

Yanks Stage Horse Opera In Cologne

Wagner Never Saw Anything Like This One

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The soldiers who captured the Cologne Opera House put on a horse-play performance of their own that must still have Richard Wagner spinning in his tomb.

Moving through the bomb-smashed industrial city, one company chose the ruined opera house for a command post and holed up there for the night. What a night it turned out to be!

Allied bombs had gutted the glittering tiers and plush boxes where in other days German opera fans gathered to hear great singers bounce arias off the rafters. The vaulted stage was open to the sky now and prop wires lay rusting in the rain. But most of the dressing rooms still were reasonably intact. So were the director's office and the property rooms.

RUMMAGING through the damaged building with that insatiable curiosity characterizing all doughboys, the soldiers found a roomful of 100 colorful costumes. In another, they came across 50 to 60 band instruments. A third room yielded wigs.

"Let's put on a show," someone said—and that's how the first American opera performance in Cologne was born.

Dirty, tired doughboys, who an hour before had been popping away at Nazis, ran whooping into the prop room and put on the most glittering costumes they could find. The outcome was something like a fancy dress ball on the Bowery.

WE HAD all ranks, from admiral on down to one guy in a fur-trimmed coat with a white fur Cosack hat at least a foot tall," said Pvt. Jack D. Robertson, Logan, Va.

Romeo was there, too, and a barrel-chested Juliet with waist-length false black hair hanging down in front instead of behind, like a circus wildman.

Siegfried, the epic hero of the German nation, was a little spindle-shanked GI, and his buxom Brundhilde, whom Uncle Sam had listed as a mortarman, was badly in need of a shave.

There was no plot to the "Doughboy Opera." It just grew—like a dandelion patch.

THE dressing room corridor was the stage. There was no lack of music. There were seven pianos, all going at once.

Most of them played "chopsticks." One soldier laid his bazooka on a piano and went to work with a slide trombone. The sound effect was about the same.

Another soldier became involved with a bass fiddle. It was hard to tell who was playing which. One boy off in a corner was working over a clarinet in a dreamy way—and this one knew his business. He made notes sound like happy little children running up and down a department store escalator.

Beside him was a soldier playing chow-call and reveille on a long fanfare trumpet.

THE cast didn't wait for the overture to finish. They just pranced about the corridors, singing and yodeling everything from the latest boogie-woogie to "Sweet Adeline." Siegfried sang "Saint Louis Woman" instead of Wagner's immortal pyrotechnics.

Outside in the dusk, German has-frauen carrying tubs and pitchers waited in line to draw water from a broken main. They listened in stolid wonderment to the strange braying and caterwauling of these Americans.

THE show lasted about two hours and was more fun to the self-entertaining troops than any USO show.

When it was dark they put back the costumes, had a little wine, and crawled into bunks which the German garrison in the opera house had used the night before.

They slept soundly—street fighting wears you out early—with weapons by their sides. The horse-play was over. In the morning they had to get back to their business of killing and capturing.