

John Steinbeck's classic *Of Mice and Men* at Calgary's Joyce Doolittle Theatre is magnificent

BY LOUIS HOBSON, CALGARY SUN

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David Haysom as Lennie, from left, and Chris Austman as George try to avoid the wandering eye of Sasha Barry, who plays Curle's wife.

Santa Claus came early this year for theatre lovers.

The Spirit Fire Theatre production of the John Steinbeck Depression Era classic *Of Mice and Men* is everything — and perhaps even a little more — that one could hope for from a production of this classic drama.

Beautifully directed and acted with depth and sincerity, it is an emotionally gripping, heart wrenching evening of theatre.

It certainly ripped at my heart and I was definitely not the only one wiping tears away as we left the Pumphouse's Joyce Doolittle Theatre.

Of Mice and Men is the story of George (Chris Austman) and Lennie (David Haysom), a pair of migrant workers trying to eek out a living getting odd jobs on ranches, farms and in towns in California.

The mentally-challenged Lennie is a child caught in a big man's body and he couldn't possibly function without the aid of George, his self-appointed caregiver.

Haysom's choice to play Lennie with numerous physical and emotional tics is as brave as it is dangerous but the fact he pulls it off with such credibility, warmth and humanity is what makes every scene he's in so poignant and, ultimately, devastating.

Our heart goes out to Lennie as it would to any disadvantaged child who doesn't deserve to be punished because he never acts willfully or spitefully.

Austman, likewise, gnaws at our empathy because we hear in his voice and see in his mannerisms the toll this powerful friendship has taken on him — especially in the final moments of the play as Austman summons every sinew of his body to propel George to perform the ultimate act of love.

Haysom and Austman are blessed with an exceptional supporting cast.

There's David LeReaney's Candy, whose missing hand is a symbol of the hope absent from his life, and Christopher Clare's Crooks, the black stable hand whose life is as crooked and mangled as his back and his name.

James R. Crowley plays the boss's son Curley as a hyper bantam rooster, but Mike Beattie's Carlson is a much greater, more sinister bully.

As the foreman Slim, Luigi Riscaldino is knowing, wise and calm.

Sasha Barry, who plays Curly's sexually and emotionally frustrated young wife, is the only woman in the cast but she more than holds her own in this company of stellar men.

Director Paul Welch takes advantage of the fact most of his cast are seasoned film actors performing in the intimate Joyce Doolittle theatre.

There is as much subtlety in his staging as there is in the acting so that tiny gestures make profound statements.

At all times Welch encourages our eyes to be the cameras on his set as when Lennie, seemingly asleep on his bunk, is really listening to the other men in the room talking about the new litter of pups or when Candy, also pretending to sleep, is actually listening to Lennie and George talk about the ranch they dream of buying one day.

It is the magic of being not only in the company of such fine actors but in the intimacy of the Joyce Doolittle Theatre that allows us to be witness to such stunning nuance.

Of Mice and Men runs until Dec. 12 and with tickets at only \$25 it's a Christmas treat impossible to pass up.

OF MICE AND MEN

Directed by PAUL WELCH

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