

year. Families with small children would mention the Vojtina Puppet Theatre, too. And indeed, these theatres, the Csokonai and the Vojtina – the so-called official theatres of the city (subsidised jointly by the central and the local governments and operated and supervised by the municipality) – are at the core of the theatre field.

## GRONINGEN

Hans van Maanen and Antine Zijlstra

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### History and general information

Groningen is the capital city of the Province of Groningen, situated in the north of the Netherlands. Speaking of this “north” a set of three provinces is meant: Friesland, Drenthe and Groningen. The three provinces together take up 27% of the surface of the country and represent a bit more than 10% of the Dutch population (which is about 16 million in total). The region is a relatively rural area in the highly urbanised Netherlands.

With 190,000 inhabitants (2010/11), the City of Groningen is by far the biggest city in the northern area. It is a relatively small and dense city with 2,500 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. Sixty kilometres to the West, Leeuwarden, the capital of the province of Friesland has about 98,000 inhabitants and 30 kilometres to the South, the capital of Drenthe, Assen, about 65,000. Almost as a consequence, the city of Groningen has become the cultural centre of the northern part of the Netherlands.

Groningen is one of rather many typical Dutch cities that experienced their most flowering time in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (the Dutch golden age), a period that can still be recognised in the canals around the inner city, the old houses of merchants, a number of almshouses the ruling patricians established and some big protestant (or made protestant) churches. As all Dutch cities north of the River Rhine, Groningen became a protestant city after the reformation, where the preachers were in power and consequently playing or watching theatre was forbidden till the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. During several centuries all trade from the province of Groningen, especially in agricultural products, had to be done via the city, mentioned for this reason as a Stapelplaats (Stacking place).

The first written evidence of Groningen is to be found in 1040, when king Hendrik III gave the land and villa Gruoninga (Groningen) to the church. It gained a dominant central function for the region, in both economic and political sense. After 1500 Groningen lost its position as a city-state, but it grew seriously in the seventeenth century through trade in agricultural and livestock-products, as well as peat. In 1795 the old Republic of Dutch Provinces ended, to become a part of the French empire till 1814. From then on

the Netherlands started to become a kingdom (till 1830 with Flanders as a part of it); trade and welfare started growing again, but the city of Groningen did not expand again till 1850, when Groningen profited from industrialisation.

Besides its economic position, the city of Groningen had also an important function as the cultural centre in the north of the Netherlands. In 1614 the university was founded (as the second one after Leiden, 1575). More than half of the professors were German, thereby making clear the close relations between Groningen and the north-western part of Germany. In the following centuries schools for visual arts (established in 1798) and music (established in 1966) got a place in the cultural infrastructure of the city.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Groningen kept growing again: the number of residents doubled from 66,500 in 1900 to 150,000 in the 1960s. At the beginning of the new millennium, during a new wave of urbanisation the population approached the 200,000. Also the number of students at the university grew strong, from 2,000 around 1950 to more than 25,000 nowadays.

## Cultural infrastructure

Whoever arrives in Groningen by train cannot miss the Groninger Museum, designed by Alessandro Mendini particularly to exhibit contemporary art, because it forms the entrance to the south of the inner city. Before entering the city, however, going half a mile eastward the big concert hall the Oosterpoort, built in the 1970s, can be found. And whoever goes from there to the north, following the old city canals that enclose the inner city, arrives at the main theatre hall, the Stadsschouwburg, built at the end of the nineteenth century (1891).

Besides these three cultural bastions, in the very centre of the city the main building of the university (Neo-renaissance from 1906) and its library (1980s) are located opposite each other in the Academy Square (Academieplein). And directly around the corner the central city library can be found. Some miles further, more or less on the outskirts of the city, Martiniplaza is situated, a big congress, sports, event and theatre hall.

In the field of music, two venues already mentioned are important, Martiniplaza, which host in its 1,500-seat hall musicals and big popular shows, and the Oosterpoort which is the home base of the Noord Nederland Orkest (Northern Dutch Orchestra) the only full symphony orchestra in the North and host of other classical as well as pop concerts in its two halls (1,500 and 450 seats) on a day-to-day basis.

The Oosterpoort is, as said, available for pop music, particularly for the bigger acts. Smaller, newer or more underground bands have two other stages at their disposal: Simplon and Vera, the latter situated in an old mansion in the very centre of the city, the first one in an old factory, about a ten-minute walk from the central market place.

Besides a music school for children and adults, there is the academy of music (Prins Claus Conservatory) for vocational training. Finally two festivals for pop music take place (Noorderslag/Eurosonic and Bevrijdingsfestival), as well as one for classical music (Peter de Grote Festival), all on a yearly basis.

In the field of museums and visual art, besides the Groninger Museum, three other institutions can be found in the city: Het Grafisch Museum (Graphic Museum); Noordelijk Scheepvaartmuseum (Northern Maritime Museum) and Het Nederlands Stripmuseum (Dutch Comic Book Museum). Two other major institutions still need to be mentioned: the Minerva Art Academy with its master's education department the Frank Mohr Institute as well as the (inter)nationally known Noorderlicht photo exhibition that is presented every second year in the city of Groningen (the years in between the exhibitions take place in the province of Friesland).



The central square of Groningen, *Grote Markt*, with the Grand Theatre. Photo: Grand Theatre, used with permission.

## Theatre infrastructure

The city theatre company for the north is the Noord Nederlands Toneel (NNT, Dutch Northern Theatre), which is based in Groningen. The company has its own building De Machinefabriek, with offices, workplaces, rehearsing rooms and a hall for 170 visitors. The large productions of the NNT, however, always première in the Stadsschouwburg, the city theatre hall, and have a run of about 10 performances in this venue before they start touring for another 20 to 40 performances.

Besides the NNT, three other organisations based in Groningen are financed on the national level: 1) the Citadel, a theatre company for children that shows a part of its performances at its own small venue (70 seats), but mostly plays at schools; 2) the Northern Dutch Dance Theatre (NND) that premières its productions in the Stadsschouwburg, but mostly tours around the country; 3) the Grand Theatre, which

is a venue subsidised by the city, but also a production house and international laboratory.<sup>2</sup> Finally, a second dance company, Guy & Roni, is indirectly subsidised on the state level, namely through the Netherlands Funds for the Stage Arts. These are the full professional companies that are based in Groningen, but play, with the exception of the Citadel, 60% (NNT) to 90% of their performances elsewhere.

The leading stage in Groningen is the Stadsschouwburg, a city theatre hall of 650 seats, built in 1891, just at the outside of the old inner city. Yearly, the Stadsschouwburg sells 70,000 tickets for 160 theatre performances of about 100 different productions. About twenty of those performances are played by the NNT, based on two or three different productions. The backdoor of the Stadsschouwburg, leads to the Kruithuis, a 100-seat venue with a flat floor, where yearly 9,000 visits are paid to 90 performances.

On the outskirts of the city there is a big venue, Martiniplaza, coupled with a conference centre and basketball hall, where commercial shows are presented, varying from children musicals to magic shows and from Eastern European opera to Ice dancing, in total a 60 theatre performances per year, based on 20 different productions. Martiniplaza, which is more entertainment-oriented and has a hall with 1,500 seats, and sells for only 60 performances the same number of tickets as the Stadsschouwburg for 160.

In the very centre of the city, on the Grote Markt ("the big market") a theatre venue now exists after the empty Grand Theatre, a cinema built in 1929, was squatted in the beginning of the 1980s and rebuilt into a theatre with two halls, one with a flat floor and 170 seats and one with semi-flat floor with 125 seats. Till 2013 it was subsidised by the local government for its functioning as a stage and by the ministry for its functioning as a production house. In the domain of theatre, the Grand Theatre programmes yearly 80 new and renewing small scale performances, for which about 8,000 tickets are sold. In the hall of the NNT, the Machinefabriek, 75 performances are played for 4,000 visitors a year. Another 200 semi-professional performances take place in a variety of smaller, often incidental, venues for 20,000 visitors.

In Groningen, six theatre festivals take place every year. Four of them can be considered small-scale, one middle-scale and one large-scale.

While the middle-scale Jonge Harten Festival, for young people up to 28 years of age, is bigger than most of the others with more than 50 performances in several venues in the city, the summer festival, Noorderzon (Noorderzon Performing Arts Festival), taking place in a park on the edge of the inner city (and making use of some of the regular venues as well) during the last two weeks of August every year, is the biggest theatre festival in the city. The main programme, consisting of 90 theatre performances of 25 different shows, attracts 12,000 visitors a year. There is also a rich side programme of hundreds of small acts on the festival grounds.

<sup>2</sup> All three organisations lost their national subsidy in January 2013, after a serious cut in cultural subsidisation by the State.