EVER SEEN A THEATER that publicly boasts it's the world's worst? Well, believe it or not, one such actually exists and, what's more, is doing very well, month in and month out. And if you reside in Frankfurt, chances are that you unwittingly have passed it many a time.

It is not a big theater. Near St. Paul's Church, in the heart of Hesse's largest city, you enter what was once the gateway to a patrician house. Following a series of gaily-colored posters which point the way, you soon find yourself in a windowless, somewhat damp, but neatly-whitewashed basement. That is the auditorium — and at the same time the stage — of "The World's Worst Theater." In German it is called Die Schmiere, the colloquial term applied to the once numerous third-rate touring companies or road shows which did the small towns.

Staffed by a group of five who do their own writing, composing and staging, and with virtually no equipment or costumes except perhaps some old fancy clothes, Die Schmiere is typical of the modern German political cabaret. Typical, that is, in so far as these pocket-size theaters can be classified at all, for there are approximately as many types as there are cabarets in the country.

In all their barbed witticisms, pointed puns and often risque parodies, these political cabarets have only one thing in common: the principle that all is grist for their mills. They ridicule everything and everybody, including themselves. That is their business. Characteristically, their headline their programs "Shouldn't that be prohibited?" or "For heaven's sake, don't avoid a quarrel!" They label theirs the "theater for people and fools" and describe themselves as "poisonous mushrooms," "horns" or, even more deprecatingly, "an admirably poor cabaret."

FUNNY AND A LITTLE SENSELESS though that may seem, the cabarets serve a very definite purpose. Germans are known the world over as very stern and businesslike people who take even the most trivial and silliest things seriously and thus sometimes unfortunately fail to see the border which separates good sense from nonsense. Recognizing this tendency, the cabarets unfailingly make it their business to magnify the wrongs of the day in pictures so drastic that even the sternest and most pompous cannot fail to recognize their own follies and laugh about them.

"We show you a negative and you develop your own pictures of it," one cabaret prefaces its program. There are lots of such negatives! For half a century now their contemporaries have been indefatigable in supplying the cabarets with new and ever more worthwhile material for derision.

In early political cabaret times the stiff-necked, heel-clicking army officer was their pet victim and they rode him until his death in the revolution of 1918. He was succeeded by the "bourgeois" citizen, whose wing collar and derby hat were favorite targets. Then came the "class-conscious" labor leader, a man who takes off his rings, wristwatch and tie before he goes to a party rally.

And throughout its 50 years, of course, the political cabaret has caricatured the deathless German civil servant (Beamte), invariably portrayed as an elderly, bald-headed semi-intellectual, with pencilez of 1900 vintage and shabby clothes, a harmless, backward character so devoted to duty that he fines himself when he discovers that he has been a day late in paying his income tax!

Hitler's rise to power brought the cabarets a wealth of new material. Not only could they dig up the old Prussian officer jokes again, but Hitler's own party offered characters even better suited to cabaret purposes. For understandable reasons these jokes were not made public during the Nazi regime. Deprived of their best themes, the cabarets lingered on in suspended animation until 1945, when the Occupation Powers lifted the ban on criticism of the government.

They were not very grateful, however, and struck right back, mocking the new rulers, too — or at least those who were democratic enough to take it. The Russians and...
their East German satellites, of course, had their own ideas about these political cabarets. An ordinance promulgated by the Socialist Unity Party (SED) told all actors that it is their foremost duty "to employ their art as a means of explaining to all Germans the criminal role of the Anglo-American warmongers, to ridicule saboteurs, and to promote optimistic vitality among the working classes."

The West German cabarets are hampered by no such regulations. They pick their victims freely and the governments, German and Allied, are their favorite targets. Foremost ranks what the German man-in-the-street briefly and all-inclusively refers to as "Bonn," comprising everybody in the government from the Chief Executive down to the little bureaucrats, including last but not least the Bundestag, West Germany's lower house of parliament.

Once they showed on the stage an innocent pedestrian who entered the restaurant of Bonn's parliament building and found Germany's top politicians busily talking shop. So he called a waiter and asked him why the representatives did not hold their discussions in the plenary hall.

"They never do there," the waiter replied.

"Why not?"

"Well, can you talk while you're sleeping?"

Neither have they let the US Congress get by unscathed. When the 1950 Security Act was passed they staged a scene showing a German at a US consulate, worried because he could not get a visa on account of his Nazi record. Promptly a fellow-countryman offered him this solution: "It's very, very easy; just tell them you were working on atomic energy and they'll take you there free of charge. And if you have any trouble getting back, tell them you are a Communist, and you'll find yourself right back where you came from."

Orson Welles is a popular target; "Mausefalle" program shows actor (right) performing the cardsharper's trick Welles did on stage in his performance of "Faust."
"Die Schmiere," self-proclaimed "world's worst theater," offers advice for 1951: "Humans, let's become human!" Manager writes, produces and appears in all programs.

To Germans, the typical American traveler is a young man in sloppy, gay-colored clothes, straw hat and window-sized horn-rimmed glasses, with a notebook in one hand and a camera in the other, to record his memories. Such a character, for instance, they portrayed standing in front of Goethe's (rebuilt) birthplace in Frankfurt, wondering why this building showed no bomb damage in the midst of heaps of rubble. "Naturally!" said his American companion. "That's proof we've always shown respect for culture!"

Then there is the gag on the souvenir hunters who were enticed by the doorman of this historic building into buying odd bits of wood he insisted were chips from Goethe's bombed-out desk!

The cradle of the political cabaret is not Germany, but France. To be precise, it was the famous Latin Quarter of Paris, the Bohemia where students, artists, poets and composers have their home. A French barkeeper first got the idea of utilizing the idle talents of his usually penniless customers to attract a more solvent public. Working as they were for a meager board, the Bohemians struck back and vented all their sarcasm on the arrogant, caste-ridden society of 1880 for which they had to perform. But the French had a sound sense of humor and the newly-born political cabaret prospered.

Ernst von Wolzogen, a German actor and stage manager who visited Paris in 1900 found the idea inspiring. Returning to Germany he borrowed some 10,000 marks and went to work. Just 50 years ago, on Jan. 18, 1901, the curtain went up for the first performance of his Berlin cabaret, called Ueberbrett. Ten days later Wolzogen paid off his debts in hard cash. The cabaret was a hit. But success brings imitators and soon dozens of plagiarists were frantically trying to snatch away East-West quarrels will destroy world, program warns — and shows Ivan kidnapiing Miss Germany while Allies (with United Kingdom in kilts) disconcertedly look on.
some of his business. So exactly did they copy Wolzogen that one published a "want ad" in a Berlin paper, asking for "a baronet able to write some poetry." The result was that the attraction of the new theater wore off rapidly. Within one year Uberbrettl was dead, and so were most of its imitators.

It seems that the fate of this mother of German cabarets set a kind of precedent. Since they require only limited means and facilities, innumerable rivals appeared during the succeeding half century, mushroomed to fame and then disappeared again overnight, either for financial reasons, because their good actors and writers were looking for something better, or simply because they in time ran out of ideas. A lapse of years saw new targets for mockery and satire develop, and eventually a new cabaret sprung up.

However, some, such as Berlin's Katakcombe or Hamburg's Bronzekeller became permanent institutions and are an accepted part of cultural life in those cities. Business was quite prosperous until Hitler's ban struck the cabarets a near-mortal blow and their activities remained at a virtual standstill until 1945.

Today Berlin features a number of political cabarets again, particularly as the East-West struggle over the former capital offers a most fertile field. In West Germany, notably Hamburg, Duesseldorf, Frankfurt and Stuttgart, they have returned to life, drawing strong public acclaim. All are rather new. Kommoedchen in Duesseldorf, with a record of four years, already claims to be a veteran.

Their staffs are mostly young, intelligent and resourceful, and come from all walks of life. One noted West German cabaret team has four male members, of whom one was a salesman, another a doctor and the third a mechanic, while the fourth had been a student before financial straits forced him to earn a living. Few cabarets have a regular stage and auditorium. Most perform in restaurants, nightclubs or improvised rooms, even basements.

Critics — and there is no lack of them — have maintained that the much-discussed "crisis" of the German theater has also spread to the political cabarets. Some feel that they lack ideas, that their jokes about Bonn and the occupation are a bore, but judging by the upsurging attendance figures the public does not think so. To the cabarets' delight, the all too serious have even argued that in such dangerous times they should leave out delicate issues, such as Germany's participation in Western defense, because they might weaken the democratic position. Such advice merely adds to the cabarets' programs. And yet other critics have held that actually the cabaret is dead. The real cabaret was more literary, they say, indicating that they consider the present ones just a degenerated circus.

However, the cabarets do not care. As individual enterprises they may — and probably will — disappear, but others will take their place. As an institution they are invincible, always bobbing up again like corks — or the proverbial bad penny. They have done so for 50 years, and most probably will still be doing so 50 years hence to mock those critics of today who have pronounced them "dead."

Tourism in Germany Soars

Foreign tourists in Germany last summer numbered 712,000 as compared to 179,101 in the summer of 1949. German Central Tourist Association figures covering the period from April 1 to Sept. 20, also showed that overnight lodgings taken by foreigners rose from 420,711 in 1949 to 1,549,000 in 1950.

Americans, with registrations of 133,386, or 19 percent of the total, and 295,039 overnight lodgings, headed the group of foreign guests to the land of the Rhine and the Alps. This total is 29 percent above the 1949 figures.

The British were second in 1950 with 15.1 percent while the Swiss were third with 8.9 percent.

The total number of German and foreign registrations for the 1950 period of survey was 7,164,000, of which 9.9 percent were by foreigners. Overnight lodgings totaled 28,875,000, with 5.9 percent made up by foreigners.

Air Passenger Traffic Increasing

Civilian air traffic at US Zone airfields increased by 123 percent during 1950, with more than 382,000 passengers utilizing its six civilian airports.

The air terminals in Berlin, Bremen, Rhine-Main (Frankfurt), Munich, Nuremberg and Stuttgart serviced 171,000 air travelers in 1949. Rhine-Main led the list last year with 200,000 travelers. The Frankfurt port also processed more than 60 percent of the air cargo, which totaled almost 1,500,000,000 pounds.