

Antine Zijlstra –
Berber Aardema

Perspectives on the social and communal values

of the Frisian spoken performance
The Diary of Anne Frank, a first impression

Abstract

Using the example of the Fordivedaesje amateur theatre association's performance entitled *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the essay explores the topic of how Frisian-language amateur theatre events performed in small villages contribute to the creation of social and community value for Frisian and Dutch audience members. The research is based on 17 short and 5 in-depth interviews, which the authors conducted with audience members, 13 Frisian and 4 Dutch attendants, and 2 Frisian and 3 Dutch visitors. The results show that participating in this amateur theatrical event strengthens the relationship between the members of the Frisian and Dutch communities, increases their members' involvement in the production process, contributes to the creation of a collective experience, and strengthen the vitality of the villages, but at the same time it raises demographic questions, and other aspects related to the use of a minority language.

Keywords: amateur theatre events, Frisian (minority) language, villages, social and communal values, Frisian and Dutch audience members

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Introduction

How do Frisian and Dutch audience members value Frisian spoken amateur theatre events in village communities and in what way does it contribute to communal living? Using the amateur theatre production *The Diary of Anne Frank* of the amateur theatre association 'Fordivedaesje' as an example, light is shed on the social and communal values a village performance generates for its audience members. The performance was staged in late April and early May 2022 in community centre Harspit in Toppenhuzen and Twellingea, twin villages of about 1600 inhabitants, near one of Frisian cities Sneek, or Snits in Frisian, in the north of the Netherlands.¹ Frisia is one of twelve provinces of the Netherlands and has its own language: (West) Frisian, that has been acknowledged as an autochthonous and official minority language. In 2018, 61% of the population of Fryslân considered Frisian their first language. However, Frisian is mainly used informally and orally, especially within families, social and public life in the countryside and regional media, since minority language learning is scarcely offered by the educational system. (Riemersma 2023). Research into the general language proficiency of inhabitants of the province Fryslân supports this observation. It shows that 92% can understand Frisian (fair to good), 64,1% can speak it (fair to good), and 52,4% can read the minority language (good to very good). Yet, only 15,9% claims to be able to write it (good or very good) (Provincie Fryslân 2019).

Importance of Frisian spoken amateur theatre for the minority culture and research context

Because of its oral nature and connectedness to local communities Frisian spoken amateur theatre fulfils an important function for the Frisian language and culture. It has his roots in the 330 villages in the province Fryslân, far more than any other Dutch province and dates back to 1860 (Oldenhof 2006). This longstanding amateur theatre tradition has been passed on, mainly informally, through generations. In 2015, 194 active amateur theatre associations and

¹ For more information in Dutch and to a lesser extent Frisian on the website of the villages: <https://www.topentwelonline.nl/onze-dorpen/top-en-twel-in-t-kort> (last visited: October 27, 2023).

34 open air theatre groups were counted, spread over the province. Some of these groups create performances yearly, others more occasionally. Also, their artistic ambitions vary: amateur theatre groups that perform 'for and with the village' seem to focus on their social function for the community, whereas more ambitious amateur theatre groups often employ a professional director and/or technical staff to achieve higher quality performances (Zijlstra et al. 2016). Often, the latter groups broaden their audience reach, also because their way of working is more expensive and ticket sales are an important income source for most amateur theatre groups (Zijlstra et al. 2023).

The Diary of Anne Frank, the performance chosen as a case study for this article, has been studied as part of the larger research project *Re-voicing Cultural Landscapes* (JPICH Horizon 2020) that aims to better understand the interplay between majority and minority perspectives on marginalised intangible cultural heritage, like the Frisian spoken theatre tradition. One of the questions the project addresses is how different groups of participants value minority cultural events in Cornwall (UK), Livonia (LV, EE) and Frisia (NL).²

This short article focuses on the perspectives of self-acclaimed Frisian and Dutch audience members on social and communal values of participating in the theatrical event at hand.

Theoretical background and research design

Studying performances within a minority cultural context demands a broader perspective that includes the social and cultural context of the performance. Therefore, the notion 'theatrical event' has been chosen as a key concept. Within theatre studies it is broadly defined: a theatrical event takes place during a specific time, a specific location and under specific circumstances, bringing together participants, both theatre makers and audiences (Sauter 2000). By that, it offers the opportunity to study performances from its roots in human presence and interaction, both during the performance and the social and communal context surrounding it. Thereby, it enables the study of performances as part of a set of social and cultural conventions and circumstances that determine the specific characteristics of the performance, the cultural practice it is part of, and the way it is embedded in the social and collective lives of participants (Knowles

2 See <https://www.heritageresearch-hub.eu/project/re-voicing-cultural-landscapes>.

2004). Frisian spoken amateur theatre productions offer their communities the opportunity to experience performances collectively and meet at a local venue or location, which enables social interaction about their theatrical experiences and connect experiences and insights to their personal and communal lives. As such, they offer the circumstances to socialise and exchange personal viewpoints and discuss world views, which might lead to social values like social bonding with familiar audience members or creating new relations with unfamiliar others, usually called 'bridging' (Putnam 2000; Van Maanen 2009). By doing so, theatrical events support building and strengthening relationships within a community that surpass the event itself and might contribute to the vitality of that community, and cumulative to a (minority) cultural tradition (Brown 2006; Zijlstra 2020; Zijlstra et al. 2023).

Alan Brown (2006) developed a general framework that show the way cultural events create value for individuals and communities, which functions as a basic scheme for understanding different types of values and the relationships between them (*Figure 1*), which he specifies into five dimensions (*Figure 2*). For this article especially 'human interaction', also called social values, and communal meaning, or communal values, are important. At the interpersonal level, the benefits related to social interaction that Brown describes are grouped involving more satisfying relationships, family cohesion and teamwork skills (Brown 2006). For the aim of this article the analysis of the social values *The Diary of Anne Frank* generates focuses on creating relationships and the perceived effects it has, either through bonding or bridging as described above (see Putnam 2000). The value dimension 'meaning for the community' consists of a cluster of collective benefits, which take place during and around the art experience. This dimension includes strengthening or sustaining cultural heritage, political dialogue, creating shared memories and common meaning, the transmission of values and ideals, social context and a sense of belonging (Brown 2006).

Especially the way participating in *The Diary of Anne Frank* contributes to communal values and the minority culture is of interest for this short article. Consequently, creating memories and meaning is interpreted as creating collective memories and meaning, thereby clarifying the difference with similar interactive social values that can be connected to the theatrical event itself.

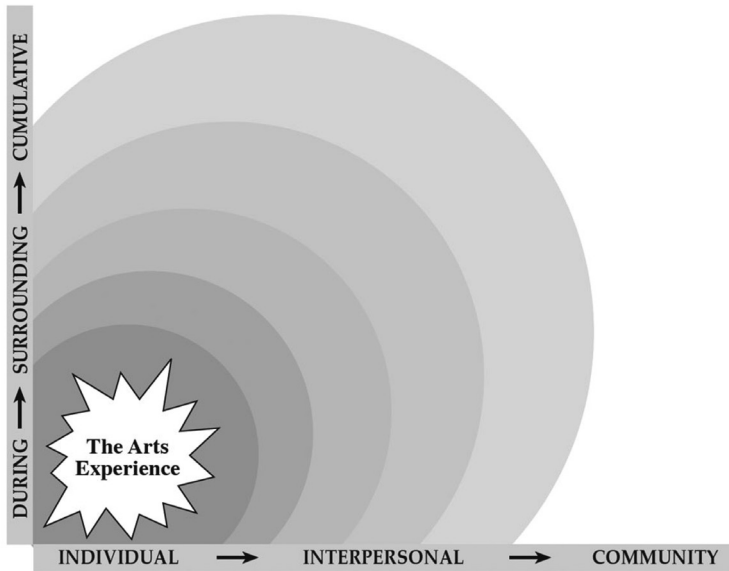


Figure 1. An architecture of value (Brown 2006, 19)

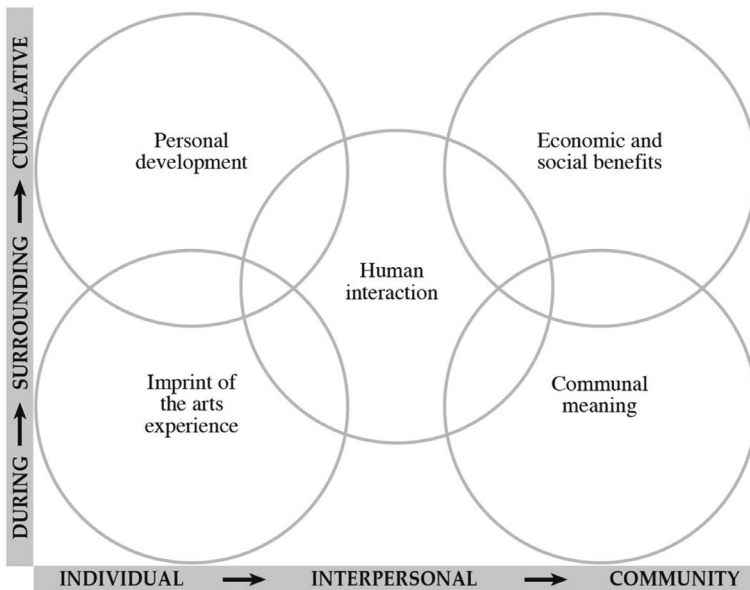


Figure 2. Value dimensions of Brown's architecture of value (Brown 2006, 20)

To better understand the social and communal value of attending *The Diary of Anne Frank* 17 short and 5 in-depth interviews with audience members were organised, respectively 13 Frisian and 4 Dutch attendants and 2 Frisian and 3 Dutch visitors. The short interviews took place immediately after the end of three performances and lasted on average ten to twenty minutes. The in-depth interviews were held at a time and place of the respondent's choosing and lasted on average an hour and a half. Also, respondents were asked to fill in a questionnaire with their basic details and background information on language and identity. Additionally, if relevant, insights gained from in-depth interviews with three board members about the organisational context of the theatrical event will be used and referenced. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed using Atlas.ti.

The case

The performance *The Diary of Anne Frank*, the case this article focusses on, is produced by the amateur theatre group 'Fordivedaesje' that normally focusses on its connection to the local community. However, in the context of the 75th anniversary of Dutch liberation after the second world war, the amateur theatre group chose to up their game and produce a larger production which they planned to premiere in 2020. The board of 'Fordivedaesje' chose *The Diary of Anne Frank* which had been translated to Frisian from its original English adaptation of the Dutch/Jewish book of the same name and hired a professional director and extended the rehearsal time to achieve their goals. Unfortunately, the performance had to be postponed due to Covid19 and was re-produced in 2022 resulting in five performances for audience members from their own and neighbouring villages in the multifunctional community centre. However, the endeavour and (personal) risk that producing this performance took made them decide to make a smaller, more comical production for the next theatre season without professional support.

The amateur theatre association 'Fordivedaesje' was installed in 1977 and has been performing yearly in the local venue, offering a broad range of genres. Also, a larger open-air production was made in 2017.³

³ See <https://fordivedaesjetopentwel.nl> (last visited: October 28, 2023).

Insights: a first impression

Meeting other attendants at an event like *The Diary of Anne Frank* is enjoyable, especially in a larger group and offers the opportunity to talk about it and, in this specific case, also feel proud. Analysis shows that the Frisian language plays an important role in the social interaction on and off stage, in the social context of the performance and therefore, an important mediator for the social and communal values of *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Especially, because the village community is dominantly Frisian speaking and finds it important to stress this to newcomers as can be read on their village website:

“The main language in the villages [Top en Twel] is Frisian. Newcomers are not immediately expected to start speaking Frisian, but they are expected to learn to understand Frisian within a reasonable period of time.”⁴

Even though respondents report to be impressed by the acting and staging of *The Diary of Anne Frank* and have talked about the themes of the performance and their love for (amateur) theatre, when asked about the value of the theatrical event as a Frisian spoken cultural tradition, the use of Frisian as a minority language is the main topic. As such, *The Diary of Anne Frank* creates a space where using the minority language is obvious and, as such, offers the opportunity to perform Frisian identity even though the original book the performance is based on is Dutch and can be seen as part of the Dutch majority culture.⁵ Also, the values of the social interaction between attendants contribute to creating and strengthening personal relationships and bonding within this minority culture context. The use of the Frisian language, as an identity marker, is positively valued by all Frisian and Dutch respondents, and seen as an important ingredient of the amateur theatre tradition in Fri-

4 See <https://www.topentwelonline.nl/onze-dorpen/top-en-twel-in-t-kort> (accessed 29 October 2023). However, the need the village representatives feel to stress these expectations to newcomers that speak other languages implies a certain level of uncertainty about the position of Frisian, as a minority language. This observation is supported by the board members of the theatre group express their concerns about the increased amount of Dutch speaking village inhabitants that moved to Frisia for its rural qualities and are less aware of the minority cultural context they have entered.

5 Most respondents feel the story told is a universal one, that is relevant globally. Some stress that is important to offer Frisian translations of highly esteemed books or plays, either to contribute to the cultural value of the minority language or because it should be available in as many languages as possible.



Image 1. Leading amateur actress as Anne Frank (used for publicity; Photo: Fordivedaesje)⁶

sia. However, as multiple respondents point out that Frisian speakers tend to switch to Dutch when a Dutch speaker joins the conversation of a group, even when this person can understand Frisian. This habit of ‘language breaking’ is a common phenomenon in the Frisian minority language community and is viewed and valued from different perspectives: Some Frisian respondents see it as an endangerment of the Frisian language practice, others view it as a way to include other language speakers since all Frisians are bilingual. A sim-

⁶ More about the director and the cast:

<https://fordivedaesjetopentwel.nl/it-deiboek-fan-anne-frank/regisseur-rens-rotsma>,

<https://fordivedaesjetopentwel.nl/it-deiboek-fan-anne-frank/eftergrun-spilers-toanielstik-deiboek-fan-anne-frank/#page-content> (last visited: October 28, 2023).



Image 2. The set design (Photo: Fordivedaesje)

ilar distinction can be seen in the viewpoints of the Dutch speaking respondents: Some feel it is unnecessary and makes learning to understand or speak Frisian harder, others point out that it makes them feel welcome. The tensions between these positions can be seen as the result of the negotiation process between the minority and majority culture within the context of *The Diary of Anne Frank* (see Zijlstra and Aardema in Hodsdon et al., forthcoming).

When analysing the communal values respondents mention, the focus shifts to the cooperation necessary to produce amateur theatre events and the values derived from the production process. Amateur theatre-making enables interpersonal communication, active participation and social involvement as is emphasised by both the board members as Frisian and Dutch respondents that live in the twin villages. As such, organising and staging this kind of amateur theatre events contributes to community involvement. This collective involvement is highly valued by most of the audience members. They admire the twin villages for being able to achieve a high level of community engagement and are impressed by the quality of the acting and staging of the production this results in. Especially, because it in their experience it is getting harder to find volunteers for these kind of communal activities throughout the cultural and leisure domain.

Also, creating theatrical events like *The Diary of Anne Frank* is seen as part of a village tradition, since it occurs yearly and village inhabitants grow up knowing



Image 3. The theatre space in the multifunctional hall of community centre 'It Harspit'
(Photo: Antine Zijlstra)

about it or participating in it, either as an active participant (for example as an actor or volunteer) or as an audience member. Thereby, it keeps inhabitants enthusiastic and secures engagement of all generations. However, keeping youngsters involved is a point of concern mentioned regularly.

Additionally, theatrical events like *The Diary of Anne Frank* create opportunities for village inhabitants to actively participate in a cultural practice that is part of their 'living space', which is seen as an added value. As such, it contributes to the vitality of a village community (and decreased dependence of the cultural life in the nearby city).

Concluding remarks

Participating in theatrical event *The Diary of Anne Frank*, an example of a Frisian spoken amateur theatre production that has a strong connection with the village community it is produced in and performed for, offers audience members the opportunity to meet as part of a dominantly Frisian community. Thereby, it enables creating and strengthening relationships between all, both Frisian and Dutch, participants, and offers the opportunity to express their Frisian identity or empathise with the minority language and community. On a communal level, it creates opportunities for active involvement in the production process and opportunities to meet as part of a larger community group, which not only contributes to the exchange of personal experiences and viewpoints, but also to a collective experience and, in this case, community pride. Also, its contribution to the vitality of the twin villages is valued positively. The different viewpoints on the use of the Frisian language between the Frisian and Dutch respondents are visible and lead to discussion, but they aren't disrupting the amateur theatre practice as such. Note, however, that because only attendants of *The Diary of Anne Frank* were interviewed, all of them have a positive attitude towards Frisian and Frisian spoken theatre. Additionally, some future challenges have been mentioned, respectively as part of the amateur theatre practice and as part of demographic changes: Keeping young people involved and attract volunteers, and a stronger need to explain the importance of the minority language for village inhabitants to—slowly increasing amount of—Dutch speaking newcomers.

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