"OF MICE AND MEN" (Hal Roach-United Artists, 1939) Produced and Directed by Lewis Milestone; Based on the short story and play by John Steinbeck; Screenplay by Eugene Solow; Camera: Norbert Brodine; Art Direction by Nicolai Remisoff; Musical Score by Aaron Copland; Associate Producer, Frank Ross.

With Burgess Meredith, Betty Field, Lon Chaney Jr., Charles Bickford, Roman Bohnen, Bob Steele, Oscar O'Shea, Granville Bates, Leigh Whipper, Helen Lynd, Barbara Pepper, Eddie Dunn, John Beach.

"Of Mice and Men" was the first film made from any Steinbeck novel, short story or original screenplay, and it has remained the best. Only John Ford's "The Grapes of Wrath", which followed it to the screen the following year, and which was less successful when viewed purely in terms of scenario, can be considered on the same level. The others, all of them interesting, none of them great: "Tortilla Flat", "The Moon is Down", "The Red Pony" (also directed by Lewis Milestone), "A Medal for Benny", "Lifeboat", "The Forgotten Village", "Viva Zapata", "The Wayward Bus".

Even admitting that the convenient length and simple structure of the original provided a built-in advantage, I can't think of any other screen adaptation of a play or story which was more faithful to both the spirit and the letter of the original and at the same time was completely a film. It is consistent in its intelligent use of the language of film, despite an inevitable reliance on long dialogue exchanges to carry its story. The opening was the first (and still most effective) utilisation of that now very much overworked device, the pre-credit story sequence. Now the device is often used lazily and indiscriminately, like an instant attention-getting tv teaser. Here however, it is used to establish both characters and milieu in a few deft strokes, eliminating the need for a later flashback, much longer establishing footage after the credits, or that clumsy way out, the off-screen narrator. Now, when the credits are over we know all we need to know about George and Lenny. No story elements are either added or deleted (as they were, for example, in "The Ox Bow Incident") and Milestone's distinctive visual style serves as punctuation, or to maintain pace, but never once clashes with the simplicity of Steinbeck's original. Indeed, most of Milestone's visual embellishments are essentially absent.

There are some beautiful shots of the grain wagons heading home at the end of day; effectively dramatic usage of his favorite shot - the sweeping parallel track - in the lynch mob scenes; and some well composed dolly in and dolly out shots in the barn, as in the superb shot of the vicious Curly confronting the entirely innocent Whit and accusing him of playing around with his wife. Footage was shot initially of Lenny's earlier life, and of George's promise to Lenny's aunt to look after him - but wisely it was never used.

Flawlessly cast and acted, by players who use their bodies as well as their voices, and with such expert yet unobtrusive art direction that it is often difficult to tell what is location and what is studio, it is literally a perfect screenplay. If there are flaws - and admittedly, some of the sentimental scenes, and especially those involving the old swampers' dog, do seem a trifle protracted - then they are flaws of the original too. The only compromise, if one has the right to use such a harsh word in such a stark and thoroughly uncommercial movie, occurs in the very last scene. Higid production code rulings of the day prevented the use of the word "hell" as an expiective, and Steinbeck's last bitter, casual wrap-up line has had to be jettisoned for a warmer, more poetic language. But even this, in filmic terms, seems right: the final reel of the film is so almost unbearably poignant that the fadeout on a note of visual peace and beauty is almost a necessity.

Lewis Milestone was an odd, erratic, director, too often heavy-handed, too often imitative, too often lacking in a point of view or a film style, other than for recognising the visual trademarks. But every so often he holds up with a permanent classic: "All Quiet On the Western Front", "The Front Page" (Likewise adaptations of literary works from another medium, indicating that he was at his best in translating the commitments and fervors of others into his own filmic terms) and certainly "Of Mice and Men". This film appeared after we'd just emerged from some five years of the Cinderella Never-Land of the late 30's, in which good movies were made, but few serious issues were ever raised. Accompanied by Ford's "Stagecoach", it brought conclusive and encouraging proof that the doldrums were over, proof substantiated by the arrival of "Citizen Kane".

--- Wm. K. Everson ---