GERMAN AUDIENCES like American drama. Their first postwar reaction to plays from abroad was suspicion, then surprise, and now—three years later—their enthusiasm for American drama has grown to an actual demand for new scripts from Broadway.

These are the observations of Dr. Eugene Bahn who, as theater officer for Education and Cultural Relations Division, OMGUS, has seen the growth of German acclaim for US plays.

"Germans," says Dr. Bahn, "have looked upon the theater, hardly less than the school, as a 'means of education'—to be subsidized, of course, from public funds.

'The idea of the stage's existing for its own sake—purely for entertainment or for the completely free expression of ideas—was a comparatively novel one, especially to the Nazi-imbued youth. But it has caught hold. While some German critics, traditionally the arbiters, still hesitate to concede that laugh-provoking drama can be worthy of the sacrosanct boards, American satire and comedy as well as serious drama are nonetheless drawing large crowds.

"By and large, German audiences have always tended to set the greatest value on tragedy, whereas Americans tend to emphasize satire. However, an appreciation of satire is growing in Germany. If we can show the German people its value—give them the realization that you can learn from comedy and satire as effectively as from tragedy—we shall have done a real service. Recently a German said to me, 'Had we been able to put ourselves on the stage and to laugh at ourselves, there could never have been a Hitler.'"

THE ECR Theater Office, Dr. Bahn points out, is not a propaganda agency. One of its prime functions is that of a publishing house for representative US plays which have been cleared by the Civil Affairs Division, Department of the Army, for production in Germany. It handles translations and necessary business arrangements, and makes copies available for consideration by directors who ask for them. But it puts no pressure whatsoever upon these directors. The phenomenal demand for American drama throughout Germany is therefore the more striking, for almost daily, German theater directors come to US theater officers and ask for new plays.

It is difficult to predict whether or not a particular play will be successful. This depends not only upon the..."
director and the actors, but also upon the community and even the nature and size of the theater. Some theaters build their reputations upon certain types of plays and when they deviate from the usual formula the audience is not always pleased. Then, too, the trend of public thought in general is an important factor. For example, pessimism which was prevalent several years ago is not so pronounced now, and the theaters are trying to reach for a more optimistic note and a broader perspective. Therefore, the choice of a play must be made with considerable care, especially since currency reform has made money more scarce and valuable.

In spite of the great difficulties in procuring cloth, costumes and stage materials of all kinds, the German theater has made remarkable strides since the end of the war. It is a clear indication of the significance of the theater to the German people, and in reaching out to other countries for new ideas and new plays they show an awakening interest in the world around them.

To date 200 contracts for American plays have been negotiated in the US Zone, 140 in the British, 40 in the Soviet, and 12 in the French. In all, 45 modern US dramas are available to German theaters, and most of these have already been performed. In Germany, it must be understood, each city has its own theater with its own company of players. Touring companies on a large scale are rare. Thus, if a play succeeds in one city, other cities are likely to want to produce it for themselves. A number of facts which Dr. Bahn has at hand provide an interesting index to German public opinion.

The most amazing success to date has been "Voice of the Turtle," which has been produced in 55 cities of Germany (including several in the Soviet Zone) and has played precedent-breaking runs in all of them. Its popularity is the more remarkable because an actor of a defeated nation, in the hero's role, wears the uniform of the conqueror. There is also an interesting point (of little significance to Americans, but having a decided effect on German audiences) in this

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soldier’s putting on an apron and washing dishes.

Second in popularity has been “Three Men on a Horse” (in 42 cities). The explanation seems to be that it brought to German audiences hitherto totally unfamiliar but apparently irresistible elements—fast-playing comedy, lively repartee and the ridiculous situation.

Robert Ardrey’s “Thunder Rock” (in 41 cities), although not a success on Broadway, has been extraordinarily popular in Germany, as it was also in England. Without doubt its philosophy, coupled with the realities of threatening war, causes it to speak with marked directness to German audiences.

Thornton Wilder’s “Our Town” (in 25 cities) has delighted both audiences and critics, setting off spirited, if unresolved, controversies as to whether this play is “typically American” or “universal”.

“The Skin of Our Teeth” (16 cities) has received by far the widest critical acclaim of any production. Although some theatergoers claimed mystification, most were quick to comment, “It is as though it were written especially for us Germans.” In almost any discussion on an American drama, German theater critics and directors are enthusiastic in their acclaim for “The Skin of Our Teeth”. With their keen interest in philosophy they find Wilder’s play fascinating, and it, among other American plays, has been the theme of many hours of discussion.

Saroyan’s “The Time of Your Life” is having great success, both critical and popular, and in Berlin it has had a comparatively long run.

THERE have been a number of surprises. “Family Portrait,” so well liked in America, was unsuccessful here. The Germans pronounced it “sacrilegious.” “You cannot,” they announced, “put the Holy Family on the stage—as just ordinary people.” The Berlin performance took place in the Soviet Sector, and the Russians, on the other hand, liked the play very much.

“Ah Wilderness!” was also a failure here. It is doubtful that it was understood by German audiences who did not seem to find children or adoles-
cents significant dramatic material. "How," they have asked in reference to a number of plays, "can a child's problems be important?"

"Kiss and Tell," which opened in Berlin on September 24, was not at all approved by the critics because of its "lack of social significance." Nonetheless, the play was a box office success, and it was very well produced and acted. The setting, in view of the obstacles to be overcome in getting equipment, was excellent.

"Of Mice and Men" was given its German premiere early this fall in Wiesbaden, directed by the talented Karl-Heinz Stroux. It was widely acclaimed as a production and as a play. Critics praised the play as "a study of social and metaphysical significance." "Of Mice and Men" is also playing with outstanding success at the Schlosspark-Theater in Berlin. Steinbeck has quite a following among German readers, many of whom are well acquainted with his "Tortilla Flat" and "Grapes of Wrath" as well as with "Of Mice and Men."

"Ethan Frome," so well-liked by Americans, was decried as "too heavy" by German theaters, despite the fact that other "heavy" plays are accepted; for instance, "Mourning Becomes Electra" was extremely popular in 15 cities, and its performance in Frankfurt, where it was given a magnificent production, was the outstanding theatrical event in the state of Hesse. The deep psychological significance of the play was fully appreciated by both the actors and the audience.

IN THE LAST four months interest in religious plays has steadily been increasing in Germany. This interest is superseding the interest in "supernatural" plays, which was evident two years ago. The American plays which most vividly portray religious themes are those by Emmet Lavery, whose "First Legion" and "Monsignore's Hour" are receiving great support from the German public.

"Glass Menagerie" by Tennessee Williams is now in rehearsal at the Hebbel Theater in Berlin, and excitement over the German premiere is steadily mounting. "Glass Menagerie" has long intrigued German actors and directors and it will prove to be popular among more experienced acting groups.

With a glance to the future, Dr. Bahn announced that "Lady in the Dark" will soon go into production in Germany. Because of costly, complex staging and dearth of materials a number of producers have plans to pool resources and form a corporation in order to do the production justice.

Germans, who have long been hearing a lot about "Oklahoma," have set up a clamor to produce it here. If or when it can be cleared with its American owners, Americans in Berlin will be very pleased too. They are looking forward to hearing "Surrey with a Fringe on Top" and "I Can't Say No" in German.

IN ADDITION to the more serious and significant reaction to American plays produced here, there are also some humorous sidelights. After the premiere of "Life with Father" at the Renaissance-Theater in Berlin, members of the audience were amusing themselves imitating Cousin Cora's high-pitched giggle. Such wholehearted and repeated laughter at its comedy is seldom heard in Germany nowadays.

In "The Skin of Our Teeth," the famous lines of Sabina: "Oh, oh, oh. Six o'clock and the master not home yet. Pray God nothing serious has happened to him crossing the Hudson River," became almost household jargon when it was time for "Vater" to come home.

What is the value of these plays from a broad sociological angle? To answer this, we must first realize the extent to which the German theaters were limited in their choice of plays during the Hitler years. During these years, very little knowledge of activities or ideas in the world outside of Germany was allowed to come into Germany. This was equally true in the theater.

All of the modern plays so well known in other European countries and in America and Britain were completely strange and unknown to German theaters. The trends of thought and theater developments in those countries were likewise unknown. Enabling the German theaters to present to the German public the ideas and developments in other countries is a positive step toward the reorientation of German thought.

+ END

Laval Account Released

The sums of 10,000 Swiss francs, €10,000 and a number of Spanish pesetas have been released to the widow of Pierre Laval, who, the French government decided, was entitled to receive the money. The money had originally been taken from Pierre Laval at the time of his capture in Austria by the US Army.