By HERMAN HAHN

A S LIGHTS POINTED UP the baroque features of the Erlangen theater, an exhausted group of French students smiled a wan acknowledgment to their 54th curtain call that evening and staggered triumphantly to their dressing rooms.

The French youth had just rung down the curtain on "Aucassin et Nicolette," a play woven around the chants of a medieval troubador, which they produced as their contribution to the International University Theater Conference held in Erlangen last summer.

The group, "Les Theophiliens," of the Sorbonne, was one of eight similar university theater groups which presented 16 performances during the week-long (July 24-31) international conference.

The conference idea originated with the Erlangen University theater group in cooperation with the MG Cultural Affairs Branch in Bavaria. The suggestion that a meeting of similar university theater groups be held on an international basis at Erlangen to be subsidized partly from German sources and partly from US reorientation funds won instant applause from the Bavarian students.

Invitations were sent out to student groups in France, Austria and Sweden as well as to German university theaters while a special committee, composed of three members of the Erlangen group and the MG theater specialist, was formed and charged with direct responsibility for the preparation and organization of the meeting.

Objectives of the program were listed as:

1. To propagate the idea of liberalized university education upheld in most countries outside Germany.

2. To afford the German groups a chance at critical comparison by viewing their own productions as well as those of non-German groups.

3. To promote international understanding between students on a concrete basis.

Response among the other university students was electrifying. Invitations

Mr. Hahn was theater specialist for the Education and Cultural Affairs Division in Bavaria before his recent return to the United States. He had been prominent in the encouragement and promotion of many cultural activities in Bavaria during his association with Military Government.
were accepted with alacrity while the Free University of Berlin flew its group, including two students living in the Soviet Sector, out of Berlin by commercial airlines at the university’s expense to avoid possible difficulties in traveling through the Russian zone.

The 700-seat baroque style Markgrafen Theater, temporarily vacant because of the lack of a professional company in Erlangen, was leased by the city to the students for the month of July and the Studentenhaus (Student House), a US Army officers’ club, was released by the Army to serve as quarters for more than 200 students.

INEVITABLE HANDICAPS were overcome with ingenuity and resourceful improvisation. French students—actors pitched in and unloaded their own scenery, delayed at the Italian-Austrian border, two hours before their scheduled performance. Language difficulties at the Nuremberg railroad station were conquered by songs and music which brought Nuremberg residents flocking to the crowded station.

Because of the problems and money involved in transporting scenery, most of the sets for all the visiting groups were made up in Erlangen with the help of the Erlangen group scene designer who worked a round-the-clock schedule to produce all types of makeshift designs.

The Berlin Free University group made capital of its inexperience by intentional misdirection of its production of Georg Kaiser’s “Napoleon in New Orleans,” a tragi-comic takeoff on misguided hero worship based on an old New Orleans legend that Napoleon is buried in that city. Recognizing his inability to bring out the more tragic scenes, the student director stressed the comic moments in the play, burlesquing the entire production to the roaring approval of the audience.

Each conference day was planned with three morning hours devoted to lectures given by drama experts of the US occupation forces and by European specialists.

Erlangen students won acclaim in this scene from Hannes Razum’s “Dangerous Life,” a dramatic story of reincarnation. Acting, technique and scenery were widely praised during the following day’s critique of the student production.

The university production of Tennessee Williams’ “Glass Menagerie” was rated higher than the professional production of the Munich State Theater by some critics.

two and sometimes three performances, followed by an hour’s critique of the performances of the previous day.

THEATRICAL EXHIBITIONS during the conference provided interesting sidelights to the actual performances. Exhibits ranged from one on comparative productions of American plays in the United States and in Bavaria, to an exhibit on German university theater from the middle ages by the Munich Theater Museum.

French and British as well as US Military Government theater officers visited the conference and along with prominent German cultural leaders participated in the lecture program. The majority of speakers pleaded for liberalization of university education where the student theatrical group would range beside the university choir and the student orchestra.

Dr. Eugene Bahn, chief of the Theater Section, OMGUS, outlined the history of university theater in the United States and demonstrated how American universities used their theater departments as visual aids within their curricula as part of a liberalized education, and as an instrument to train future professionals.

The 60-voice Yale Glee Club, touring Germany last summer, in a brief visit to the conference, set the pace in both spirit of performance and international feeling.

OTHER PARTICIPATING university groups—groups from the University of Vienna, the Sorbonne, University Upsala in Sweden, and those from the universities of Erlangen, Kiel, Wuerzburg, Berlin, Garmersheim and Mainz — exhibited a wide variety of student theater, both good and indifferent.

The undisputed highlights of the conference were the two performances by the Sorbonne’s medieval French group, “Les Theophiliens.” Their production of two 13th century one-act plays, “Aucassin et Nicolette” and “Le Miracle de Theophile” by Rutebeuf won critical praise for excellence in technique and complete unity in direction, scenery, lighting and acting.
The Vienna group, with its production of J. B. Priestley's "Highway on the Desert," an anti-Nazi play, and its rendition of a Viennese comedy by Hermann Bahr, were rated closer to the category of professional theater by their stress on professional routine than any other group.

The Erlangen group, with its performance of Tennessee Williams' "Glass Menagerie," Andre Obey's "Return from the Stars" and Dr. Hannes Razu'm's "Dangerous Life" were acclaimed as the most accomplished German group. They demonstrated a style of acting all their own with a great feeling for style, good stage presence and an unadulterated, youthful spirit.

Other groups came in for rather severe criticism, mostly due to over-ambitious productions not capable of being adequately presented by amateur groups. "Erasmus Montanus," by the Danish 19th century comedy playwright Ludwig Holberg, produced by the Kiel University group was an amateurish presentation saved by a clever idea in the scenic design.

Henrik Ibsen's "Ghosts," produced by a group from the Garmersheim State Interpreters' College proved that amateurs must confine themselves to those plays which are within the realm of their potentials.

The Wuerzburg group, which arrived in Erlangen with its professional director who once had headed a large German municipal theater, its own orchestra and a cast of 30, was credited with the worst performance of the meeting. Their use of worn out professional tricks led to a presentation definitely lower than the university level.

**Criticism** of each performance was taken in good part by the groups whose performances were presented to demonstrate the trends of each student body rather than as competition for the best production.

Critiques of each performance were held with two paramount questions in mind: Was the play performed suitable for production by a university group? Had the production done justice to the message and spirit of the play?

On the whole, it was found that the scenic design had been neglected by most groups, that the lighting was poor for the majority of the productions, and that the preferred use of an expressionistic style had been an easy way out. None of the scenery and lighting, with the exception of the French production, was based on the approach of the modern scene designer — the relationship of the design to the spiritual message of the play.

The Erlangen experiment has lent impetus to future international exchanges. The Swedish representative extended invitations to the Vienna group, the Kiel cabaret group and the Erlangen students for exchange performances at Swedish universities with the Swedes scheduled to perform in Germany and Austria, while the French accepted an invitation to tour German university towns. The student groups resolved to repeat the conference next summer with a wider invitation including American university groups.

Although German dramatic circles have in some cases opposed unlimited activities by university theaters as a serious competition for the professional theater, the Erlangen conference was hailed by leading theatrical people within Germany.

Erich Otto, president of Germany's Actors' Equity, who attended the conference with mental reservations, later told a meeting of German stage designers in Munich that despite the present crisis in the German drama, theater is gaining a new lease on life through the activities of the universities.

The productions as well as the spirit of the Erlangen meeting, Otto revealed, have caused him to drop all reservations and have aligned him firmly on the side of the university theater in which he sees not only a training ground for potential professionals but even more a training school for future theater audiences. +END