeck's stories. "It seems like it's part of our background, our culture, our upbringing," says Sinise "when, in fact, we discovered there were many people who were coming to it for the first time."

For all you first-timers, Of Mice and Men tells the story of two traveling ranch hands in California during the Depression. The powerfully built but slow-witted Lennie has a penchant for all things soft and fuzzy - rabbits, puppies, mice - and at one job he frightened a woman when he began petting her dress. Having escaped a nearly disastrous situation, the two find work at another ranch in the Salinas Valley, hoping to save enough money to buy a little stake themselves, a place where they'll have to answer to no man, and Lennie can look after the rabbits. It's a fantasy that George spins out to his friend's unending delight, a bedtime story Lennie never tires of. But their new situation has own pitfalls: the boss's sadistic son, Curley, has a curvaceous wife (Sherilyn Fenn) he's possessive of, and a hatred for helpless men like Lennie. Disaster looms.

What sets George and Lennie apart from those around them is their very friendship, the fact that they "go around together."
about companionship and compassion," says Sinise, "and it's one of the great love stories of all time."

While Of Mice and Men doesn't threaten to become this year's Rain Man, it has been enthusiastically and emotionally received, a ten-minute standing ovation at the Cannes Film Festival. And one of its biggest boosters has been Elaine Steinbeck, the author's widow, who believes it to be the best movie interpretation of her late husband's book yet. Elaine Steinbeck was already a fan of Steppenwolf when the group first approached her with the idea of adapting The Grapes of Wrath; her background was in the theater (a New York stage manager in the forties, she was also previously married to the stage and screen actor Zachary Scott), and she had seen the troupe's celebrated works - True West, Balm in Gilead - when it traveled. She became intimately involved with the Grapes production, doing publicity for it and introducing the television version on PBS's American Playhouse. She became fast friends with Sinise, and says, "Gary is the essence of Steppenwolf."

An elegant and well spoken woman in her late seventies, Elaine Steinbeck still lives in the Upper East Side apartment she shared with her late husband. "When Gary was playing in Grapes of Wrath," she recalls in her Texas accent, "he would come up to the apartment and go in the room where John used to write, look at his books." It was in one of these meetings that he first proposed filming another Of Mice and Men, and Elaine gave her blessing without hesitation. "I trust him implicitly," she says. "There isn't anyone who understands Steinbeck more than he does.

"I've always been very close to this material," says Sinise, "and he's less intense in person than on stage or screen, though he retains some of the cunning and wariness that marked his portrayals of Tom Joad and George. "I had very specific ideas about how I wanted it to look and feel, how I wanted to cut away a lot of stuff and get to it in a more visual way. 'Cause it's a very talky book; they're always talking about how nobody talks."

He first became enamored of the story when he was sixteen and his high school drama teacher took the class to see a production of the play at the Guthrie Theater. "Of Mice and Men was one of the first emotional experiences I had in the theater," he says now. It was that same teacher who inculcated in Sinise the do-it-yourself sense of theater from which Steppenwolf sprang. "I didn't go to college, or film school, or do TV work, or anything," he says. "I started in the theater and worked in the theater, nuts-and-bolts, blue-collar kind of American work ethic. Get out of high school start your own business, try to put it together, work at it. I didn't go off to college and find a mentor to tell me how to do things."

Instead, he started Steppenwolf, at the age of nineteen, in the basement of a church in Highland Park, performing and producing plays with a small group of actors that included his wife, Moira Harris, and, later, John Malkovich. In 1981 they performed Of Mice and Men, with Sinise and Malkovich playing George and Lennie for the first time. (Neither of them remembers the experience very clearly.) Today Sinise says their friendship was an important factor in the film's success. "It was really an asset for me as an actor and a director to have somebody playing that role with me who I know so well," he says. "And there's a real playful aspect of my relationship with John that applies a little bit to George and Lennie, just a funny part of our relationship where he's always annoying me and I'm telling him to shut up."

Malkovich understandably resists taking the George and Lennie/Gary and John analogy too far, but his performance - sweet, simple, doomed - is at Of Mice and Men's core. "My husband used to say, 'Lennie is not an oaf, he is a goof. He is an unfinished man,'" says Elaine Steinbeck. "I think that's the way Malkovich plays him."

Though many people respond emotionally to Lennie, Malkovich is not overly concerned with sentimentalizing the role. Speaking between scenes on an old Warner Bros. back lot, done up to look like old Salinas (most of the film was shot on a specially built ranch north of Santa Barbara), Malkovich is soft-spoken, almost inaudible. "I'm not aware that anyone has ever shed a tear over me," he says. "I should think that I'd keep that strain in check."

When asked if he
feels a particular affinity for Steinbeck, the actor demurs. "As a good writer," he says, adding, "Gary, I'm sure, much more so than I. Steinbeck, perhaps, believed in people a little more than I might be inclined. I'm a Faulkner man myself."

Sinise's film, as faithful as it is to Steinbeck's vision, does not end on a note of hope and moral regeneracy. While liberated from the novel's claustrophobic one-night/one-place feel ("You think of Of Mice and Men as being inside," Elaine Steinbeck said after seeing the film, "but this is so scenic - through the barley fields and by the river"), it leaves us with a dark image of enclosure: George's face, in the recesses of a boxcar, lit intermittently by the headlight of a passing train. His expression, glimpsed however briefly, is that of a man trying to calculate his loss.

The real mystery Of Mice and Men leaves us with is not about Lennie - he is unchanging, a static personality - but George. What does he get out of their relationship? A few people they encounter are openly suspicious. But there is a mystery to all caretaking, all caring. That is what Sinise means when he calls it a love story.

"To me, it's not symbolic," he says. "It's two guys who've got no place to go. And they've got a dream, and they keep each other alive for a while. It's a tragedy, what happens to them, no question. I just want people to care about the characters, be moved by them, amused by them, feel for them, 'cause they see some of themselves in them. It's that simple."

8.5 Of Mice and Men
Guy Flatley

Of Mice and Men: So plaintive and haunting is this tale that it seems not to spring from a book at all, but from some distant collective memory. The fragile yet enduring figures of George, the intellectually keen ranch hand, and his companion, Lennie, a laborer with the strength of a giant and the mind of a child, are as real as remembered uncles and cousins, faded faces in dusty albums. In 1937, novelist John Steinbeck made our parents and grandparents feel the pain of homeless people forced to roam the ravaged land during the Great Depression, and now, in tormentedly similar times, we experience the anguish anew. Like a recurring dream that unspools gently in our sleep before exploding in nightmare, the scary story continues.

Fortunately, this taut, deceptively simple treasure has been entrusted to the sensitive care of screenwriter Horton Foote and director Gary Sinise (who also does himself proud in the role of George, a man driven to make an intolerable decision) and a superb cast. As the ranch boss's abusive son Casey Siemaszko is loathsome right and Sherilyn Fenn is tantalizing and touching as his lonely wife, who unwittingly prods Lennie to act on a dangerous impulse. What you really want to know, though, is how does John Malkovich do as Lennie? This notoriously unorthodox actor, capable of bending an author's intent to suit his own purposes, disdains flash and fuss, giving a performance of daring and rare delicacy. Steinbeck himself could not have found a lovelier Lennie.


8.6 Gary Sinise Goes to Hollywood
Patrick Goldstein

Gary Sinise was a cocky sixteen-year-old, a long-haired rock 'n' roll delinquent about to flunk out of high school when a teacher took him to see a production of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men. Sinise was mesmerized - who would've thought theater could be as explosive as a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo?
Today, at thirty-seven, Sinise is a cult hero of American theater. While still a teenager, he helped found Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre - an intrepid stage company that has produced such daunting works as Sam Shepard's True West, Lanford Wilson's Balm in Gilead, and Harold Pinter's The Caretaker - in a church basement in Highland Park, Illinois. But even as he explored theater's razor-edge, Sinise never abandoned Steinbeck. In 1961, he starred in Of Mice and Men opposite Steppenwolf member John Malkovich. Then in 1990 Sinise earned a Tony nomination for his role as Tom Joad in Steinbeck's epic The Grapes of Wrath. While on Broadway, Sinise secured the rights to do Of Mice and Men as a film from the writer's widow, Elaine. Made for under $9 million from a script by two-time-Oscar winner Horton Foote, the film is an acolyte's hymn to his patron saint. It's also a crucial career stop for Sinise, an opportunity to show Hollywood that his skills translate to the big screen, both as an actor and as a film director.

With Sherilyn Fenn, Ray Walston, and Casey Siemaszko in supporting roles, Of Mice and Men features Malkovich and Sinise in a reprise of their 1981 theater roles—Malkovich as the feebleminded Lennie and Sinise as the tight-lipped George, two Depression-era drifters whose dream of owning their own farm is tragically denied. Watching Lennie and George roam the dusty, golden-hued California countryside—Murt and Jeff in bib overalls—you're reminded of the intense but enduring relationship between Malkovich and Sinise, who've been acting together since the early days of Steppenwolf.

Sinise was the troupe’s artistic director, the consummate-team player, always stressing the company's communal strengths. Malkovich was the volatile star, a wayward spirit, always absorbed in his craft. Two gifted acting peers—one painfully carnal, the other a caustic grump. So guess who’s received all the media heat?

Malkovich may have the more flamboyant role, but Sinise’s quiet, unerring performance - only his second as a film actor - gives Of Mice and Men its emotional focus. It’s no wonder critics have raved about him for years. (After seeing Sinise play a street punk in Israel Horovitz's Indian Wants the Bronx, Richard Christiansen wrote in the Chicago Tribune: “It was the only time in my life that I was physically afraid in the theater.”) Colled, ready to pounce, Sinise is America’s answer to Gary Oldman - an actor with a killer’s instinct.

Sinise recently left his native Chicago and resettled in Los Angeles's San Fernando Valley, giving up the security of his Steppenwolf roots for a shot at movie stardom. He's not the first guy to head west for a new start. Fifty years ago, the Valley was rich with orange groves and vegetable fields, a promised land for Steinbeck’s hoboes and migrants. Of Mice and Men is a story about people born into their fate,” Sinise says as he stands in the 105 degree summer heat of the Valley, amid the malls, the house tracts, and the freeways. His watchful intensity is masked by an innocent grin. Wary yet hopeful, Sinise seems the perfect fit as one of Steinbeck’s quiet dreamers. These people didn't have access to the American dream. I mean, my character, George, doesn’t go on to become a studio executive.

He points to the freeway. "You can look at pictures from the Thirties of people with signs saying “I need a job”. And you can get off any freeway exit in this city today and you can see some guy with a sign saying “I need a job”.

The only things that have changed are the hairstyles and the clothes - the signs are all the same.


8.7 Von Mäusen und Menschen
Norbert Grob

Der Auftakt ist furios: nur Hell & Dunkel; und wie durch den Kontrast dazwischen Bewegung und Gefühl in die Bilder kommen. Das Gesicht eines Mannes in Schwarz, über das hin und wieder grelle Lichtstreifen huschen, Reflexe von Lampen, die ins Innere eines Bahnwaggons dringen. Das Licht gibt der Physiognomie Kontur, es wirkt ernst und verschlossen. Der Mann scheint einen weiten Weg hinter sich zu haben, zu viele vergebliche Träume, zu viele offensichtliche Niederlagen. Vielleicht ist er
an einem weiteren Anfang, vielleicht auch an einem weiteren Ende.


Nach fünf Minuten jedoch ist es aus mit dem Spaß. Es wird ernst, die "naturalistisch - melodramatische Tragödie" beginnt, wie sie in so vielen literaturhistorischen Abhandlungen bereits erörtert wurde, die Tragödie um den gutmütigen, aber schwachsinnigen "Lennie", der mit seiner Körperkraft nicht zurande kommt - und so, auch wenn er stets das Gute will, nur das Böse schafft.

John Steinbeck's classic novel Of Mice and Men gets its third movie treatment, having been filmed previously for the big screen in 1939 (starring Burgess Meredith and Lon Chaney Jr.) and for television in 1981 (with Robert Blake and Randy Quaid). (Only the latter version is on video.)

... The film begins with George pensively, sadly sitting alone in a railway car, the shadows of the car's slats partially covering his face. He's apparently remembering what follows.

... Of Mice and Men is one of the most beloved of John Steinbeck's works, if not necessarily his most critically acclaimed. And it's easy to take the sentimental road, with the role of Lennie offering an...
opportunity for an actor to go way over the top.

But Malkovich is in control of the role and his Lennie is innocent, obviously retarded and tragic without ever seeming like a cartoon or an affected performance. Likewise, Sinise is just right as world-weary George, who loves Lennie and wants to help him but who feels somewhat frustrated and helpless about his own life. Ray Walston is also a standout as Candy, low-key and sympathetic even as he sees his world crumbling around him.

The rest of the cast is also quite good, with Siemaszko, Fenn, John Terry as stalwart ranch boss Slim and Joe Morton as embittered Crooks all giving it their all.

Sinise the director manages to keep the various elements under control as if he already has a dozen films under his belt. In fact, this is only his second (after Miles From Home). The screenplay, by Horton Foote, is masterful and the technical elements are all excellent, from the period sets and costumes to the sharp cinema-tography.

Of Mice and Men is a fine, literate film of the kind we get all too infrequently these days. It is rated PG-13 for a fair amount of profanity, some vulgarity and some violence.

8.9 Of Mice and Men
Brian L. Johnson

... Of Mice and Men is the third film version of John Steinbeck's novel. I haven't seen the 1939 version yet. I think that this version of Of Mice and Men is much better than the 1981 television film (which received a three). This film follows the novel very closely. I definitely recommend this film to everybody. On a scale of zero to five, I give Of Mice and Men a five. Of Mice and Men is rated PG-13 for explicit language and graphic violence.

The cast for this version is much better than the '81 version. I think that John Malkovich (Shadows and Fog, Empire of the Sun) does a much better Lenny than Randy Quaid did. Likewise Gary Sinise does a better George than Robert Blake did. Ray Walston (Blood Relations, Popcorn, and for all of you who wrote back on my review of Popcorn, My Favorite Martian) gave the best performance in this film. Walston plays the old man on the farm and I feel that he adds a lot to the film. Sherilyn Fenn (Meridian: Kiss of the Beast, Backstreet Dreams) gives her best performance since Two Moon Junction as Casey Siemaszko's flirtatious wife. Casey Siemaszko (Breaking in, Three O'Clock High) is great as the boss's cruel son.

This film is very well written, and gets extremely dramatic in places (I haven't seen so many wet eyes leaving the theater). I think that this film will have a better impact if you see it in the theater, so do so if you have the chance still. It has been released on video cassette. Both the settings and photography for this film are top notch.
8.10 My Brother's Keeper
Stanley Kauffmann

In one way John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men (MGM) is like John Berryman's poetry: it's more powerful than, aesthetically speaking, it has a right to be. I saw the first production of Steinbeck's play in 1937 (well directed by, of all people, George S. Kauffmann, the ultrarurban smartcracker, who reportedly had helped Steinbeck to dramatize his novel); the first film in 1939, the Broadway revival in 1975, and now I've seen the new film. The first experience was overwhelming; with later viewings, though the story was still moving, the mechanics became plainer.

For instance, in the opening scene Lenny implores George to repeat the daydream about the place with the rabbits that they'll have one day. Then George tells Lenny that, if he gets into trouble at the ranch they're going to, he is to come to this place and hide. Then the dead mouse in Lenny's pocket foretells more deaths (and justifies the Burns allusion in the title). Click, click, click, the pieces fall into place. Soon, Curley, son of the ranch owner, is set up as one kind of provocateur, Curley's wife as another. The putting away of Candy's old dog is not only a shivery prophecy for old Candy himself, it foreshadows another killing.

But, just as Berryman enthralls despite his limitations, so Steinbeck's work rolls on, rolls over us, like the wellconstructed engine that it is. The power begins with the characters of the two protagonists: George, spunky competent, always grumbling at the burden of Lenny, always fiercely protective of him; Lenny, with the strength of an ox and the mind of a child, an absolutely innocent wrongdoer. Part of the power also comes from the inevitability of the ending. One of the reasons we hear about their dream place at the beginning is to inform us that they will never have it. And part of the power is in an oldfashioned bucolic feeling touched with the sordid—Currier and Ives with killings.

Other roles, too, are poorly cast. Ray Walston's only qualification for Candy, the maimed old swamper, is that he is grizzled: he doesn't sound "country," and he lays on the pathos. Casey Siemaszko as Curley is a zero, and Sherilyn Fenn as his wife is negligible. A key role, Slim, the ranch foreman, was given to John Tenny, who is good-looking and not much else.

Still, the fault doesn't lie entirely with the last three actors. Horton Foote's screenplay has whittled down all their parts, to the film's detriment. Foote even eliminates the penulti-
A scene in which Slim, a mature and compassionate man, guesses where Lenny is hiding and leaves, so that George can do what needs to be done, alone with his friend. The loss of this scene is a detriment, too.

Sinise as director is no great shakes. The easy stuff comes off well enough—the pastoral landscapes, the great barley fields with the harvesting teams at work—but he wobbles in the intimate moments. Candy's appeal for his dog is handled heavily, and to weight it further, Sinise finishes the sequence with a long shot of Candy standing outside the bunkhouse all alone.

The moment is not exactly subtle. After Lenny kills Curley's wife in the barn, Sinise puts in a high overhead shot of the two, one live and one dead—intrusive cinematics that fracture the grip of awful irreversible error. At the finish, when George shoots the kneeling Lenny, Sinise uses a long shot to show the two men. Again, too explicit. A medium close-up of George, more or less facing us, speaking to an invisible Lenny, with the shot and Lenny's crumpling invisible, is what, consciously or not, most of us might be hoping for. The drama, not the data.

The music by Mark Isham is even more coarse. Particularly in the pursuit sequences, it's Saturday-afternoon-serial stuff. Yet despite the various hobblings and hamperings in the film's making, despite Steinbeck's all-too-patent blueprint, the essence prevails. Perhaps Of Mice and Men is still affecting because of the authentic sweetness that George sees in Lenny and that he knows is doomed. Perhaps it's because the work can be taken as a monodrama, really about one individual, with the ego combating a kind of guileless id, finally suppressing it but with the knowledge of a certain prelapsarian loss. The ending moves us not to tears but to acceptance.

My introduction to John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men was a terrific television production with Nicol Williamson as Lennie and George Segal as George. Envy me. At least as far as I am concerned no other production has been as moving. Steinbeck's very short novel is one of the greatest tragic stories of world literature, ranking (in my opinion) almost up to Hugo's Les Miserables. And it is probably shorter than Hugo's chapter on the Paris sewers. Actually, on my last reading—about a year ago—I read the entire novel and the entire chapter. There is only one play that I have ever read that I feel was an actual improvement over the book, and that was George Cukor's play of Of Mice and Men. I think the novel is so near to being a script that it is a new story in itself.

The novel is essentially a play. Of Mice and Men was originally a play by Steinbeck, and the film from 1952 later became the best-selling non-live adaptation is at least the third non-live adaptation of the novel, and having read the book many times, I find it hard to rate the film as if it was a new story. Sinise also directed the film, and he does a fine job as George, a part that could easily be overshadowed by that of Lennie. Sinese has starred in stage versions of both Of Mice and Men and The Grapes of Wrath.

Sinise and Malkovich manages to look like a giant playing Lennie and at the same time giving the part more personality than it has had in the past. Neither Ray Walston as Candy nor John Terry as Slim manage to look as grizzled as their characters' roles. Terry is just too handsome and young to be slim, in my opinion. The ending moves us not to tears but to acceptance.

By most measures this is a very good adaptation. It is a wonderful story, set in an era on loneliness and pain. It is the only film that I have watched twice. As an adaptation of an often-dated novel, I give it a new 4. The film seems out of place, since the novel seems out of place, since the novel is a play, and the film is a film. But the ending moves us not to tears but to acceptance.
8.12 Softening the Blow
Vanessa Letts

In Bertolucci’s version of The Sheltering Sky he took Paul Bowles’s mediocre prose descriptions of the desert and converted them into wonderful film footage. John Steinbeck’s novel Of Mice and Men has almost no lyrical sentences in it at all. Only once does he aim to be beautiful, when he is capturing the atmosphere inside a darkened bunkhouse: ‘The sun square was on the floor now, and the flies whipped through it like sparks.’ Unlike Bowles, Steinbeck suggests motion almost entirely through dialogue. This is something you would never guess from the new film version, which could perfectly well be snipped into half-minute pieces and sold off to make 222 Marlboro cigarette commercials. The predominant look - dusty tracks, sunburnt fields and swirling hayseeds - has been deliberately chosen to contrast with the bleak and lonely existence of the ranch hands who work
the land, but the formula doesn't work. For the audience it is impossible not to enjoy being drenched in visual warmth: the pictures soften the blow of the story rather than emphasise it.

The adaptation itself, by Horton Foote (who won an Oscar for his screenplay for To Kill a Mocking Bird), is taken pretty faithfully from the novel. George (Gary Sinise) and Lennie (John Malkovich) arrive at the Tyler Ranch having fled a lynch party in a place called Weed. Ranch hands are usually 'the loneliest guys in the world', but these two travel together and look out for each other. George is sharp and personable. Lennie is a child with the strength of a giant. They dream of owning a house and ten acres, but their dream is doomed.

Foote's only serious bit of plot interference lies in watering down the racism directed against Crooks, a black stable buck segregated from the other workers. There's no good reason for this change. The film-makers go to immense effort to recreate period detail and yet in this respect they shy away from it. There is a similar bit of fudging in the recent film of The Last of the Mohicans, where Michael Mann leaves out the West Indian ancestry of one of the heroines. It is as if filmmakers these days daren't risk tackling the leaded issue of racism, even with a buffer of historical context around it.

Of Mice and Men stars its director and co-producer, Gary Sinise. As well as glamorising California he glamorises himself. He is an exceptionally beautiful man. The film more than the book makes his character's tragedy central. Even so, Sinise doesn't quite manage to overcome the powerful impression made by John Malkovich, whose portrayal of a simpleton is disconcertingly inconsistent, from one mannered outburst to the next. The film might have been able to support one slightly implausible performance, but it drifts under the weight of two.

Having said this, Of Mice and Men has the dignity of good intentions. The supporting cast (including Sherilyn Fenn and Ray Walston) is strong. The story has a naively high quota of tragic inevitability, but it is still moving. Unless you hate Steinbeck, this new adaptation is worth a look.

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8.13 Of Mice and Men
Frank Maloney

... Of Mice and Men was first adapted to the big screen in 1939, ... a mere two years after the novel's publication. The story was adapted twice for TV;... it was also made into a opera that was produced twice by Seattle Opera. The script for this newest version was written by Horton Foote (The Trip to Bountiful), who downplays the novel's political subtext, a call for a humane socialism where people take care of one another. Instead, Foote's version is content to redefine the human condition on the individual level only. This new version does succeed in capturing Steinbeck's special feeling for the land. The film was stunningly photographed in California's Santa Ynez valley, a rolling land of golden grass and live oaks. This film marks the introduction of director-star Gary Sinise as one of the future lights of Hollywood. Sinise founded the Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago in the Seventies. It was there that he and John Malkovich first played George and Lennie in 1980. As a director Sinise shows a spare, delicate style. As George, the smaller, smarter migrant worker who has fallen reluctantly into the role of Lennie's protector, Sinise is especially sympathetic and effective.

As Lennie, the child-like giant, John Malkovich presents a more problematic performance. Malkovich is a star, not a character actor. We are watching a star do a star turn when we watch Malkovich parade his formidable and showy arsenal of shtick, the hands floating, bouncing, the mouth in search for a shape, the stutters, shambling walk. These things might have worked brilliantly on stage, but on the big screen they serve only to draw attention to the actor, not the character.

On the other end of the end of the scale is the wonderful Ray Walston as Candy, the withered old hand whose old dog foreshadows the eventual culmination of the story. Walston, ... registers a heartbreaking performance as the old man who says, "I wish someone would shoot me when I'm of
no use anymore. But they won't, they'll just send me away."

Among the other noteworthy performances are those of Casey Siemaszko as the brutish Curly, Sherilyn Fenn, his unnamed wife, and Joe Morton as Crooks, the broken stable hand. Fenn in particular presents a new take on her character. The wife in this version is far more dangerous and
predatory than in Steinbeck's novel. Initially acting quite slutish, she shows us eventually to be naive, lonely, and trapped in an abusive marriage; she acts as a voice for a feminist consciousness that probably never occurred to Steinbeck. Likewise, the wonderful Joe Morton (Brother from another Planet) begins as the brutally, cruelly angry Black man, eventually shows his pain and loneliness. Both of these unhappy people are brought out of their shells in contact with Lennie, the confessor who understands almost nothing they tell him, so they can tell him anything.

I recommend Of Mice and Men without reservation even at full price. It is visually beautiful. It is thematically intelligent and important. It is sensitive to its source and the debut of a great new movie talent. Really, you must go.

Dies ist ein Auszug aus einem Artikel, der am 17.10.1997 dem Internet entnommen wurde:
http://www.us.imdb.com/Reviews/15/1591

8.14 Of Mice and Men
Todd McCarthy

Well-mounted and very traditional, Of Mice and Men honorably serves John Steinbeck's classic story of two Depression-era drifters without bringing anything new to it. Fine performances down the line and sensitive handling justify this attempt to introduce a new generation to the small tragedy of George and Lennie, although lack of any edge or fresh motivation to tell the tale will keep enthusiasm, and B.O. results, at a moderate level.

First published in 1937, the novel has had a continued life as a Broadway play, a Hollywood film starring Lon Chaney and Burgess Meredith, and a 1980 stage piece at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theater that featured John Malkovich and Gary Sinise, who repeat their roles here.

Set in a lonely world of itinerant men in 1930, drama has a simplicity and a gruff sentimentality that makes for almost surefire pathos if done properly. It's a story of vulnerable creatures - human and animal - and how a rough world makes life very tenuous for those without a proper set of defenses.

Horton Fonte's intelligent adaptation begins with George and Lennie fleeing a posse of dogs and armed men across the sunbaked California countryside. However, they are not at loose ends for long, as they have jobs lined up at a farm near Soledad, where acres of wheat need harvesting.

George (Sinise) is a quickwitted man of few but wellchosen words with no family or money to his name. His only charge is Lennie (Malkovich), a lumbering simpleton who has the mind of a child but the strength of an ox. People can't quite understand why George has saddled himself with Lennie, and George spews out his resentment of his companion in one early scene, but they've gone as far as choosing a small spread they hope to buy if they can earn enough money.

Dramatic gears start turning when belligerent farm boss son Curley (Casey Siemaszko) starts picking on Lennie. Before long, son's lovely, lonely wife (Sherilyn Fenn) begins; hanging around the bunkhouse and barn, seemingly with an eye for George.

Story's subsequent small events have a withering old farmhand (Ray Walston) coming apart when his old dog is taken out to be shot; after which he proposes to join with the new arrivals in buying a place, and Lennie crushing Curley's hand after the latter provokes a fistfight.

Lennie, not knowing his own strength, accidentally kills the puppy he's adopted, then manages to tragically do the same to Curley's wife, who made the mistake of offering him some tenderness and intimacy. Both George and audience must come to terms with the sad inevitability of the situation's resolution.

Captured in lovely, burnished hues by lenser Kenneth MacMillan and evocatively realized by production designer David Groisman, the working world of the men is a hot, dusty place devoid of emotional outlets and career possibilities, and could not look more different from the studio-bound Lewis Milestone rendition of more than 50 years ago.
Other alterations engineered by Foote and Stinise include rounding out the wife's character (never given a name by Steinbeck) to emphasize her need for human interaction, building up the role of a black animal hand (Joe Morton) who has a meaningful exchange with Lennie, the farm's other total outcast and changing the nature of Lennie's death.

Performances are sterling. Malkovich's odd looks, slightly crossed eyes and slurred speech are perfect tools with which to build a convincing Lennie. Even if the actor is not the giant described, he conveys the requisite gentleness and strength, as well as the sense of not being able to help himself when enraged.

Sinise is surprisingly effective, bringing to his role a reedy quality that contains both bitterness and qualified hope for better times ahead. His reticence makes believable his admission that he's never had a sweetheart, as the harshness of the life he's led shows through his good looks.

Outstanding supporting turn is delivered by Walston, who has rarely had the opportunity to shine on-screen. Fenn hits a good combination of flirtatiousness and need as the ill-fated wife, and John Terry is quietly notable as the evenhanded foreman. Solid in more one-note performances are Siemaszko and Morton.

Returning to the screen after his failed first feature (Miles From Home) and his stage success with The Grapes of Wrath, Sinise demonstrates that he knows how to deliver the dramatic goods on film, even if his interpretation of the work is very straightforward. While not especially exciting, this adaptation still proves emotionally engaging and somewhat moving.

Action is underlined with subtle effectiveness by Mark Isham's fine score.

The best laid plans of director/actor gang aft agley as Gary Sinise's version of Of Mice and Men proves. The film has all the right credentials: Steinbeck's widow gave permission for the project to be filmed a second time, while Oscar-winning scriptwriter Horton Foote adapted the novel. Sinise himself acted in The Grapes of Wrath for the renowned Chicago based Steppenwolf Company, which he co-founded, and the presence of John Malkovich adds prestige.

8.15 Of Mice and Men
Geoffrey Macnab

California 1930, at the height of the Depression. Two itinerant farm workers, gentle but retarded giant Lennie and friend George, go on his quick-witted friend George, go on the run after leaving a job in a hurry. In a new town, they find work on a ranch. The ranch owner's son Curley takes an immediate dislike to the pair and finds any excuse to start a fight with Lennie. George manages to keep his friend out of trouble, warning him to avoid Curley's bored, flirtatious wife. Lennie is an excellent worker, and earns the respect of the other hands. He and George befriend an old man, Candy, and share with him their long-cherished dream of buying their own homestead. The old man offers them all his savings if he can join them. Curley finally picks a fight with Lennie and has his fist crushed by the giant. However, ashamed of his own cowardice, Curley fails to report the incident.

Lennie has a labrador pup to which he is devoted. George warns him to be careful with the dog, but one afternoon, while the rest of the men are out in the yard throwing horseshoes, an inconsolable Lennie realizes he has imothered the pup to death. Curley's wife tries to comfort him, allowing Lennie to touch her hair. When he will not let go, she panics. Alarmed, he puts his hand over her mouth to silence her and inadvertently strangles her. When Curley finds his dead wife, he immediately grabs his gun and heads out into the woods after Lennie. Meanwhile, George makes his way to a clearing where he told his friend to wait for him in case of emergency. He finds Lennie splashing about in the river. He asks him to kneel, telling him for the last time about the farm they dream of owning. George shoots Lennie in the back of the head to save him from Curley's lynch mob, then resumes his travels alone.
Nevertheless, *Of Mice and Men* is pretty lifeless.

The movie is undeniably handsome. Exhaustive attention has been paid to evoking 30s rural America, conjuring an atmosphere of dust and faded denim. At its best, the photography recalls Nestor Almendros’ striking work on *Days of Heaven*, with scenes of ranch hands harvesting in golden fields of wheat (planted specially for the picture) or trundling-home in their cart at twilight. And there is nothing wrong with the two central performances: Malkovich is exceptional as the gentle, retarded giant Lennie, while Sinise is neat and effective as George, his friend and protector. Individual scenes work well: for instance, the vivid early sequence where Lennie and George flee from unidentified pursuers, eventually hiding out in a river. Or the poignant moment when the feeble old-timer Candy (played by Broadway veteran Ray Walston) realises his beloved dog, arthritic, riddled with fleas and reeking to high heaven, is going to be shot by the other ranch hands, who can no longer bear the mutt’s presence in the bunkhouse.

But the picture sags in the middle. Sinise appears in virtually every set-up, leading one to suspect that he neglected his directorial role. Lewis Milestone’s 1939 version had a level of energy, humour and pathos which this tasteful, middlebrow remake lacks. Sinise treats his material too earnestly, as if it were destined for Masterpiece Theatre. The framing is often static, with the camera rooted to the spot as characters mouth their touching homilies. Thankfully, the cast, largely drawn from theatre, is strong. Casey Siemaszko as the pugnacious, bullying Curley and Randolph Scott lookalike John Terry as the ranch foreman deliver telling performances in small parts. Horton Foote has expanded Steinbeck’s original tale, broadening the role of Curley’s wife. We get the sense that she, like all Steinbeck’s loners, is looking for companionship - her flirtations with the ranch hands are seen as her way of combating the boredom and frustration of a stale, loveless marriage. Sherilyn Fenn makes the character - referred to as „Curley’s wife“ throughout - at least slightly sympathetic.

In spite of this improvement, Foote must bear some responsibility for the way the film runs out of steam. Even Lennie’s death, which has him shot by George as the latter rehearses their dream of owning a homestead, fails to tug at the emotions. Sinise might have been expected to imbue the picture with some of the desperation and yearning characteristic of the work of his longtime collaborator at the Steppenwolf Company, Sam Shepard. Sadly, he has delivered instead little more than a lacklustre ramble through an old favourite.

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Underrated is a word that is used far too often in Hollywood. But what is far worse than being underrated is being unappreciated and not by the critics but by the fans. Two of my favourite actors are Gary Sinise and John Malkovich and although they have always been well received by the popular media they have never achieved the audience appeal and name recognition that their talents deserve. ...

A movie which highlights the talents of both men is the 1992 movie *Of Mice and Men* based on the story by John Steinbeck. *Of Mice and Men* is the story of two brothers, George and Lennie Small. George is an intense, intelligent young man who has taken responsibility for the care of Lennie, who is mentally challenged and possesses immense physical strength. It is a simple story about two men, George, an intelligent, hard working man and Lennie, a man of incredible physical strength who is mentally retarded, who have been travelling America looking for work during the depression era. George does his best to keep Lennie out of trouble, although the trouble that Lennie gets into is in no way malicious, but George can’t always be around and Lennie gets himself into a great deal of trouble while the two are working on a farm.

Gary Sinise, who also directed and produced this film, plays George Small. And I mean he really is George. It must be a daunting prospect to have to bring to life
one of America's most loved novels. But playing one of the two leading characters while directing and producing is a hard feat to successfully accomplish which many of Hollywood's best actors have tried yet still failed to do. Add a Steinbeck novel to the mix and buying Tylenol by the case might be a good idea. But Sinise truly rises to the occasion and there isn't a hint of overacting in his performance.

His performance functions on many different levels. What is most remarkable about Gary Sinise's performance is that he does not allow his character to be overshadowed by Malkovich's Lennie while maintaining the quiet nature of George. It would be so easy to watch Of Mice and Men and be overwhelmed by the performance of Malkovich but Sinise is so solid his performance can't be ignored.

John Malkovich, better known for his villain roles in movies like Con Air, Dangerous Liaisons, and In The Line of Fire, is absolutely remarkable as the mentally retarded Lennie. There are plenty of actors with whom to compare him since Hollywood has had a love affair with characters who are simple minded yet full of heart such as Tom Hanks in Forrest Gump, Jodie Foster in Nell, even Billy Bob Thornton in Sling blade. Lennie is probably a combination of Forrest Gump and Karl Childers (Billy Bob Thornton's character in Sling Blade). What Malkovich never does is fall into parody. His character is very realistic and you never get the feeling that you are watching an actor playing Lennie. You are watching Lennie.

Another actor who can't be forgotten is Ray Walston. He plays an aging farm hand who won't be able to work much longer. In one of the most poignant scenes in the film one of the bullying farm workers insists that Walston has to kill his aging, smelly, dog. In the dog you can see the future of Walston's character himself. Like Sinise and Malkovich he gives a simple easy-going performance. The fluidity with which the actors play their characters is what makes this film so watchable.

Horton Foote wrote the screenplay for Of Mice and Men. He has been nominated for three screenplay Oscars winning two: one for 1983's Tender Mercies and the other for 1962's To Kill A Mockingbird. Foote's adaptations of Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men and Harper Lee's To Kill A Mockingbird illustrate perfect examples of how to adapt a screenplay from previously written material. Foote does not try to turn Of Mice and Men into something it is not. Falling back on his experience of adapting "To Kill A Mockingbird" Foote maintains the simplicity of the story without bogging it down with Hollywood hype. Foote successfully adapted two of America's most classic novels to create two of America's most classic films.

There can be no doubt that To Kill A Mockingbird is one of the great classic films of our time. It has been named to the National Film Registry by The National Film Preservation Board which was founded by the Library of Congress. Since its founding in 1988 the National Film Preservation Board has selected up to 25 films each year which are considered to be culturally, historically, or aesthetically important. Saying that Gary Sinise's version of Of Mice and Men is a classic is a far greater leap.

But let's look at the facts. The original novel was written by one of America's most renowned authors. The story, set in depression era America, is about two brothers and their quest for the American dream. All that George and Lennie want is to be able to make enough money to buy their own farm. The film itself is beautifully filmed showing the great American countryside. As far as I'm concerned this film meets all three standards as it is culturally, historically, or aesthetically important. I highly recommend this film. Don't be off put because it is an adaptation of one of America's greatest novels. At heart it is a simple story, with great acting and a perfect script. What more could you ask from a movie?

Of course what most students ask of a film adaptation of a classic piece of literature is that it mirrors the story so completely that you can watch it and then not have to read the book. Of Mice and Men is a great book and what makes Sinise's Of Mice and Men a great movie is that it does mirror the book. None of the cast or crew involved in the movie tries to make Of Mice and Men something it's not; it's a simple story, simply told, and simply acted, a truly great piece of film. If you have any questions or comments about this review, or if you would like to
suggest a great film to feature, drop me a
line at jjmls@mailserv.mta.ca.

Dies ist ein Auszug aus einem Artikel, der am
02.12.1997 dem Internet entnommen wurde:
http://www.argosy.mta.ca/ argosy97-
98/100997/review/review2.htm

8.17 Picks & Pans: Of Mice and Men
Ralph Novak

Like The Last of the Mohicans, this movie is
based on a major American novel that was
turned into a splendid film 50 or so years
ago. This kind of exercise is about as useful
as touching up Leonardo’s paintings.

This is still a picturesque, affecting movie. But
then its source, John Steinbeck’s novel about
a simpleminded California farm worker and
his friend and guardian, is almost foolproof,
with its succession of vivid incidents and its
didactic but touching lessons about
generosity, loyalty and prejudice.

Directing his second feature, Sinise (A
Midnight Clear) seems to have let Malkovich
run out of control as Lennie, the hulking man
who just wants to have smooth things to
stroke and to be let alone. The ordinarily
slight Malkovich bulked up for the part and
at times seems to be wearing platform
shoes. But he has less success with his
character’s affliction, looking almost frantic
in his eye-rolling, gaping attempt to suggest
retardation, even affecting an exaggerated
speech defect. Lon Chaney Jr.’s per-
formance in 1939 seems like a model of
naturalism by comparison. (Chaney was
also physically bigger and more convincing
as a muscle man.) Sinise himself plays
George, Lennie’s buddy-protector whom
Burgess Meredith played more subtly in
1939.

As director, Sinise makes the California farm
setting look too pretty, and the sense of the
lingering Depression that was an undercurrent of Steinbeck’s book is missing.
(The Depression worked better in black and
white.) Sinise musters strong supporting
acting, though, especially by Sherilyn Fenn
as the wanton daughter-in-law of the owner
of the farm where Malkovich and Sinise
work.

Casey Siemaszko is the owner’s bullying son,
who keeps one hand in a Vaseline-filled
glove to “keep it soft” for his wife. (While a lot
of these characters are walking symbols,
Steinbeck gave them enough idiosyncratic
traits to make them individuals as well.) Ray
Walston is sympathetic as the farm’s resident
old-timer, whose sick old dog is implicitly
compared to Malkovich.

Screenwriter Horton Foote (The Trip to
Bountiful) keeps in all the too coincidental
confrontations between Malkovich and the
farm’s other maligned characters, the
superannuated Walston, black “stable buck”
Joe Morton and the neglected Fenn. The
best thing Foote does, in fact, is to not mess
with George’s poignant “Guys like us”
speech, in which he promises Lennie they’ll
end up with their own farm, while Lennie
reminds him who will lend the rabbits. Sinise,
as George, struggles to put off the inevitable
meeting between the seductive Fenn and
innocent Malkovich.

Sinise, as director, rushes the heartbreaking
climax. No tension builds. But the moment is
still quite shattering.

All right: Now, this film’s shortcomings not
withstanding, there are two absorbing movie
versions of Of Mice and Men. (PG-13).

8.18 Of Bindlestiffs, Bad Times, Mice and
Men
Jay Parini

... A revival of Of Mice and Men would have
seemed out of place in years of
Reaganomics, Donald Trump and Michael
Milken, a time when Rambo supplied
millions of filmgoers with a fantasy that
masked what was really going on in their
lives. Today the mega-deficit has hit home,
and the streets are littered with Georges and
Lennies. They dawdle in the parks, sleep in
doorways and wait in line at soup kitchens.
Of Mice and Men -indeed, most of
Steinbeck’s work from the 30’s -- speaks to
the condition of these homeless, powerless
and neglected people in a manner that
compels us to look again at their plight in
wonderment and pity.

Steinbeck’s vision of the disenfranchised is
curiously apolitical -whether he writes about
the good-hearted bums of Cannery Row
(made into a film in 1982 starring Debra Winger and Nick Nolte), the paisanos of Tortilla Flat or the lost wanderers with a secret dream of paradise in The Grapes of Wrath and Of Mice and Men. Instead of overtly blaming government policy, Steinbeck addresses the eternal issues of human isolation and the power of friendship.

Although the story of George and Lennie in Of Mice and Men ends on a depressing note, there is a peculiar aura of human dignity in it, a hint of redemption. 'I think we can all learn from this story,' says Mr. Sinise. 'It's a story about two people excluded from the American dream, which is a dream of owning a little piece of land.' ...

... In the current adaptation by Horton Foote, Curley's wife (played by Sherilyn Fenn, of Twin Peaks fame) is written with an eye to an audience that would not tolerate the simplistic and sexist rendering in Steinbeck's book. In the novel, Curley's wife is somewhat dumb. In the screenplay by Mr. Foote, who won Oscars for To Kill a Mockingbird and Tender Mercies, she is more intelligent and innocent and a bit pathetic. Nonetheless, Mr. Foote follows Steinbeck's novel more closely than Milestone's earlier adaptation did. ...

... One night, as he was leaving the Broadway theater, Mr. Sinise casually asked Mrs. Steinbeck if he and Mr. Malkovich could have the film rights to Of Mice and Men. 'People had been asking for the film rights for years,' Mrs. Steinbeck says. She had just seen Mr. Sinise's performance, and agreed on the spot.

To replicate the book's period detail, Mr. Sinise had a whole field of rye planted on location near Santa Barbara. But it is the emotional landscape of the film that is its heart. Steinbeck felt a deep empathy with the hobos and drifters, the field hands and destitute families of the Depression era; their stories still resonate today. Perhaps his novels from the 30's keep selling, and movies and plays continue to be produced from them, because no matter how well off we may feel ourselves, something whispers to us that the Georges and Lennies, though removed by 50 years, are not that far away. ...


Sunday Oct 18, 1992 Sec: 2 Arts & Leisure Desk p: 4

To the Editor:
It was with disbelief that I read Jay Parini's article ['Of Bindlestiffs, Bad Times, Mice and Men,' Sept. 27] about the latest version of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men and his remark that Steinbeck was 'curiously apolitical.'

Every high school junior I taught would disagree. Clearly, in everything Steinbeck wrote, he was quite political. From time to time he did manual labor in the Salinas Valley in California, where he grew up during hard times. Experience was an effective teacher.

From his first successful novel, Tortilla Flat, about the plight of Mexican-Americans, to The Grapes of Wrath, the unforgettable story of the migrant Joads, Steinbeck is concerned with ordinary workers at the mercy of absentee landlords and greed-driven big business.

As Steinbeck wrote in Travels With Charley, We are tied together for all time. His characters are always acting or reacting against a government that was always too late with too little.

Jean McGehee, Mentone, Ala.

8.19 Of Mice and Men
Megan Rosenfeld

The new movie version of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men opens with scenes of a woman in a red dress, running through fields in desperate escape from some undefined terror. Her flight frames the movie, as though she is running, headlong, into the nameless dread of the future.

To say that Of Mice and Men is a classic understates the number of paperback copies that have been carried from school in homework stacks over the years. Just about everyone has either read or pretended to have read it, and if you add on
the number of acting students who have used one of George or Lennie's speeches, the saturation spreads even further. Happily, director/star/co-producer Gary Sinise has approached it not with the awe of an English professor, but with the practical eye of a craftsman: Here are solid characters, a taut and emotional story, a beginning, a middle and a wrenching end. ...

... The acting in this movie is as flawless as one can expect from Hollywood. Malkovich uses his natural baldness, with bulky costumes, to become convincingly large and stupid. He never resorts to cliched idiocy he just takes his time to show us the wheels turning slowly and uncomprehendingly behind his broad forehead. Sinise's George treats him with paternal tenderness; even while he complains that Lennie cramps his style, he needs someone to care for and plan with, and Lennie can help him find his dream. They're looking, for just a little land, with a little house, and rabbits that Lennie can take care of and not worry about killing accidentally.

Need binds these characters. It is not a modern neurotic bond, but a common-sense one that was perhaps more able to flourish in that simpler, bleaker time. Candy (Ray Walston), the old ranch hand who is too feeble to be much good in the fields anymore, joins in their plans. He has saved some money, and he senses that he will not be tolerated for much longer on the Tyler Ranch.

This movie is filled with performances that are perfect little gems, but Walston's is perhaps the most brilliant. All Candy has in his life is a feeble old dog, and if you can remain unmoved by its fate you should check your pulse and make sure it's still there.

Sinise selects his details with intelligent care; the sound of a pistol shot that will be ultimately echoed by an even more dreadful one, the uneasy light that shines into the empty barn into which both Curley's wife and Lennie stray. All of the collaborators seem guided by the intention to let Steinbeck's brilliance shine through, unaugmented by false modern analysis or technical gimmickry. The result is exquisite; proof that with a tender touch the bullet scars more deeply.