John Steinbeck’s play adaptation was an immediate success on Broadway and ran for over a year. However, the actress playing Curley’s Wife, Claire Luce, began to have misgivings about her character during the run of the play. Steinbeck himself was persuaded to write to her and explain his view of the character:

She (Curley’s wife) grew up in an atmosphere of fighting and suspicion. Quite early she learned that she must never trust anyone but she was never able to carry out what she learned. A natural trustfulness broke through constantly and every time it did, she got hurt. Her moral training was most rigid. She was told over and over that she must remain a virgin because that was the only way she could get a husband. This was harped on so often that it became a fixation. It would have been impossible to seduce her. She had only that one thing to sell and she knew it.

Now, she was trained by threat not only at home but by other kids. And any show of fear or weakness brought an instant persecution. She learned she had to be had to cover her fright. And automatically she became hardest when she was most frightened. She is a nice, kind girl and not a floozy. No man has ever considered her as anything except a girl to try to make. She has never talked to a man except in the sexual fencing conversation. She is not highly sexed particularly but knows instinctively that if she is to be noticed at all, it will be because some one finds her sexually desirable.

As to her actual sexual life – she has had none except with Curley and there has probably been no consummation there since Curley would not consider her gratification and would probably be suspicious if she had any. Consequently she is a little starved. She knows utterly nothing about sex except the mass of misinformation girls tell one another. If anyone – a man or a woman – ever gave her a break – treated her like a person – she would be a slave to that person. Her craving for contact is immense but she, with her background, is incapable of conceiving any contact without some sexual context. With all this – if you knew her, if you could ever break down the thousand little defences she has built up, you would find a nice person, an honest person, and you would end up by loving her. But such a thing can never happen. (1)
Adaptations into other forms (continued)

In the mid-nineteen fifties Of Mice and Men was adapted as a Broadway musical. In writing to the authors Steinbeck set out something of his view of whether the novel is a tragedy or not:

Everyone in the world has a dream he knows can’t come off but he spends his life hoping it may. This is at once the sadness, the greatness and the triumph of our species. And this belief on stage must go from scepticism to possibility to probability before it is nipped off by whatever the modern word for fate is. And in hopelessness – George is able to rise to greatness – to kill his friend to save him. George is a hero and only heroes are worth writing about.

The stage production of the play threw into sharp focus the question of whether Steinbeck was attempting to write a ‘realistic’ depiction of migrant labouring life, or whether the farming locale was a setting for something more mythic and universal

What he had created, in both the novel and play versions, was a type of morality play. George and Lennie are symbolic figures in realistic coveralls: we watch them, fascinated, moved, and frustrated, as they dance towards a climax that is inevitable (and unlikely) in the manner of Greek tragedy. The dream of owning a little piece of California real estate was always fantastic for these men. And Lennie, with his terrible strength and weak brain, was a bomb waiting to go off. The story is just ‘something that happened’, as the original title of the novel implied, something horrifying and emotionally true, however unreal. (2)

Excerpts taken from:
2. PARINI, John Steinbeck, A biography, Heinemann, London 1994