Directed by John Shearin
Interviewed by Carla Kazmierski

“The Grapes of Wrath” is based upon John Steinbeck’s book by the same title. The book deals with the families of the Depression era migrating to California and the Dust Bowl area of the United States in search for jobs, money, and a better way of life. The play follows the original work rather well. John Shearin, the director of the production, said, “In a show that is just under three hours…you can’t possibly get it all in. The book itself is enormous in scale, and the play focuses on the Joad family itself…. You really lose the sweep and epic nature of the book. [It] is truly a description of an epical journey.”

Even the theme follows the original as set by Steinbeck. “America belongs to all of us,” is Shearin’s view of the book’s theme, but he strays from that statement slightly with his version of the show. “If I had to put it in a statement like that, I would say it would be ‘An American exodus,’ because it is the American version of...when the Israelites migrated to the promised land, except they find that California is not the promised land for them.”

Since the work is based upon the migrations of families during a certain period of American history, certain historical texts were used to compare and construct the show accurately. Not only does this mean that the set and costumes must be appropriate for the time period, but the behavior and situations the characters faced were different as well. “I pulled from a great deal [of sources],” Shearin said. The Farm Security Administration proved to be one of the major resources. “It has written and pictorial descriptions, out of which came Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. Also another book is Let Us Now Praise Famous Men [which tells of the men and women] from the Depression era,” explained Shearin. He goes on to state, “Of course we pulled from [The Grapes of Wrath] itself if we had a question about behavior or motivation or setting.”

The historical aspect was not the only challenge the cast and crew faced while piecing together the production. From a directing point of view, the “logistical aspect” was a major problem putting together the production. “The enormous number of people involved and in the number of properties and of course, having a vehicle as part of the staging,” he stated to be a challenge to work with. However, anyone who has done, seen, or read about a theatre production or movie knows that authenticity is the biggest challenge any production faces. In order to solve the problem, the show must be cast well with actors and actresses who “are well-suited to the characters, and also show great honestly, openness, and truthfulness, who are able to achieve that authenticity [visually, and more importantly acting and behavior],” John Shearin explained.

The production itself is a wonderful way to experience the epic drama of John Steinbeck’s book, The Grapes of Wrath. East Carolina Playhouse has overcome any obstacles, and is able to exhibit the plight of the migrants during one of the most difficult periods of American history in an insightful and genuine way. The show is the perfect medium for such a tale, and does so to the fullest extent.