

Steinbeck novel translates beautifully to modern opera

By PATRICIA BEACH SMITH

Carlisle Floyd's opera "Of Mice and Men" has added a new dimension to John Steinbeck's poignant novel about the trials of a slow-witted migrant worker and his protector.

The Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT) production, currently being mounted at Music Hall in Detroit, adds its own touch to this worthy American work. That it was chosen to be on the MOT's 10th anniversary season is amazing in itself.

For one, it isn't an opera most people gravitate to, unless they already know what's in store. Most people are familiar with the novel and know the evening won't be joyful — and they probably figure its "modern" music origins won't make it any easier to understand, even if it is in English.

The surprise is that it translates easily from Steinbeck's powerful book into opera. And for once, the English words make beautiful sense. Lennie's plight is only more pitiful set to music.

But that music is incredibly difficult for singers and orchestra. It is also relatively difficult for the listeners — not because it is 20th century music, but because of its powerful expression of the frustrations and sadness the various characters portray.

LOOKING FOR ARIAS like Puccini or Verdi wrote? You won't find them in this score, but the elegant and pointed musical motifs for each major character, while shorter than classical arias, are nonetheless interesting and beautiful.

Some of the motifs are reminiscent of Aaron Copland themes, especially in the first act and overture, but later Floyd's themes develop well in his unique style.

Like some other MOT productions, this one isn't as interesting vocally as it might be, but dramatically it is probably its best ever. For here is tragic opera of the third degree, played masterfully by the entire cast. Floyd's musical tour de force is matched by his powerful staging of the work.

From the stunning opening scene where search lights beam out into the bleak fields of central California and sirens wail in the night — to the closing scene of similar dramatic impact, there is no doubt of the tragedy one has witnessed.

Perhaps, the reason it is a "difficult" work is its familiarity. Set in California in this century, it is tragedy a lot closer to home than Joan of Arc's trauma set in France hundreds of years before. The tenderness of George's opening song which you could call "Trouble

was beautifully sung by Lawrence Cooper who never disappointed listeners Friday.

His fellow traveler Lennie, sung by Robert Moulson, may turn out later in history to be one of the most thrilling operatic roles for a tenor. Moulson created the role of Lennie when "Of Mice and Men" premiered 10 years ago in Seattle.

MOULSON'S TENUOUS VOCAL technique is absolutely no deterrent to his development of the sad Lennie.

Because of his sense of timing and acute musical interpretation, one forgets that a beautiful singing sound is not emanating from this character — and perhaps that's the secret of Moulson's success. If Placido Domingo sang the role, the drama might be lost as the singing dominated.

James Longacre, on the other hand, possesses not only a fine voice, but acting skills sufficient to creating a terrible presence as the Napoleonic Curly. His wife, sung by Elizabeth Wakefield, adds to the frustrations of his existence and her own demise.

Ms. Wakefield strongly portrays a character caught in a trap and struggling out as best she can, with feminine wiles that tantalize everyone. Her sole lament in the second scene of Act I

was sung very well. Her character was faultless right down to the pink feather mules on her feet.

ANOTHER STRENGTH in the production is the role of Candy, an aging cowhand with a dream. The role was convincingly sung and played by a superb actor — Jack Bittner.

In the second act a dashing chief cowhand, Slim, delivers one of the longer arias of the opera. Louie Otey was dashing in the role and sang also remarkably well.

But not enough can be said for Lawrence Cooper as the thoughtful, loyal George, beset by the problem of caring for an explosive, yet dim-witted man whom he loves in a special way. The audience knows that throughout. When he sings "I'll never settle for this life" you know he means it, but the best laid plans of mice and men, so they say, go astray.

A magnificent musical trio is the second act, "A Place of our own," can rival any by Verdi, even if it is comparative brevity. Lennie, George and Candy sing with passion about the dream they are reaching for to quit the gypsy life. Also in Act II comes Slim's rather appealing aria of sorts. It offers a quiet pause with the ranch hands joining in.

Fires fail to damage jail cells

There were no reported injuries or damage after a prisoner set his cell on fire in the Farmington Hills police station last Wednesday.

Thaddeus J. Prusinski, 58, of Farmington Hills, won't be charged with arson, but faces trial on charges of being a disorderly person and trespassing.

According to police, Prusinski's cell was checked at 1 p.m. after a fire alarm sounded in the cellblock.

Burning papers were found in the cell and extinguished by a police officer. The cell toilet was plugged with paper towels.

Witnesses said Prusinski set fire to paper toweling with a lighter taken from his sock. Police also found a book of used matches in a pants pocket.

Prusinski is being held on \$5,000 bond in the Oakland County jail.

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