

# THEATER

Of Mice and Masters

by Martin Gottfried

*Pittsburgh*  
**J**OHAN STEINBECK'S *Of Mice and Men* is one of the few American plays that is standing the test of time. It is a classic, profound and dramatic and immensely moving. Yet only lately has the play been staged with any regularity: at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis five years ago; on Broadway a few seasons back; and just last month by the estimable Pittsburgh Public Theater.

The test of a classic is its ability to be valid for any age; to sustain interest after repeated viewings; to provoke new and different responses. The first impression Steinbeck's play gives is an emotional one, for it is a story of pathos and tragedy. George and Lenny are a pair of itinerant farm workers drifting across California during the Thirties. They are friend and friend, man and child, brother and keeper. The huge Lenny is mentally retarded, a gentle giant. George takes care of him, seeing that he doesn't get into trouble—a constant threat because Lenny doesn't know his own strength.

The two men hire out to a large farm and move into the bunkhouse. When the other laborers hear Lenny and George discuss their plans to save enough money to buy their own piece of land, they are enthralled by the dream, and offer to chip in and share in the land. But when Lenny, frightened by the farm owner's daughter-in-law, strangles her, these hopes are dashed. Realizing that his friend is dangerous, that he will either be gunned down or jailed forever, George distracts Lenny. And slays him.

Like any work of art, a play must be good before it can be great; it must work before it can be profound. If it doesn't have basic theatrical value, then any other qualities it might have—language, imagery and metaphor, subtext and philosophy—become academic. *Of Mice and Men* is devastating on the gut level. Its characters are believable, its story is engrossing, its situations are dramatic, the tension builds to a final release of emotional energy. Solid, dramatic architecture is as necessary to a play as a good story. Perhaps Steinbeck didn't construct his play's architecture alone; George S. Kaufman, the well-known playwright and theatrical physician, was Steinbeck's director in 1937 and did help the fledgling playwright adapt his successful novel to the stage.



*Pittsburgh Public Theater's Ben Shaktman.*

Yet the power is Steinbeck's, for never in his life did Kaufman write so forceful and artistic a play as *Of Mice and Men*.

Ironically, though Steinbeck was famous for his fiction, and won a Nobel Prize for it, he may well be remembered for this first play. It is surely his best.

Any play must have more than one layer to be artistic. Implications and references and stimulations—the what-is-it-about?—are what give *Of Mice and Men* its layers.

The power of the story, for example, lies in its dealings with fundamentals. There are biblical qualities in this parable, and elements of fairy tales and monster stories. Isn't Lenny an ogre? How different is he from the Hunchback of Notre Dame or King Kong or Dr. Frankenstein's creature? He, too, is an innocent, a well-meaning but love-starved grotesque whose physical appearance is frightening, who takes that fright for rejection. Like the other monsters, he must be destroyed by his creator, the God figure, the father.

*Of Mice and Men* also has in it elements later used by Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*. Like Vladimir and Estragon, these two wanderers are seeking some fulfillment and justification of life, as symbolized by the farm they dream about. And like Beckett's two tramps, they somehow know that the dream cannot come true; that life won't be justified—their Godot will never come.

One can also see in the play some of the comradely, share-the-wealth aspects of Thirties left-wing thinking. But the

deepest and broadest subject in the play is the human being, represented by both Lenny and George. George is the mental side of us, and Lenny is the physical, emotional, animal side. As with most great literature, *Of Mice and Men* deals with our eternal struggle to control our own destinies, to make sense of our lives, to be rational beings rather than victims of nature. This struggle is one that artists traditionally think doomed to failure. Steinbeck may seem to differ; his rational figure survives the emotional one—the smart George does kill the animal Lenny. But who really survives? Is killing a rational act of the mind? By killing Lenny (his primitive part) did George destroy himself? After all, he is left with no hope.

Though the production of the Pittsburgh Public Theater was flawed, it touched off a deep responsive chord among its audience. Here was a regional theater doing exactly what a regional theater is supposed to do—provide polished productions of worthwhile plays in theaters outside New York. Its audiences have something created for them in particular, instead of the warmed-over Broadway hits that show up at the local dinner theater.

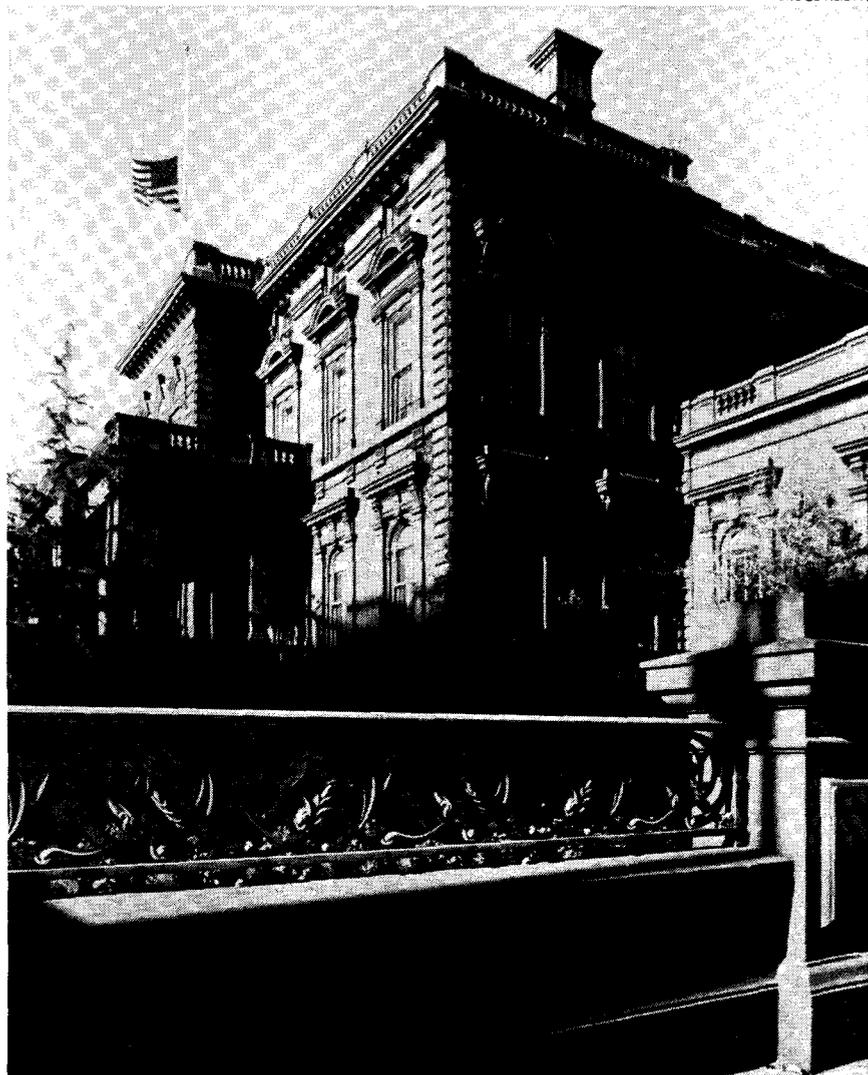
The Pittsburgh Public Theater is not among America's regional theater pioneers. It isn't even of the second generation. This season is only its fourth. Yet it has already established itself as a major cultural force in Pittsburgh, because of the drive and the belief and the considerable talent of its artistic director, Ben Shaktman. Coming to a city that had already rejected two regional theaters, he proved that no town is a bad theater town. There is a right theater for every city, for Pittsburgh. His house is a striking four-sided arena, dramatic in its own right, but—at 350 seats—not big enough. A new building is already being planned. The season has grown from three productions to six. The plays have been diverse and stimulating, from Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* to Shakespeare and Shaw. The productions have not always been brilliant but they have been unassailably professional, and never in my life have I seen a better *Menagerie*.

Shaktman's is not a flamboyant theater. New York and London don't hear about it as they do the latest *Annie* or *A Chorus Line*. But it is real and true theater, and high theater. ●

# BOOKED FOR TRAVEL

The Bayside Hillbillies

by Horace Sutton



BRUCE KLIEWE

The Pacific Union Club—Flood's great villa is now inhabited by modern tycoons.

THE SUMMITS OF San Francisco offer unparalleled vistas of the city's streets as they tumble down toward the new skyscrapers, and beyond to the Bay and the bridges that cross it. But for the hill people, the steep incline and the heights also provided a sanctuary in the fashion of those who sought protection in the perched villages of France, safe from marauders. It was that way for one Dr. Hayne, a San Franciscan, who achieved such a distinguished reputation that the sick and the injured came to the door of his Montgomery Street hotel room at all hours, leaving the doctor with time neither to sleep nor to read his medical journals.

He looked for the most inaccessible

site and found it on Nob Hill. There, on the land where the mass of the Fairmont Hotel stands today, Dr. Hayne built his house, and since the cable cars had not been strung to that remote eyrie as yet, the physician was able to find some serenity.

Hayne was the pioneer of Nob Hill, which came to be called the Hill of Golden Promise. It became, too, the nesting place for the freewheeling bonanza kings and railroaders of the 1870s in the salad days of San Francisco. Although the Great Fire in 1906 swept away many of the trappings of that era, there are vestiges of that flamboyant life that survive to this day. The cable-car motorman, making the stop on these heights, is liable to say, as one did as I

alighted there recently, "S-s-s-nob Hill."

Of the mansions that were built, by Leland Stanford, the onetime Sacramento grocer who became governor and railroader; Mark Hopkins; James Fair; Charles Crocker, the former dry-goods clerk; Collis Huntington, the Connecticut peddler turned tycoon; and James Clair Flood, who started as a bartender and became the nabob of Nob Hill, only Flood's home remains, and that had to be reconstructed.

The bonanza king of the Comstock Lode, Flood erected a 42-room brownstone surrounded by a brass fence that was painted black to discourage vandals who might steal the metal if they knew what it was. Flood's great villa is spread like an aging dowager plopped across an ample plot of hilltop. It is now the Pacific Union Club, inhabited by latter-day tycoons, and called, in a note of snide deliciousness, the P.U.

Leland Stanford's house, one of the first of the hilltop mansions, was done in refined good taste, reflected now in Stanford Court, which on my score-sheet vies strongly for the title of the best hotel in the nation. From the Tiffany-glass dome covering its entranceway to its new winter garden, it reflects a Victorian air. The elegant service matches the period. The Potpourri, on the lobby level, with its cross-hatchings of lattice, seems to have been lifted from Gigi—a fancy of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, where croissants and coffee are served in the morning, and a salad Niçoise—and the local version, salad Pacifica, with Bay shrimp, avocado, and crabmeat—are fare for lunch. Fournou's Ovens, in the lower reaches of the hotel, is a preserve of its own, where the great brick oven produces racks of lamb, sides of beef, and duckling that comes crisp to table.

Mark Hopkins's house, next door, was built by his wife Mary, who spared none of Mark's money to outdo the mansions of other Victorian wives. As he watched it rise, with all its turrets and towers, Mark called it, ruefully, the "Hotel de Hopkins." He died before it was finished, and although his widow moved east and the house succumbed to the holocaust of 1906, the hotel that rose on its site became the Mark Hopkins, now operated by Inter-Continental Hotels. When its rooftop opened in 1939, the Top of the Mark, as it was