

BROADWAY, OUR LITERARY SIGNPOST

By Kenneth Andrews

SOME time ago we saw a movie with a most deceptive title. We have forgotten what the title was, but there was no suggestion in it that the picture was what is known as "western", or we should certainly not have seen it. It began in front of the same old saloon on the same old company street. The same old grocery store and post office were set up in their usual places; in the distance were the same old mountains. The conventional farm hands, smoking the well-known Bull Durham cigarettes, loafed about the swinging door of the saloon; the tidy little mustangs or burros stood patiently swishing their tails, waiting to make their customary dash up the street and out of range of the camera. We swore fervently under our breath and reached for our hat, overcoat, rubbers, brief case, and umbrella.

But a caption on the screen caught our eye. It said something to the effect that the old west was no more, that cowboys were not what they had once been, that they were now mostly a myth. We paused. Cowboys no longer wore chaps and loosely knotted bandannas, we read. The average herder of cattle, in this effete present, would consider a loaded .48 in his belt a great responsibility, would not be able to hit anything with it if he did carry it, which he did not. We scarcely credited our eyes, but there it was in black and white. Here indeed was enlightenment, progress. A deception which had been lucratively practised for years was exposed, and by the

movie magnates themselves. How extraordinary that we should, by chance, stumble upon this epoch-marking film which would no doubt sound the death knell of the two-gun man, and thus rid the casual movie goer, like ourself, of one of our gravest afflictions.

The star of the picture, a big he-man, for the first time permitted his admirers to see him in civilian clothes. He looked lumpy and surprisingly mature and ill at ease, his hands kept getting in his way and the stiff collar about his swarthy, muscular neck bothered him considerably. We were full of admiration for him; here surely was a sacrifice on the altar of artistic truth. The picture went on and we learned that a young lady from the east was coming on the next train and that she would expect all the old glitter and trappings of the west as she had learned to know them through the movies. It would be unmanly—unwestern—to disappoint her. The boys must get together and give her all the adventure and wild west stuff she was coming for. So they all dressed up in the same old costumes. The star got into his patent leather gauntlets, his spurs, his wide sombrero—and he was himself again. The story that followed was the old story. There was gun play, drinking of straight red-eye, the chase over hill and dale, and the fist fight. It was the same old hokum; by the end of the picture the actors on the screen, and the audience in the theatre, had forgotten all about the disclosures at the beginning, which

had been made merely to salve the conscience of the producers, and to offer an alibi enabling the more intelligent of the spectators to revel shamelessly in the pictorial dime novel which they had really come to see. It was a memorable and confusing spectacle.

And something of this kind seems to be happening on the stage—or perhaps we should say the “speaking stage”. An immaculate New York audience does not like to concede that it is thrilled by the scene where the leading lady is tied to the rails three minutes before the night express is due; but that scene, variously modified, has been the basis of a dozen big Broadway successes of the last few years. We need only recall “Seven Keys to Baldpate” or “The Bad Man” or “The Tavern” or “The Bat”. In spite of the gesture of sophistication with which those tales are told, they are, in reality, the same old stuff. The qualities which really give them life are derived straight from the Beautiful Cloak Model school.

However, as the process of insulating the old blood and thunder and adapting it to modern needs has been developed, quite noteworthy results—and quite surprising ones—have been attained. We have what amounts to a new type of play. It is a play where effort is made not to create illusion, but to destroy it. The spectator is constantly reminded that it is all foolishness, he is constantly being urged not to believe a thing he sees. But in spite of these admonitions he insists on getting excited when the hero is trapped in the opium den and the spark is creeping along the time fuse on the infernal machine. He is excited and amused at the same time, a peculiar and novel situation which he does not understand, but which he finds pleasant. This may account for

the great success of the plays just mentioned, and of the others like them. They provide a distinctly new sensation.

If we were asked to draw a moral from this, we would say that this new type of play—and it is certainly a mongrel type—may not be a bad thing at all. In enjoying such a play we bring into the theatre, in spite of ourselves, a detachment of viewpoint that is quite unusual. We have a totally different sort of reaction to such a play. The craftsmanship, the devices on which it turns, are emphasized. We are able, in other words, to find amusement in the play as an exercise of artistic dexterity, not solely as a fairy tale which, to impress, must fool us. It is in such an atmosphere, and only in such an atmosphere, that the playwright can do his honest best.

The most successful experiment in this new medium yet to be revealed is, we think, “Bulldog Drummond”, which came to New York after a distinguished and extremely prosperous career in London. During the first few scenes there is not the slightest suggestion that the big scene of the play is to find the hero lashed to a chair by means of a strait jacket, while the heroine, unconscious as a result of the torture that she has just undergone, sits at the left, a sinister red mark on her wrist indicating the fiendish nature of her recent agony. When the play opens we are in Captain Drummond’s flat on Half Moon Street. His flat resembles the trophy room of a country club, and the jolly young chaps who sit about in their tweed knickers and spoof one another do not suggest that there is impending the ringing curtain line: “Get Bulldog Drummond dead or alive!” There is, as the play gets under way, much

old-dearing and old-beaning, much tossing off of brandy and soda, though it is morning.

Captain Drummond, we learn, did the usual thing in No Man's Land, getting his machine gun nest and his V. C. early in the proceedings. Since the armistice he has found peace irksome to his active nature and has at length inserted an advertisement in the agony column of the "Times", touching upon his war record and stating that he is looking for adventure. A lady in blue sees his ad and presents herself at the flat. And still we are just jolly along the way young toffs do on an idle morning in London. But the lady in blue tells a harrowing tale about a mysterious house where a forlorn creature is held prisoner by a band of thugs. Her own uncle is in their power and it is fast making an old man of him. Will Captain Drummond help her? Cheer-o! Rath-er! And we're off. We're off, and we go far. Far be it from this bewildered reviewer to recall all that happens thereafter. There is, we believe, no moment when someone is not in danger of some particularly horrible death. But the touch of light comedy with which the play opens is never lost; that is the important thing. The three young dogs are perfect clubmen, even when the house is surrounded, and they are presumably lost. Here—as in the case of the western movie—we find a memorable and confusing, but a thoroughly enjoyable spectacle.

"Captain Applejack" by Walter Hackett, also very English, is in its general spirit quite similar to "Bulldog Drummond". Here, too, we have crooks and guns, and the narrowest possible escapes from death. But the blend of light comedy and this-is-my-

woman melodrama is achieved in a different—and a less ingenious—way. Ambrose Applejohn, however, is, like Captain Drummond, thirsting for adventure. He wants to rescue a beautiful woman, a princess if possible, from danger. He has the blood of a long line of pirates in his veins, and the placid routine of his excessively well ordered country place has at last got on the old nerves. Into the silent house comes an adventuress at the unearthly hour of ten o'clock. She is being pursued by Ivan Borolsky, the most devilish of all the agents of Soviet Russia. She begs succor and a haven. Ambrose is abashed and embarrassed, but when someone knocks on the outer door (apparently with a hammer) he tells her to go "in there", and the duel with death and destruction is on. There is a treasure, so the crooks believe, concealed in the old house, and the secret of its hiding place is to be found written on parchment in a secret panel of the very room we are in.

In the dead of night, with the return of the crooks expected at any moment, Ambrose and his ward study the parchment which they themselves have found. And Ambrose falls asleep. The next act is his dream, and it is a swashbuckling act aboard Captain Applejack's pirate lugger. There is a woman over whom the captain and his mate come to blows, there is a mutiny, and a card game with a life at stake. The old stuff again. Again we were reminded of the movie. And the audience at the Cort reacted much as the movie audience did. It was the Treasure Island complex, not the burlesque, that got them. The play has the double appeal of melodrama and burlesque, and that is a curiously fetching appeal. "Captain Applejack" and "Bulldog Drummond" both have

it, but the latter play affords the more significant example. We are aware of the burlesque in "Captain Applejack", we know it is a dream we are seeing. In "Bulldog Drummond" the melodrama really registers as such, and the comedy also registers as such, which is very different. Both plays are extremely successful tours de force.

It has generally been such a boisterous month in the theatre that the peace to be found at "The S. S. Tenacity" comes as something of a shock. This simply conceived and delicately wrought little comedy from the French of Charles Vildrac seems quite demure among the noisy pieces which surround it. The story takes place in a placid little restaurant in a town on the coast of France. Bastien and Segard, two ex-poilus from Paris, come to the port to take the S. S. "Tenacity" for Canada. But the "Tenacity" is laid up for repairs for a week, and the two friends are forced to wait in the inn. Both take a fancy to Thérèse, the pretty housemaid of the place. Segard, the gentler of the two, dreams of a cottage with vines over it and Thérèse inside doing fancy work. Bastien plies Thérèse with champagne, and one early morning they take the train together for somewhere. Segard, left behind, is brokenhearted, but he starts off for Canada alone. This uneventful story is told with the utmost simplicity. Nothing is stressed, no moral is pointed; yet it is one of the most moving plays of the season we think. Three lives are changed forever as the quiet scenes unfold, and merely because the boiler of a tramp steamship sprang a leak. It is edged delicately with irony, also, since Segard, the dreamer, who had been persuaded by the more volatile Bastien to undertake the adventure in the new

world, is, after all, the one who really goes out alone in search of his fortune.

"The Dover Road" from the pen of the fecund A. A. Milne seems to us to accomplish what Mr. Milne has been trying to accomplish, by various means, for years. Milne undeniably has the gift for light comedy, but, even in light comedy, at least on this side of the Atlantic ocean, there must be something more than finely spun phrases. There is in "The Dover Road" a genuine light comedy idea as well as light comedy people and light comedy lines. Latimer (most unctuously played by Charles Cherry) has a house "just off the Dover Road" and, by various ruses, intercepts eloping couples and keeps them as his guests for a week. He gives to the man involved a particularly draughty room on the theory that no woman should marry a man until she has seen him with a cold in the head. He has, as the result of long experience in his unusual avocation, numerous other devices which he applies as circumstances warrant. Sometimes the couples go on to Dover, sometimes they return to London. He is neutral, feeling that his duty is done when his system has been conscientiously exercised. It is an amusing tale as Milne tells it, the most entertaining of his plays yet to be imported; it seems to us considerably more of an evening than "Mr. Pim".

The Theatre Guild's production of Andreyev's "He Who Gets Slapped" provides an experience that is distinctly novel, quite unique. It is the impossible dream of a thousand drama uplifters come true. It accomplishes what the intense little theatre groups and collegiate dilettantes have proved over and over again cannot be accom-

plished. It takes a play which is, in essence, an ornate dramatic poem and makes it enormously effective on the stage. We mean that it is a dramatic poem in the sense that it is more a symphony in words than a coherent theatrical narrative. Its appeal is the appeal of orchestral music. There is of course a story. A stranger who is never identified comes into the unreal little world of the circus from "out there" and begs that he may become a clown. Pressed to devise a stunt he says that he will be known as He, the one who gets slapped. He falls in love with the bareback rider and poisons her and himself when her father seeks to marry her off for money. But this story runs through the play only as a subdued and fitful melody. The scenes, vivid enough in themselves, seem curiously to suggest rather than state. The appeal of the play lies in the vagaries of the moods, mostly fanciful and indeterminate, which the florid lines may create, not in this capricious and illogical tale. It is astonishing that the Theatre Guild is so successful with it. The piece is well acted, sumptuously mounted, and brilliantly directed, but this does not entirely account for its success as a practical theatrical venture. Naturally the production might have all of those qualities and still fail. The truth is that the Theatre Guild, possibly without quite knowing how they did it, have managed to reveal with a peculiar aptness the strange emotional fervor which lies deep down in the play—which warmed the author as he wrote it. There are few rules which could guide a producer or an actor in this delicate task. It is not a question of emphasis, or grouping or reading. It is more a question of a rare group

sensitiveness—and luck. It is like burnishing a precious stone, stopping by chance midway in the process, and realizing that another stroke would have irreparably destroyed the lustre. Giving the Guild all credit, we have the feeling that this exceptional production is in the nature of a fortunate accident. Which is perhaps unfair to Richard Bennett and Margalo Gillmore, who play their difficult rôles with thorough comprehension. It is pleasant to see Miss Gillmore at last in a part which fits her; and the same may be said of Louis Calvert who at last has a chance, once more, to exercise his mellow talents.

"The Married Woman" by C. B. Fernald is little more than an obligato for Norman Trevor's suave and resonant eloquence. Leo Ditrichstein, in "Face Value", wearing as red a wig as has ever been seen on Broadway outside of the Columbia, gives some odd moments from "The Great Lover", "The Phantom Rival", and other of his past successes. Our chief impression of "The Squaw Man" was that William Faversham, as the runaway Englishman who marries a dumb wife, shows his age less than the play. "The Blue Kitten" is a sprightly and tuneful anecdote about the Paris equivalent of a head waiter with a Dutch accent and a place in the country. Joseph Cawthorn is getting to look more like Raymond Hitchcock every day, and Lillian Lorraine's back is as dazzling as ever. Elsie Janis and her gang remind us of what we put up with during the war. The show, with its home brew humor and general shoddiness, somehow suggests "The American Legion Weekly", or an ex-doughboy out of work.

QUAI DE LA TOURELLE

By John Dos Passos

I

IN the dark the river spins,
Laughs and ripples never ceasing,
Swells to gurgle under arches,
Swishes past the bows of barges,
In its haste to swirl away
From the stone walls of the city
That has lamps that weight the eddies
Down with snaky silver glitter,
As it flies it calls me with it
Through the meadows to the sea.

I close the door on it, draw the bolts,
Climb the stairs to my silent room;
But through the window that swings open
Comes again its shuttle-song,
Spinning love and night and madness,
Madness of the spring at sea.

II

THE streets are full of lilacs,
Lilacs in boys' buttonholes,
Lilacs at women's waists;
Arms full of lilacs, people trail behind them through the moist night
Long swirls of fragrance,
Fragrance of gardens,
Fragrance of hedgerows where they have wandered
All the May day,
Where the lovers have held each other's hands
And lavished vermillion kisses
Under the portent of the swaying plumes
Of the funereal lilacs.

The street are full of lilacs
That trail long swirls and eddies of fragrance,
Arabesques of fragrance,
Like the arabesques that form and fade,
In the fleeting ripples of the jade-green river.