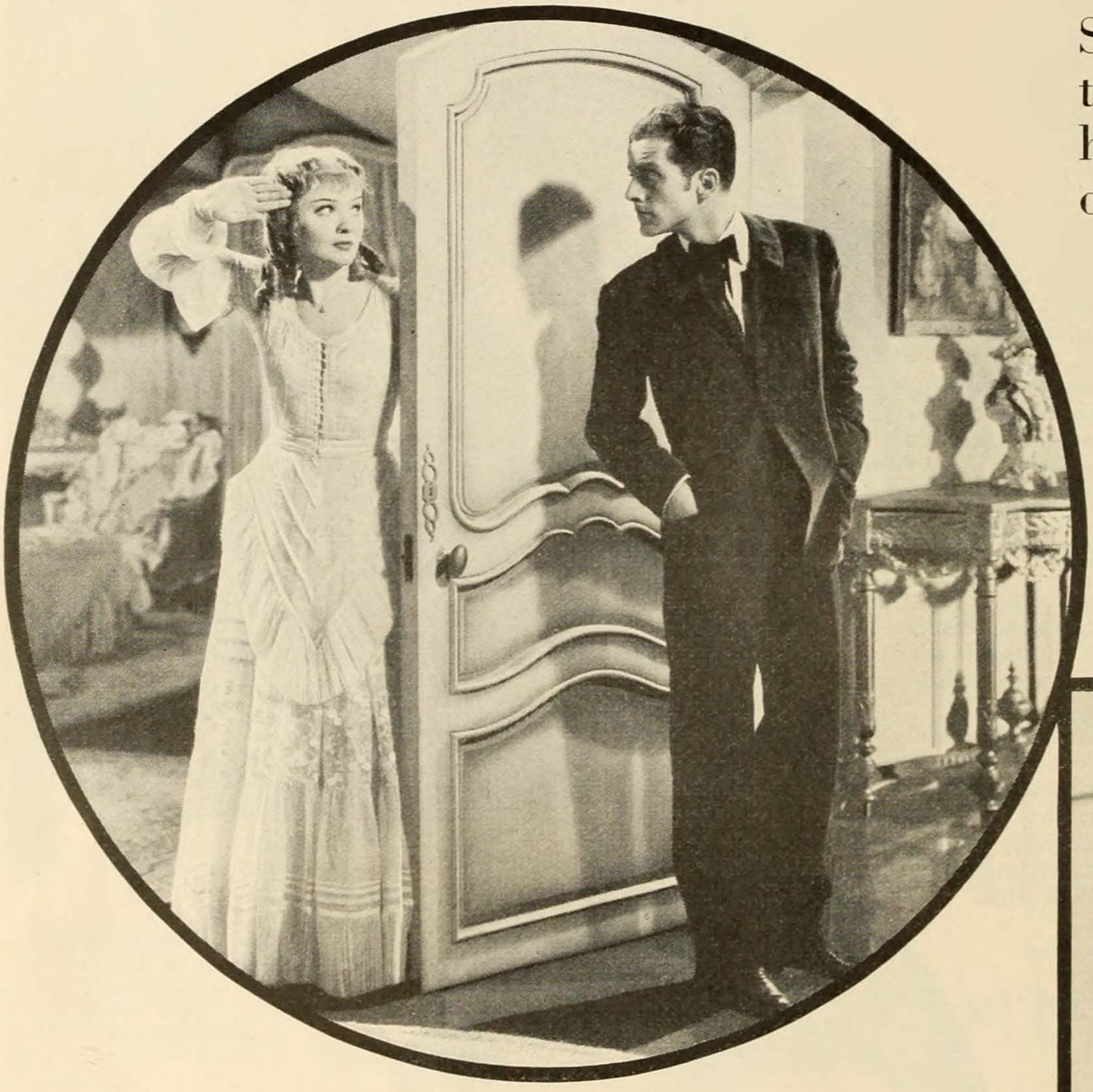
ANNA STEN

The Million Dollar Gamble

Sam Goldwyn seems to be the winner as his Soviet star gets critical recognition

By Hilary Lynn



Anna Sten salutes Phillips Holmes, her war-conscious lover for whom she emotes and dies in "Nana," her long-heralded American début film

The two men watched the moving drama on the screen in a kind of breathless silence.

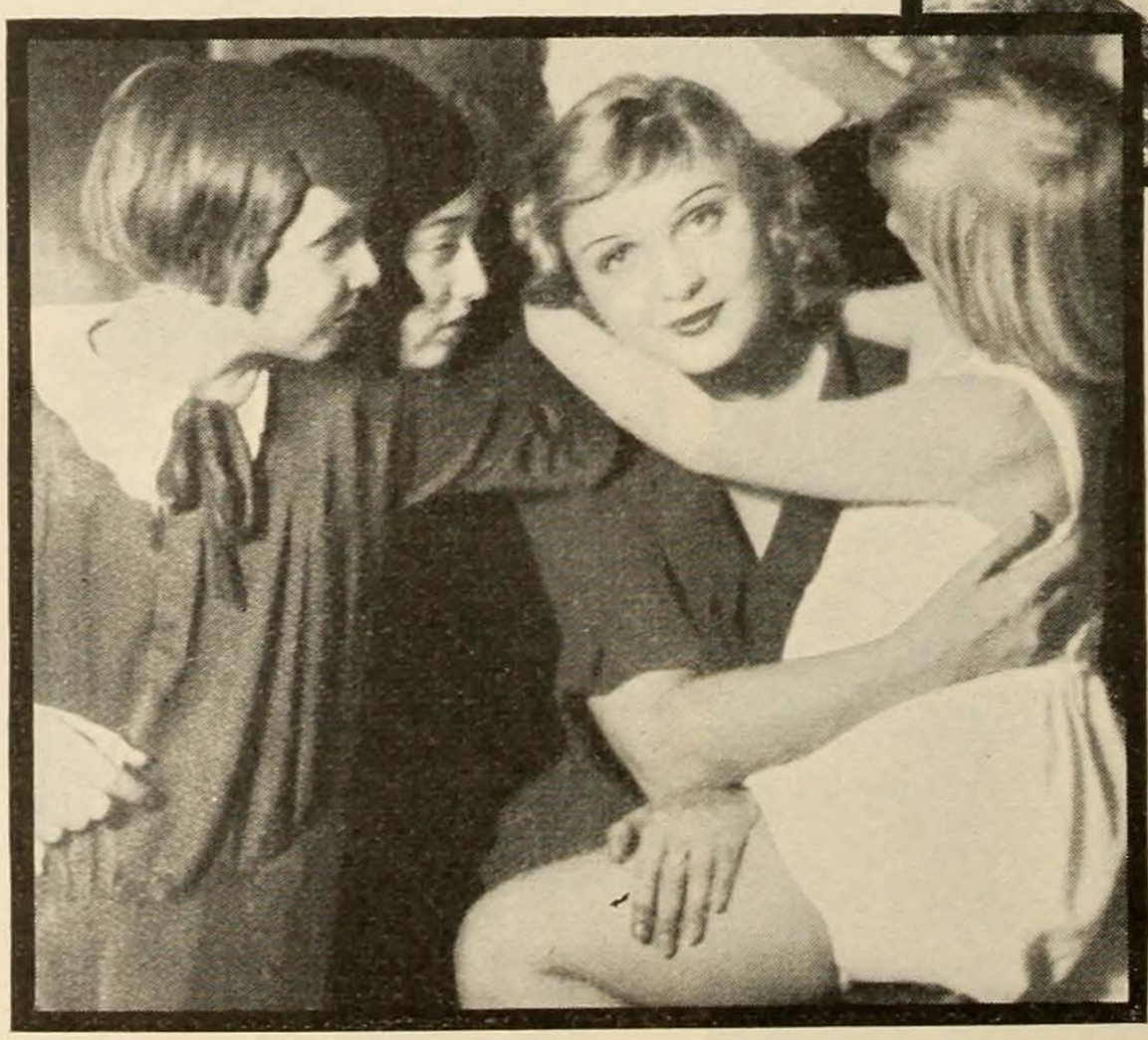
When it was over, the censor let out an enormous sigh and turned to Goldwyn, slightly abashed.

"Sam," he said, "I have to ask a great favor of you."

It was an awful moment!

A SERIOUS-FACED gentleman sat in the projection room, waiting for the movie to be shown. He was there on business. He carried with him a long, sharp pair of scissors. For he represented Will Hays' office, and he was there to censor the film, "Nana." The scissors were particularly sharp because the gentleman knew that Zola, the author of "Nana," was a French novelist who left nothing to the imagination. And that the book "Nana" was concerned with the life and loves of a *demi-mondaine.*

Next to the serious-faced censor sat Sam Goldwyn, nervous, anxious, fearful that the scissors would whack out great chunks of his precious picture, and that dozens of expensive and ruinous retakes would be necessary.



Two years ago, Anna starring in German films, looked like this. Sam Goldwyn saw her and signed her to come to this country before she learned English

This girl from the Ukraine was popular with the children of Berlin, as you can see by this photograph taken there, before she dreamed about America

Anna's *Nana* is not the unregenerate character of Zola's novel. Miss Sten's *Nana* has a heart, but it isn't for Lionel Atwill

"Sam," said the shamefaced censor, "will you run that picture over again tomorrow morning for me? I was so lost in watching Anna Sten, I forgot to attend to my job. That woman's dangerous! She makes men *forget*."

That's Anna Sten — the actress!

Born in Russia, into a life of poverty and hard work, beauty and glamour existed for her only in imagination. Life itself was practical and cruel. And in the stern Russian Commune, the only escape into the world of imagination is through the theater. So, to Anna, acting became life.

Thus it has always been to her—a thing that is real, and serious, and not to be taken lightly.

Upon arriving in Hollywood she said, "I do not want to be heralded; I do not want to be discussed until I appear before the public in my picture. Whatever I have to say will be said by my performance. If that is not good, I'm not worth talking to, anyway."

And Sam Goldwyn was in accord with this strange, un-Hollywood attitude. It was the philosophy of a true artist.

BEFORE the première of "Nana," I was one of two magazine writers permitted to interview Miss Sten.

Nana stood before me, twisting an impertinent ruffled parasol, and looking at me with clear, intelligent blue-gray eyes under the tilt of her impudent bonnet.

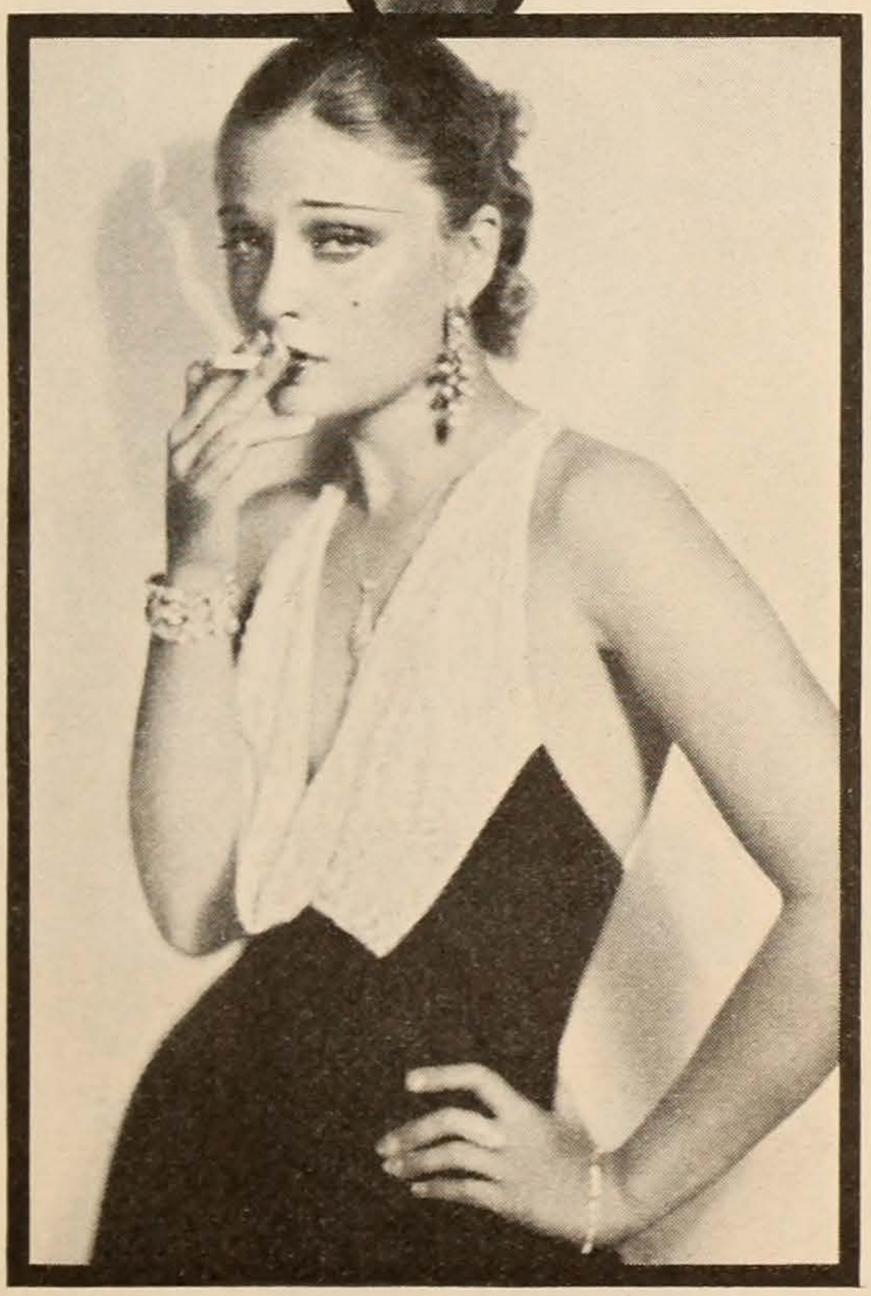
"What are you going to ask me?" she said, seriously. "You see, I am a very prosaic person, and I cannot think out—what you call—those *bright* answers at this moment. Ask me your questions now, and I will go home and think out *true* answers which will interest you!"

To a hardened interviewer the idea of a movie star going home and seriously thinking out *true* answers was unheard of! But that is Anna Sten. Serious, intense. Everything — even an interview — must be done right and to the best of her ability.

In my first few moments' conversation with her, I recognized that Anna Sten has the simple ways and directness of the peasant, and the instinctive warmth, the human understanding of a fine actress. Added to that, she has the versatility of a real artist. Before the camera, she can become an enchantress, intoxicating men with her half-indolent glances and her low melodious voice. At will, she can touch her audience with a scene of moving pathos, and the next second become a charming comédienne, delighting with her gaiety. That is Anna Sten—the artist.

At home, Anna Sten, the woman, is a wife. Her husband is Dr. Eugen Frenke—a sturdy, dark chap with a persuasive jaw and piercing black eyes. He reminds one, in appearance, of Von Sternberg. He looks very much as if he knew what he wanted and how to get it. A German, an architect, a man of private means, he recently completed an experiment in independent picture-making. It's a fantasy, starring Jimmy Savo, that Broadway old-timer.

Dr. Frenke, being a wise husband, is perfectly content to play the maestro in the domestic relationship, and to leave Anna alone in matters of her dramatic career. However, Dr. Frenke does have ideas on the kinds of parts his wife should play. And he sums them up in a quaint German-English phrase. "She should play," says he, "characters which are *in the mud*."



The flower of the million dollar, two-year Hollywood experiment — Anna made the critics rave!

WHAT he means is that Anna Sten should be cast in rôles that are expressive of the common people. With millions of her suffering countrymen, she lived through the blood-soaked years of the Russian revolution. And few stars have ever brought to Hollywood the depth of human understanding and experience that she brings. So, her husband believes, this should not be wasted. She should be given rôles which interpret the needs, the hopes, the lives of the common people.

The character of *Nana* is a far cry from the real Anna Sten.

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MARY BRIAN--POPULAR STAR

Have I been talking? I'm afraid I've been thinking out loud, indiscreetly expressing thoughts I've held for a long time but managed to keep locked in my bosom. They look just a little intimidating, set down on paper.

Ah, well, it's too late now. And as long as I'm in for it, I might as well add one more very important thing—

I would see all motion pictures in which Adolphe Menjou played—for, of course, if I were a woman, I'm quite certain my favorite actor would be Adolphe Menjou.

Anna Sten—The Million Dollar Gamble

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While she was making "Nana," Gary Cooper came to visit her on the set. Miss Sten, wearing a feathered negligée, had just seethed through a scene with one of her lovers. At the end of the sequence, she walked over to meet Gary, and an ambitious publicity man thought it would be clever to photograph them together.

Miss Sten, however, refused to be photographed with Mr. Cooper *en negligée*. Her reasoning gave the Hollywood publicity man heart failure! It seemed, Gary was still Mr. Cooper to the Russian star.

"It would be different," she said, "if Meester Coopaire were playing in the picture with me. Then we would both be in character when we were photographed, no matter what costume we had on. But he is a gentleman visitor to the set. It would be very undignified of me to allow myself to be photographed with him *so*—half-undressed!"

That's Anna Sten—the woman.

THE hard-boiled censor is so intrigued by her, he forgets his job. The Hollywood-wise press-agent gasps in amazement at a star so modest, she refuses to pose in a negligée with a male star. The press is bewildered by an actress who is anxious to make an interview interesting and truthful.

The story has been told often, how Goldwyn gambled a million dollars over a two-year period on the faith that this daughter of Soviet Russia would be a colossal sensation in America. Only, the press-agents got the sum up over a million.

But after the New York première of "Nana," those high praises chanted for Miss Sten were not the hallelujahs of press-agents. They were the ravings of the motion picture critics of New York's great daily newspapers —a clan that makes no general practice of gushing, and that includes two or three who are rather hard-boiled in their attitude toward the screen.

Several of this clan were lukewarm or unflattering toward the adaptation of the story —admitted by the producer to have just a loose relation to the "Nana" of Emile Zola, a Nineteenth Century novel. Zola wrote about a Parisian *demi-mondaine*, whose unregenerate career ended in a horrible death by smallpox. Miss Sten's *Nana* is nobler, and dies gracefully as a generous sacrifice—a suicide.

But as for Miss Sten herself, all of the critics clapped hands and some shouted approval.

Which was not surprising, since most critics who saw the picture on the West Coast discovered the same thing beforehand—that Anna Sten is distinctly a screen personage to be reckoned with.

She came over here in April, 1932. For a year and a half Goldwyn paid her a salary said to have been $1,500 a week, but took her before the camera only for tests. He hired teachers to tutor her in English and school her in American ways. Then, when he thought she was ready, he began production on "Nana." A quarter of the way through it, Goldwyn was dissatisfied. Production ceased. The film was shelved. He had already invested nearly half a million dollars in the Russian star. And he still thought she was worth half a million more.

Production on the picture began anew, with the insistence that every production detail must be exactly correct.

When the picture was finally finished, Goldwyn spent thousands of dollars more advertising Anna Sten as a personality.

Goldwyn believes Sten is different from any star that has ever come to Hollywood.

Zola, in his novel, describes his heroine thus: "Nana has something else, by heaven! and that something is better than all the rest. She has it strongly . . . Wait until you see her. She has only to show herself and she'll make their mouths water."

And Goldwyn believed the same description fits the girl on whom he gambled a million.

Polly With a Future

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The rehearsing company gave up the stage for the try-outs and moved out front to watch. Polly told Sam Harris she just could not get up on that stage and read a line, she was so paralyzed with awe of Marilyn Miller's presence.

Harris humored her; persuaded her to try a private audition in his office. She did this and Harris liked her. He was seriously considering her for the rôle, when along came Tom Weatherly offering her a part in the farce, "She Loves Me Not," which he and Dwight Deere Wiman were producing.

Weatherly had heard that odd voice of hers slinging slang at some time or other, so Polly popped into his mind when he needed a girl to play the hoydenish *Curley Flagg* in the Howard Lindsay dramatization of Edward Hope's novel.

Polly looked over the script and decided it was just the part for her, regardless of what Harris might decide.

Weatherly and Wiman didn't overexert themselves ballyhooing the fact that Polly Walters was their lead before the opening night of "She Loves Me Not." Because, we may suppose, they realized her name didn't mean anything much in the legitimate theater.

But at that late November première, hardened critics rolled in the aisles, guffawing at the genuine comedy that Polly got out of a wildly imagined character and far-fetched situations.

A few words might give you an idea of what "She Loves Me Not" is all about.

Curley Flagg (Miss Walters) is a hoofer in a Philadelphia night spot. A gangster drops in and casually slays another mob gorilla. *Curley* throws a coat about her daringly scant dance attire and grabs the first out-of-town bus. She's afraid the cops will pen her up for months as a material witness.

The bus takes her as far as Princeton, New Jersey. Wandering the streets, hungry and tired, she finally slips into the dormitory room