

THE  TIMES**Anne Frank's story lives again in Amsterdam**

Rosa de Silva, who plays Anne Frank, and Buddy Elias, Frank's last living relative, at the play's first night Photoshot

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David Aaronovitch had avoided the story of Anne Frank - but then he went to Amsterdam to see a new play and his assumptions began to unravel

Until last week I had not read Anne Frank's famous diaries, nor visited the Anne Frank Museum in Amsterdam, nor even seen the film based on the diaries. I didn't want to. It was the same reason that I had for not visiting Auschwitz. I know what happens; I know how the story ends. Let people go who need to or who know too little. What would be the point of becoming impossibly sad and angry over and over again?

Then, too, I felt that Anne Frank, this teenage girl who died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp weeks before the end of the war, had become an icon — an object of reverence — to be paraded, prayed to and thought about in a particular way. It wasn't for me. But this all changed last week because of a new play called *Anne*.

The Anne Frank diaries were discovered after the Frank family's hiding place was raided by the Gestapo, by one of the Dutch gentiles who had helped them. When Anne's father, Otto Frank, the sole survivor, returned after the war, he read them for the first time and eventually sought a publisher. Several Dutch firms turned down the opportunity to publish, and even when one agreed in 1947, sales of the book were modest. It was not until the diaries were published in English in the United States in the early 1950s that Anne Frank became posthumously famous.

In the early versions, some of what Anne wrote was considered too hurtful to the living or to the memories of the dead, or else too intimate for inclusion. But, with the passage of time, the owners of the copyright, the Anne Frank Fonds (foundation) felt able to produce more liberal editions.

By 2009 the Fonds felt it was time also for a new play based on the diaries. The 70th anniversary of the death of Anne and her sister Margot was coming up in 2015 and as the president of the Fonds, Anne's 89-year-old cousin, Buddy Elias, explained to me, though the old play was good, it might be possible to engage younger people with an updated script. The job was given to a wife and husband writing team, both from Jewish families affected by the Holocaust, Jessica Durlacher and Leon de Winter.

Their script formed the basis of the play that I saw last week in a brand new theatre in the old dock area of West Amsterdam. Theater Amsterdam was purpose-built in six months from first pile to completion, and is a simple but elegant black and glass box facing the water.

The man who took on the job of converting the script into a theatrical experience was the producer Robin de Levita, who also worked on *Chicago* and *Les Misérables*. A curly haired, ferociously bright man, de Levita understood the risk of taking on a project like *Anne*. It is a huge and controversial undertaking — ethically, financially and for the city of Amsterdam itself. “I couldn’t say no,” he smiled, “but I thought it might kill me! And there was my other fear, that people would say, ‘This is old. Aren’t we done with this?’”

The production had to have integrity, but it also had to at the very least to break even. And that means thousands of Dutch people and foreign tourists every week making the journey to the theatre, month in and month out, to have their hearts wrung all over again by a dead teenager.

I was there on what you might call king and carpet night: 1,500 people in evening dress trod a wet red carpet on a rainy night, and stood politely (some still dripping) in the auditorium as King Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands made an unshowy entry.

The stage is huge and the set is vast. At first we see a Parisian restaurant in which a postwar counterfactual Anne discusses publishing her writings. Then we move to the life-size cutaway front wall of the Franks’ apartment block house at Merwedeplein in south Amsterdam. It’s Anne’s 13th birthday, on Friday June 12, 1942, and she is given by her family, among other things, a diary. From now on, the side panels are illuminated by her diary entries, made in her own hand. Many exactly match the dialogue heard on stage.

It is Anne who then relates, almost as an aside, the many restrictions placed on Jews. That they are banned from ordinary schools, have to wear the yellow star, may not use the tram, cannot go to the cinema, are forbidden to ride bicycles, are not to be seen outside their houses after 8pm.

Then the moment comes when the authorities give notice that Anne’s elder sister Margot — 16 — is to be called up for forced labour. This is the point when the family go into hiding. The set becomes the premises of Otto Frank’s company on Prinsengracht: on the left the offices and on the right the secret annexe beyond. It is in the annexe that Anne, her family, another family of three — the Van Pels — and a middle-aged dentist, Mr Peffer, are to spend the next two years and the play’s audience the next two hours.

And here my assumptions begin to be undone. The story of the annexe, the soap opera of its inhabitants as perceived by a brilliant girl, was utterly unexpected to me. The minor deprivations, the comedy of lavatories and desk rotas, the poignancy of the loss of a much loved fur coat (sold for food money), which represents so much more than a fur coat: the loss of everything once thought safe and warm. Anne’s insight, her psychological acuity, her capacity to find the words to express what is happening, all these are wonderful.

Then there’s the existential threat she evokes, the constant fear of discovery, given dramatic shape by the breaking into of the warehouse below by burglars. These burglars prefigure the day in August 1944 when the Gestapo and the Dutch militia do eventually arrive, smash down the doors and arrest the dwellers in the annexe.

“For me,” Elias told me later, “this is the most powerful moment. I know this has to come, but when it comes [he sighs], it is always the saddest thing.” It is the time of what might have been. His cousin and her family so nearly lived out the war.

In the play the papers are scattered and then, later, gathered up. But what happens then constitutes the biggest dramatic risk. The diaries end just before the final raid, but Anne didn’t. The play follows her, briefly and almost allegorically, into the camp where she is to die from typhus. This fictional Anne is allowed a last, post-death speech on a darkling plain, based in part on what she has already written. It’s a speech about the plans she had for after the war. But she never finishes a sentence. “I wanted . . . I so hoped . . . I thought that I might . . .”

On October 1, 1956, the original play about Anne Frank premiered in seven theatres in German cities. One was in Berlin. A reviewer wrote that, “After the final curtain, the audience sat in stunned silence. There was no applause. Only the welling sound of deep sobs broke the absolute stillness. Then, not speaking, and seeing not to look at each other, the Berliners filed out of the theatre.”

Nearly 60 years later, in 2014, the Dutch audience stood to applaud. Me, I was sobbing. Anger, pity, couldn’t help it. “It was a girl,” Elias said, who knew her, met her, exchanged letters with her. “A real, lovely, human girl.” A girl who might have been 85 now, but wasn’t because her race or religion entitled men in panto uniforms to squeeze the last ounce of labour out of her before letting her die.

“It is not an easy evening of entertainment,” said de Levita, “Will people have the courage to come?”

I hope they will. In Schiphol airport coming home I bought the diaries and finished them in a day. On April 5, 1944 Anne asked herself, “Will I ever be able to write something great, will I ever become a journalist or a writer?” She was nearly 15. I am four times as old as she was then and I’m not half the writer she was. Imagine, as the play begins to, what she might have become! If only . . . **Anne is currently booking until July at the Theater Amsterdam. An English translation system will be available from July 1. For further details visit: theateramsterdam.nl**

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