

The lonely beauty at MCC's *Of Mice & Men*



Tom J. McCoy and Jared Kitch
photo by Angela Salazar

by Jennifer Haaland

"I see it! I see it, George!" says Lennie moments before the final blackout in the stage adaptation of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* currently playing at Mesa Community College (MCC). The play's heartbeat relies on the characters' and audience's ability to see and believe in dreams that never materialize. Because MCC's production paints several elements of the dream so vividly, it succeeds.

Set on a California cattle ranch in the bleak Great Depression, the well-known story chronicles a 'rocky'---both stone-solid and precarious---friendship of two drifting ranch hands, George (Tom J McCoy) and Lennie (Jared Kitch). George is the caretaker of slow-witted Lennie; Lennie is as physically strong and imposing as he is simple-minded. Every single character's through line and each subplot all belabor how lonely and desolate real life is without a companion with whom to share dreams .

George is the chief downtrodden dreamer, and McCoy understood how to lift burdens of the Depression and the challenges Lennie inflicted. Though the opening scene began somewhat understated and dimly lit, McCoy and the lighting elements improved steadily. The connections McCoy forged, in fact, created an almost combustible emotional final exchange between George and Lennie. The closing moments of the scene rivaled and in some ways surpassed recent professional productions.

Along with McCoy's well-played role, MCC's set contributed perfectly to the stark, struggling,

daring-to-hope feel of the show. Rough-cut, gnarled interlocking pine rotated to create a forest's edge that became a bunkhouse that turned into a barn. The pieces were intentionally broken and bent but, in beautiful metaphor, continued to create the bare minimum necessary for the dreams to persist.

Jared Kitch as Lennie carried a pure-hearted preschool boy's thoughts in a towering man's frame. His vulnerable, continued belief in cuddly puppies and soft rabbits, even if the face of angry men and several deceased pets helped the audience support his fragile dreams with empathy. His strongest scene was shared with Curley's Wife (Gina Holt). In a well-staged and impeccably paced exchange, the two seemed to converse. Though each disclosed very private truths, neither truly heard the other.... a theme that had been present and rose to a climax when the two reached the epitome of their dysfunctional communication.

Zach Fagan as Candy handled his role and 'The Dog' extremely well, while Seamus McSherry created a solid stereotype of the hardened migrant ranch worker in Carlson's character, too. Steinbeck's story is woven into a nearly perfect tragic script and director James Rio coached and blocked his cast on how to keep the flagging almost defeated dreams just ever-so-barely alive.

Certainly there's heart-wrenching tragedy throughout the play as jobs are upended and lives are snuffed out. The most awful, tragic element, however, is the lights that crash to black in the play's last second. Neither Lennie, nor George... nor the devastated audience at MCC could see it any longer. The dream was extinguished.

[CLICK HERE for more information on this production, which runs through April 29](#)