In his best-known works, *Of Mice and Men* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck produced two of the great social fables of Depression-era America. With his later novella *The Pearl*, he embraced a more self-conscious sense of myth. Although set in Mexico, it's an archetypal folk tale, applicable to any country where an impoverished indigenous population is at the mercy of moneyed immigrants. So the stylized, almost ritualistic staging adopted by Split Knucklers for this adaptation is entirely appropriate.

This group, Split Knuckle Theatre, named after a line from *The Pearl*, includes performers from several countries -- and it becomes apparent before a word is spoken that they know what they are doing.

The show begins with the cast sifting their fingers through buckets of sand and water: these elemental props--together with ropes, sticks, cloth and the performer' bodies and voices--form the world in which the drama takes place. The sense of ritual is enhanced by choral narration, suggestive of Greek tragedy, with which Steinbeck's tale shares a sense of unavoidable suffering inflicted by vindictive gods.

The story centres on a young peasant couple, Kino and Juana, whose baby son Coyotito is stung by a scorpion. Kino needs money to hire the odious overprivileged doctor who can save his child, so he dives for oysters, praying for a pearl to sell.

When he finds the biggest, purest pearl the world has every seen, it seems like a miracle, and the child is duly healed. But the pearl exerts an unforseen malignant influence on Kino, Juana, and everyone else they encounter, ultimately destroying everything of value in their lives.

The five performers work in impeccable harmony, bringing every moment of the story into perfect focus. An individual character is deftly sketched, plays out his role, then blends into the group, later emerging as another character--a formula well-suited to a story in which the town itself is a living organism.

The same techniques are applied to staging and sound effects. A brewing storm is suggested by actors posing as trees bending in the wind, or flapping the costumes of other actors, or simply whistling through their teeth.

Directed by Juan Mora this resourceful and intelligent production transforms Steinbeck's tale into an elegant, humorous and tremendously moving drama.