BROADWAY, OUR LITERARY SIGNPOST

By Kenneth Andrews

With Sketches by the Author

EVER since Jobyna Howland covered herself with glory in "The Gold Diggers" nearly everyone has wanted her to have a play all to herself. Zoe Akins has finally provided her with one called "The Texas Nightingale". In it Miss Howland portrays an opera singer, and thus is able to bully everyone and be as boisterous and as shockingly outspoken as she likes. It was a happy inspiration on Miss Akins's part, because no artist at the Metropolitan looks half so much like an opera singer as Miss Howland, no one but an opera singer would be forgiven the robust and refreshing vulgarity which she simulates with such enthusiasm, and no one but an opera singer would be forgiven a son like Percy Helton.

"The Texas Nightingale" is by no means the conventional vehicle, however. It would be difficult to think of it with anyone but Jobyna Howland as Madame Canava, but it is a play in its own right. It is, as a matter of fact, an extremely good play. It is thoroughly sophisticated in its point of view. It is written with a vigorous, skilful hand. Its comedy is fresh, and bubbles up inevitably from deep down in the story. It is a truthful and adult rendering of an original theme. Also it is a courageous play. Miss Akins not only ignored the ten commandments which govern the purveyor of popular drama; she showed that she is contemptuous of them. That, in itself, is not necessarily a virtue, but in this case it was essential if the play was to be written as she saw it. Its success with the rank and file of theatregoers, even in New York, is quite doubtful. Outside of New York it would probably arouse nothing but bewilderment. But it is a gratifying indication that Miss Akins is still one of the two or three most admirable of native dramatists.

Nearly every character in this play, and nearly every turn of the story, violates some article in the American theatregoer's credo. A mother, according to the proprieties of the theatre, should love and honor her son. Madame Canava refers to her Raymond as "that brat". A young man, to be regarded sympathetically by an audience, must be a sturdy, manly chap. Raymond whines and weeps and writes poems for THE BOOKMAN. A husband and father, if he is to have respect, must show that he has a backbone or at least a few opinions of his own. But Steven Tillerton, the Canava's husband emeritus, is but a pale shadow of a man, with about as much assertiveness as a professor of Latin in a small western high school. Steven, by the way, is played by Cyril Keightley, the demon impersonator of the Man from God's Country. It is a punishment he richly deserves. Each of the other men in the play is an ass in his own particular way; and the radiant Canava herself is a little too highhanded in her tyrannies to encour-

age much friendliness in her audience.

She does of course care for her son according to her lights. It is her determination to save him from a "tart" which leads her to seek out her former husband, and the details of that fleet-

JOBYNA HOWLAND
As the robust and temperamental Madame Canava in "The Texas Nightingale" she comes into her own.

ing reunion make up the play. Tillerton's placid life is considerably disarranged when the resplendent Canava bursts upon him. She had left him some years before and, he supposed, had forgotten that she had ever been married to him. He is still more astonished when he discovers that he is the father of her son. They had not even taken the trouble to tell him that. It is the Canava's idea that the guidance of a father might be good for Raymond, but poor Tillerton can't move fast enough to help much in the rejuvenation. His chief function is to light his wife's cigarettes and agree with everything she says. Then, at the end, she passes out of his world as swiftly as she had reentered it. Whether she will come back, nobody knows, least of all Canava.

Miss Akins has dramatized exceptionally well a certain phase of a certain world. She has set upon the stage, with uncompromising fidelity, a memorable character. She has written an excellent and unpopular play.

Only rarely in "Fashions for Men" are there flashes of that Franz Molnar who gave to posterity the history of Liliom, the immortal roughneck. Molnar, in this new play, is for the most part the suave, well tailored, popular playwright. The play itself is a well tailored piece, which is perhaps not entirely improper since it concerns itself with a smart furnishings shop in Budapest.

Recalling "Liliom" (and one cannot fail to recall "Liliom" when Molnar's name is mentioned) it is difficult to believe that "Fashions for Men" is anything but hack work. It is touched here and there with the wistfulness that is almost always in Molnar's work. There are times when his ability to give tremendous significance to some trivial experience lifts the play out of the commonplace. But despite a first act that promises splendid things and despite a well drawn central figure, there is left the impression that the author was in an awful hurry when he wrote it and that he never was altogether sure it was worth doing.

And one naturally wonders if it was worth doing in New York. It is the type of story that never transplants well. While it seems, at first glance, to be a whimsical character study of Peter Juhafz, the sort of bland ass who is usually considered lovable in the theatre, it really is not that kind of play. Essentially it is a comedy of atmosphere and manners. In Budapest, no doubt, it gained color and vigor and warmth from the fresh colloquialism with which the little shop is pictured. That shop, one feels, is shrewdly, penetratingly done. But it

is a Hungarian shop. The very fidelity with which the everyday patter and everyday mannerisms are reproduced hampers the play before an alien

HELEN GAHAGAN
An extremely promising young actress who plays a new kind of gold digger in "Fashions for Men".

audience. Those scenes, perhaps because they are so true to life in Budapest, seem strained and at times incomprehensible in New York. Probably a man is never so entirely a creature of tradition as when he buys a necktie and tries to outwit the go-getter who is determined to load him down with a walking stick and a box of socks. Throughout these scenes one is uncomfortably conscious of the translator, though Benjamin Glazer seems to have made a competent English version.

With the play robbed, to a certain extent, of that topical flavor which it had in its native city, we are thrown back upon the story itself. Molnar did not write it for the story. He undertook to set against a brightly familiar background a gentle, ineffectual, beguiling fellow who because of his easygoing ways gets his affairs into a frightful tangle and then straightens them out again because he is easygoing and loves his neighbors more than himself. It is a pleasant formula and a popular one, and few actors would fit into it as comfortably as O. P. Heggie. But such a play is always a matter of delicate adjustments; it cannot be staged so earnestly and literally as this one is. Played in a lighter vein it might have retained its original values. But with everyone on the stage, except Mr. Heggie and Mr. Nicander, taking it very much to heart, disastrous things happen. Not only are the flimsy tale's implausibilities emphasized, but its whole import is altered. What is, really, a blithe little comedy becomes disconcertingly suggestive of sinister things, and what was meant to be whimsical becomes almost brutal. Miss Gahagan, an admirable young actress, is largely responsible for this. There is no lightness in her touch. She is deadly in earnest, with the result that she creates as ruthless and repellent a man hunter as ever stalked a fortune.

In the first act, however, there is much that is fine. We see Peter Juhafz, with a heart too pure for the clothing business, swindled out of his savings, his shop, and his wife by an industrious young assistant whom he has befriended. He takes this series of crushing misfortunes without resentment, but with a gentle courage that makes of him a genuine and admirable figure. He sees his wife depart with his rival and forgives them. He is left behind in the shop that is no longer his, a lonely, broken man. These scenes are worthy of the author of "Liliom". With that simplicity and delicacy which few playwrights understand so well as Molnar, the bewildered sufferings in Peter's soul are revealed. He remembers that he had planned a special treat for that evening. He had got some asparagus for

his wife, as a surprise, because she was particularly fond of it. He decides, rather absently, that he will not eat dinner at home after all.

Perhaps one such moment is all we can expect in one evening. Certainly nothing in the succeeding acts rises to its level. Peter gradually falls in love with the mercenary Paula and because he is too stupid to understand how shamelessly she imposes on him, he wins her for his own. It isn't a pretty love story; and after Peter tries to give away his watch one feels that it is a little foolish to worry about him at all.

Sophie Treadwell's "Gringo" is another proof that, in the theatre, a little knowledge is a dangerous thing and too much is fatal. Here is a play about banditry, gold mining, and interracial amour in Mexico. Miss Treadwell, obviously, has first hand knowledge of them all. She intended to give, and no doubt did give, a romantically exaggerated picture of the life she had found. But she allowed truth to hamper her. Playwrights who have gained their information on Mexico from reading the literature of the American Express Company have created a mythical and glamourous country which is, and perhaps must always be, "Mexico" for the theatre-going New Yorker. Miss Treadwell's play, in spite of its authentic bits of local color, carries a shock of disillusionment.

The scene which one follows most attentively is the one depicting a bandit camp in the hills. We have all wondered what florid orgies take place in those inaccessible hiding places. In Miss Treadwell's scene we find the bright shawls, the guitars, and the captive women, but the expected magic is missing. We realize that, after all, bandits are pretty dirty people, that their life is a harsh one, full of privations, full of hard work, rather a bleak and boring existence. José Ruben plays Tito, the bandit chief, with all the swagger and suavity that one could wish, but even Ruben cannot succeed in making him what the term "bandit chief" implies. He seems merely a petty crook, who works with his wife to extort money, with no risk to himself. There is little bravado or romance or sentiment about him. He does not let his victims off when he gets them in his power, as bandits are supposed to do. He is after money, not adventure. In New York he would be a stick up man with a woman to take his chances for him. Undoubtedly that is what Mexican bandits actually are, but no one will believe it in the theatre.

The play is curiously confused, and quite amateurish in construction. The big moments are allowed to flatten out. The interest is hopelessly diffused. It is difficult to say which of the unattractive characters Miss Treadwell meant to have the sympathy. She herself seems to waver from one to another. The Gringo is an old miner who has spent twenty years of his life trying to develop a gold mine. He is, to be sure, rather pathetically appealing, but we cannot give him our wholehearted affection because we cannot quite place him. We do not quite know what kind of person he is. He has, it would seem, been renting Tito's wife for seventeen or eighteen years, which somehow does not seem to go very well with a quaint old character who dotes on his daughter. We assumed, at first, that it was a Mexican custom to sell your wife on the instalment plan, but Tito punctures that by telling his brother that it is an American custom. So we can

THE DRAMA SHELF

"Dear Brutus" by J. M. Barrie (Scribner). Uniform with the author's other well known and well loved plays. Not one of Barrie's best, perhaps, but one of Barrie's.

"Representative One-Act Plays by Continental Authors" selected by Montrose J. Moses (Little, Brown). The common people must love collections of one act plays, because the publishers make so many of them. The plays in this anthology are interesting and readable and comprise the less familiar work of Europe's best.

"Three Wonder Plays" by Lady Gregory (Putnam). In which "the greatest living Irishwoman" lets her fancy have full play. They will be found extremely amusing by those who find Lady Gregory amusing.

"Five One-Act Comedies" by Lawrence Langner (Stewart Kidd). They concern themselves with the marriage convention for the most part, and are pleasant, healthy, and actable.

"The Land of Punch and Judy" by Mary Stewart (Revell). Short plays, designed for puppets, but good reading for the nursery.

"Vaudeville Gambols" by E. L. Gamble (Denison). Putty noses, baggy trousers, red whiskers, plug hats, Kampus Klothes, "who was that lady I seen you with" — and we've all laughed at it at the Palace.

"Third Book of Short Plays" by Mary MacMillan (Stewart Kidd). One of which is called "The Weak-End".

"Cinderella, and Five Other Fairy Plays" by Lindsey Barbee (Denison). Dramatic versions of five of the fairy stories that every child should know. The playlets are quite charming and could be performed on the front porch or almost anywhere.

"Carolina Folk-Plays" edited by Frederick H. Koch (Holt). Giving a vivid glimpse or two of a romantic and unexplored section of the country.

"Drama in Religious Service" by Martha Candler (Century). A hand book which should be serviceable. It is a practicable and exhaustive survey by an author who knows her business.

"Jeremiah" by Stefan Zweig (Seltzer). A competent English translation of this massive and rather overpowering drama. It is of course a play for the library rather than the theatre.

only suppose it was an original device invented for this play. It is certainly a little grotesque, and naturally makes old Chivers seem eccentric and rather contemptible. We can scarcely root passionately for him. Tito, as we have said, fails to surround himself with sufficient glamour to take the sting out of his devilishness, and it is not very pleasing to see him walk off with all the money and the best looking girl in that part of Mexico. This girl herself, who is old Chivers's half breed daughter, goes of her own free will and thus foregoes her claim on our approval. For the rest we have the inevitable tailormade mining expert, trimmed this time with a southern accent; a draft dodger who is the worst rotter of all; and his wife who loves the mining expert but is too timid to do anything about it. Not a group that you would travel very far to meet.

"Gringo" might have been any one of several things. It might have been a vivid romance. But it ends with little Bessie leaving with a libertine three times her age, and that is not romance. It might have been melodrama, but the suspense created over some bags of gold is dissipated almost immediately. It might have been a tragedy, but no one is harmed except old Chivers, who deserved all he got.