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Together: Where endangered languages take the stage

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the European theatre network phōnē, a pioneering collaboration among eight theatres working in endangered regional and minoritized languages (RMLs). Funded by the European Union from 2022 to 2025, phōnē embraced community theatre as a tool for intergenerational exchange, artistic empowerment, and linguistic revitalization. The network brought together professionals and citizens across eight language communities – from Breton and Sorbian to Frisian and Yiddish – emphasizing theatre's unique capacity to give voice not only to individuals but to entire languages. Central to the initiative was *Deboriada* (Together), a multilingual, intergenerational gathering in Ladin-speaking South Tyrol that exemplified the network's participatory ethos. This article documents the artistic and social impacts of phōnē, including residencies, collaborative learning, and the co-creation of theatre rooted in local landscapes and lived experiences. It also highlights an international conference in Bautzen, Germany, which united theatre makers and Indigenous artists from across the globe. Looking forward, phōnē will evolve into Polyphony, expanding its reach and ambition through new educational models and cross-border festivals. The project demonstrates how youth theatre can play a vital role in safeguarding linguistic diversity by fostering community-driven performance practices that celebrate the voices of Europe's endangered languages.

I am a German theatre maker with a background in professional theatre for young audiences. For more than 25 years, I have been designing and leading multi-year international cooperation projects in the performing arts, supported by various cultural funding programs of the European Union. While the thematic focus of these projects has varied – from digital storytelling to civic participation¹ – what unites them all is a deep commitment to involving young people in creative processes and connecting theatre to broader social realities.

That commitment was shaped during nearly a decade at Berlin's theatre an der Parkaue, Germany's largest theatre for children and young people. I joined the company in 1991, shortly after German reunification, as we began to make participatory work with young people a core element of our professional theatre program.

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In 2014, the Deutsch-Sorbisches Volkstheatre (German-Sorbian People's Theatre)² in Bautzen invited me to consider developing a new form of international collaboration: a network of professional theatres working in regional and minoritized languages.

It took several years of preparation before the collaboration could officially launch. This time was also necessary because only a handful of theatres in Europe work professionally in minoritized languages – and at the time, they had no common network, few experiences of cross-language collaboration, and little visibility on the international stage.

I write not as a speaker of an endangered language, but as someone responsible for convening a transnational space in which those languages could be heard on equal terms. I felt honored to contribute to the founding of such a vital and exciting initiative. From the beginning, I was deeply moved by the stories shared by speakers of regional³ and minoritized languages (RMLs): accounts of injustice and systemic suppression, spanning generations. While much has been done in recent years to support RML communities across Europe, it quickly became clear to me that the often-isolated institutions working in this field would benefit greatly from stronger transnational connections and shared visibility.

It reminded me of my career in theatre for young audiences. Back then, we were often met with a certain condescending smile by colleagues from the “*real*” theatres – theatres working for adult audiences. I always interpreted that smile as a subtle dismissal: a way of saying, “*It’s good that you’re doing work for young people – but what we do, that’s real art.*” This lack of recognition has always gone hand in hand with weaker financial support and public attention for theatre for young audiences. When I shared this memory with colleagues from RML theatres, they laughed and nodded, clearly familiar with that kind of implicit exclusion.

Eight languages on the edge of disappearance

Before I move into the artistic work in detail, I want to offer a brief roll call of the eight languages at the heart of the project. All eight partner theatres work in language communities that UNESCO’s *Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger* classifies as either “definitely” or “severely” endangered.

*Languages are vehicles of our cultures, collective memory and values. They are an essential component of our identities, and a building block of our diversity and living heritage.*⁴

Frisian (approx. 400,000 speakers)

Spoken in the northern Netherlands, Frisian is one of the few regional languages in Europe that is still widely used in daily life. It is taught in schools and used in media, yet still faces pressure from the dominant Dutch language, especially in urban areas.

²The Deutsch-Sorbisches Volkstheatre – Němsko-serbske ludowe džiwadło in Upper Sorbian – is the only professional bicultural theatre in Germany, situated in the bilingual region of Lusatia (East Germany, close to the Polish border).

³Regional languages are languages whose speakers form the majority in their region but are a minority within their country. For example, Frisian in the Netherlands or Galician in Spain.

⁴UNESCO Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger.

Galician (approx. 2 million speakers)

Widely spoken in northwestern Spain, Galician has co-official status in the region and is part of the education system. Nonetheless, younger generations often shift to Spanish, and the use of Galician in public life has declined in recent years.

Irish (approx. 70,000 active daily speakers)

Irish is the only language represented here where young people in certain regions, especially around Galway, use it more actively than older generations. Despite its status as the first official language of Ireland, it continues to face competition from English.

Breton (approx. 105,000 speakers)

Breton is spoken in Brittany, western France. It suffered decades of suppression by the French state, which led to a drastic drop in speakers. Although revitalization efforts are growing, intergenerational transmission remains low.

Sorbian (approx. 20,000 speakers)

Sorbian, a Slavic language, is spoken in eastern Germany, near the Polish and Czech borders. It is one of the few officially recognized Indigenous languages in Europe and is supported by bilingual education and cultural institutions in Lusatia.

Ladin (approx. 30,000 speakers)

Ladin is spoken in the Dolomite valleys of northern Italy. While its Latin roots are visible, it remains distinct and deeply tied to local identity.

Kven (approx. 4,000 speakers)

Kven, a Finnic language spoken in northern Norway, was long stigmatized and nearly erased. Recognized as a national minority language in 1998, its cultural presence is slowly growing, though fluent speakers remain critically few.

Yiddish (speaker numbers unknown)

Yiddish is a non-territorial language historically spoken by Jews across Europe. Unlike the other languages here, Yiddish exists primarily in diasporic, transnational contexts, often disconnected from nation-state support.

In North America, the struggle to reclaim and revitalize Indigenous languages is deeply connected to histories of colonization and cultural erasure. Across the Atlantic, many of Europe's regional and minoritized languages face a different but no less urgent challenge: gradual disappearance through political marginalization, geographic isolation, and generational shift.

Though the histories are not the same, the questions they raise often resonate:

How can we keep languages alive in communities where daily use has become rare? How can young people reconnect with linguistic roots that were once silenced or devalued? In both contexts, language is not a relic of the past but a living expression of identity – rooted in land, community, and shared memory.

Giving voice, building bridges: The phōnē model

In late 2021, we received European Union support and the cooperation project *phōnē*⁵ – *Giving Minority Languages a Voice* could begin, bringing together eight professional theatres working in eight endangered regional and minoritized languages across Europe. At the center of our work was a guiding question: *How can we reconnect generations – those who still speak the language, and the young people who often feel ashamed when their minority identity becomes visible in majority society?*

Together with the theatres, we agreed that audiences should be the driving force in securing a shared linguistic future. We understood “audience” broadly, as the language community itself: younger participants as well as Elders who, in many cases, still speak the endangered language fluently. Our aim was to create a win – win exchange between generations – where both sides have something to give and something to gain.

This commitment to active participation was not self-evident for every theatre. Only some partners had prior experience of inviting audiences into artistic processes. The others embraced the challenge because we could offer sustained support: experienced facilitation, process accompaniment from start to finish, and regular moments of peer exchange to reflect on what was working, what felt difficult, and what needed to change in the room.

Bridging generations: Youth and Elders on stage

A central strand of *phōnē* focused on intergenerational community creation under professional conditions. In Germany, this kind of work is often called “Bürgerbühne” (citizen theatre) – a form of participatory theatre in which nonprofessional performers create and perform within a professional artistic framework. Across all eight RML regions, partner theatres developed community productions that strengthened local language use while also building long-term relationships with audiences and language communities.

Irish: Crann na bhFocla – the tree of words

At An Taibhdhearc / Fíbin in Galway, the Irish-language team brought together a genuinely intergenerational ensemble: Elders well into their seventies worked alongside school pupils as young as twelve. Together they created *Crann na bhFocla* (*The Tree of Words*), an outdoor performance that playfully asked a deceptively simple question: *are traditional Irish sayings still relevant – and if so, how do they live in young bodies and voices today?* Rather than treating proverbs as museum objects, the group tested them in action: turning old phrases into scenes, gestures, and exchanges where inherited wisdom met youthful energy. What emerged was not nostalgia, but proof of vitality – Irish as something spoken, argued with, laughed in, and carried forward.

⁵phōnē from the ancient Greek word for “voice.”

In post-show conversations, participants repeatedly described the process as energizing – especially for the younger cast – and many said, simply, “we should do more of this.” The outdoor setting mattered. Performing in the open air shaped the entire atmosphere: the piece felt like a celebration of language and place at the same time, with landscape becoming a partner in the storytelling. Several people also spoke about what it meant, from a rural community on Europe’s geographic edge, to be part of a wider European exchange that might otherwise feel distant or inaccessible. The project’s shared theme – the steady erosion of linguistic and cultural values – created a strong sense of solidarity: we are not alone. Yet the most powerful cohesion was local and immediate: a communal coming together that does not happen often, with time and permission to express shared heritage collectively, in a professional setting.

That sense of continuity mattered, too. The “Tree of Words” created for the show remains in place, visible to locals and visitors, as a living reminder of the ongoing struggle to keep Irish alive in daily life. And like many community performances, the production carried a particular charge: participants spoke of the exhilaration of rehearsing in a professional environment – costumes, props, staging, and artistic care – while also valuing the goodwill and camaraderie that grew through the process and carried into the performance day itself. As one cast member put it, with delighted surprise: “I never knew I was part of such a talented crowd.”

Sorbian: Klub potajnych Serbow – Club of the Secret Sorbs

If *Crann na bhFocla* in Galway felt like a celebration of language in the open air, the community theatre process in Bautzen began from a very different place: fear. In conversations with Sorbian teenagers, one theme returned again and again – how unsafe it can feel to be visibly Sorbian in a city and region where nationalism has been growing. Several young people described avoiding Sorbian in public spaces. Some had been insulted for speaking their language on the street; others spoke of incidents of intimidation and, at times, violence by far-right extremists.

As one participant, Milena Scholze, put it, “We are afraid that in the future we will no longer be allowed to live as we are now.” She described being harassed when speaking Sorbian in public – told that, in Germany, she should speak German. “Many people do not know what it is like to be Sorbian and to have to live with these fears,” she added. “We have to fight for our existence – especially in these times of increasing hostility.”

Director Georg Genoux and the Deutsch-Sorbisches Volkstheatre chose not to treat these testimonies as material for “issue-based theatre” alone, but as a starting point for building relationships. A second strand of the process therefore focused on bringing Sorbian youth into dialogue with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Bautzen – especially Kurdish and Ukrainian teenagers – who also navigate hostility and exclusion in the region. In rehearsals, the overlaps became visible: while refugees spoke of the pain of losing a homeland, Sorbian participants described the fear of losing a homeland *without ever leaving it* – a slow disappearance of language, culture, and public belonging. Both groups returned repeatedly to the importance of traditions, dances, stories, and language as anchors of identity.

Theatre makes people heroes of their own biography

Community Theatre director Georg Genoux

Out of this exchange emerged *Klub potajnych Serbow* (Club of the Secret Sorbs), a youth-led production that translated present-day anxiety into a playful, dystopian myth. Set in the year 2422, a dark force has seized power in Saxony: only “Aryan-German” life is permitted; other languages, rites, and traditions are banned, and dissenters are turned to stone. Yet the rulers do not control everything. A secret group of young Sorbs prepares an uprising to save their world, joined – unexpectedly – by Kurdish and Ukrainian youths who ask to understand, and to belong. The piece asks, with both seriousness and humor: *How does one become Sorbian? What defines Sorbian identity? What remains of me if my origins disappear – and what new parts of myself might I discover?*

One of the most striking outcomes came after the performances, when older German audience members in Bautzen spoke openly about how little they had known of Sorbian youth experience. As one local resident reflected: “I have lived in Bautzen for almost 40 years and was always sure that we live well together with the Sorbs here. The stories of the young people shock me greatly.” (Christa Streicher, 73, Bautzen)

For the young participants, the project did not end with the final applause. Several described it as the beginning of an ongoing process of mutual recognition – across languages, backgrounds, and generations – grounded in the shared decision to take their realities seriously, and to speak them on stage.

Frisian: *It lêste wurd* – the last word

At Tryater in Friesland, the community process took a different turn again: rather than beginning from celebration or fear, it began from a provocation. During rehearsals, director Romke Gabe Draaijer introduced a question that initially felt almost taboo: “Is it bad if a (minority) language is dying out?” The point was not to argue for resignation, but to bring what many people avoid naming into the room – and to see what happens when a language community speaks back through theatre.

It lêste wurd was created over ten rehearsals with a group of seven participants aged 18 to 80, all speakers of Frisian vernaculars and local variants. The group came together through an open call in the local press; people joined because they wanted to “*do something*” with their language before it became only memory. For Draaijer, the rehearsals were not only about staging a script but about listening closely to how participants carried their language – emotionally, physically, and in daily habit. “I was curious about how they dealt with their language,” he said later, “and that made this group very interesting.” Some participants had theatre experience; others had never been on stage before. Over time, the rehearsal room became its own small community: friendships formed, jokes accumulated, and the language itself began to feel less like a topic and more like a shared material.

The performance was staged at Tryater for an audience of more than 200. Set in a museum-like frame, the piece offered a humorous yet philosophical enactment of a final farewell: Frisian – the Netherlands’ second national language – was symbolically “buried” by its neighboring dialects and minority languages.

I thought it would be sad to do a play about saying goodbye to Frisian. But working together and hearing all the different dialects made me feel proud of speaking it. I don't want it to disappear. Niels, 17, from Leeuwarden

What stayed with many participants was the seriousness with which the process treated them: professional attention to rehearsal, staging, and images, without stripping away the intimacy of amateur participation. One audience member praised the location and the urgency of the topic; another noted how committed the performers were – “they really went for it.” They all enjoyed it not because it offered easy hope, but because it created a place where language, identity, humor, and grief could coexist – spoken aloud, together.

Each of the eight community productions approached the work differently, yet all were rooted in the same insight: language is not only something people speak – it is something that speaks people into identity. Across the stages, citizens were visible not as amateurs “helping out,” but as active cultural agents claiming artistic ownership of the stories, questions, and languages that shape their lives.

For some theatres, the result has already shifted practice beyond the project. At Centro Dramático Galego, the community theatre work was so successful that it will continue as an annual tradition. And across the partnership, a shared conclusion emerged: intergenerational creation in endangered languages should not be a one-off event, but a long-term commitment.

Deboriada – community, creation, and the power of theatre

Carrying the experience of eight locally devised community productions, 40 community actors arrived in July 2024 in the Italian Dolomites with a question we could only answer by doing: *what happens when people who have never met – across languages, ages, and histories – try to build a shared performance in one week?* Nonprofessional participants, selected from the community casts in each region, gathered in the Ladin-speaking village of La Pli. The event was called *Deboriada* – a Ladin word meaning “*together*” – capturing both the spirit and the method of what unfolded there.

Participants ranged in age from 10 to 74 and came for one week together; eight endangered languages were alive, visible, and resounding – spoken, sung, whispered, and shouted in rehearsals, workshops, and spontaneous greetings across the village. What struck me most was how quickly language moved from being a “topic” to being a shared material: something held in bodies, carried in gestures, and tested in play.

Guided by British community theatre director Andrew Siddall and facilitators from each theatre, participants created an event that was less a traditional production than an experiment in collective making. Language, landscape, and lived experience shaped the work from the first day. Participants were encouraged not only to *use* their language, but to move with it, play with it, and let it lead – even when others could not understand the words. Meaning could travel through rhythm, repetition, breath, and presence.

Each day began with multilingual warm-ups, where sounds and gestures passed from one body to another like gifts. Workshops invited participants to share songs, stories, myths, and small rituals from their home regions. In one exercise, small groups built miniature landscapes from natural materials to represent their communities, turning the rehearsal space into a map of memory and belonging. Improvisations drew on personal experiences of migration, identity, and language loss – sometimes funny, sometimes painful, always deeply honest. We ended days with

short reflection circles, so that what was difficult could be named early and held by the group rather than pushed aside. As Sasha Badiu, 14, from Bucharest, shared:

Before our theatre project, I didn't speak a single word of Yiddish. But through the music, I started to enjoy the language – and during our community event in La Pli, I wanted to teach the others more and more Yiddish words. I've promised myself that when I'm back in Bucharest, I'll take a language course.

Living in the village mattered as much as rehearsing. Instead of staying in a hotel, participants were hosted in local homes – kitchens, spare rooms, and family apartments – so the project was held by the community as well as performed for it. That hospitality came with responsibilities we had to learn in real time. One evening, a small group of older participants stayed up late singing in their accommodation, not realizing how disruptive it felt to their host. The next morning, the host asked – understandably – that they move out immediately. I felt deeply ashamed, not because anyone had intended harm, but because trust had been shaken. We apologized, spoke openly with the participants, and found alternative lodging within the village. After the final performance, the same participants apologized again in person; the host accepted, and everyone was able to laugh together. The moment stayed with us as a quiet lesson: intergenerational work does not mean that “young people are the risk.” It means creating shared agreements of care – so that the community holding the project can feel respected as well as celebrated.

The intergenerational dynamic was especially powerful. Young people learned lullabies and proverbs from Elders. Older participants listened as children invented new ways to twist grammar into theatre games. No one was fluent in all the languages present – but everyone was fluent in curiosity, attentiveness, and play. What emerged was a polyphony of shared presence, where each language carried equal weight on stage and no tongue was exoticized or sidelined.

Director Andrew Siddall reflected on the week's impact:

Participants didn't just gain artistic and storytelling skills. They learned how to build sustainable, grassroots projects – how to structure a process, raise funding, and keep working independently. They also discovered the power of listening, of showing up for each other's language journeys.

By the end of the week, Deboriada had become more than a performance – it was a model for how theatre can sustain linguistic communities. It created a space where language was no longer something to preserve like a relic, but something to inhabit, exchange, and reshape together. As Rafael Rey Domech, 22, one of the participants, put it: “The best memories are the people, the attention and kindness, the art, the differences, the open hearts, the collaborative work . . . and above all, the warmth.”

The resonance of Deboriada continues. Participants returned home with new ideas, renewed energy, and deeper connections. In a time when endangered languages are often framed through loss, *phōnē* offered a different narrative – one of joy, creation, and radical community. The energy of La Pli also sharpened what we had learned on the professional stages: when language is taken seriously artistically, it changes what young audiences feel is possible.

Empowerment of artists in their own languages

We also chose to push into new territory for some partners within the *phōnē* project: commissioning professional plays in the respective RMLs that were shaped through direct research within the language communities themselves. For several theatres, this meant moving beyond writing *about* a community toward writing *with* it – through listening sessions, local encounters, and time spent in the places where the language still lives.

These three years marked a turning point for the eight theatres and their artists – professionally, artistically, and emotionally. Why does that matter? Because artists working in endangered languages often operate in a permanent field of tension, with limited recognition in majority-language contexts. As one Breton playwright told us early in the project: “I have never been invited to a national festival – and I know it’s because I write in Breton, not in French.”

Across the partnership, eight playwrights created new contemporary works that were produced on the professional stages of each theatre. The residencies were not only a chance to exchange methods; they also offered something rarer: the experience of being taken seriously – internationally – while writing in a language that is often treated as peripheral.

One of the most striking outcomes was the first-ever theatre play written entirely in Kven: *Sallikaa lasten tulla minun tykö* (Let the Little Children Come to Me) by Inger Birkelund. Told from the perspective of an 18-year-old woman raised in a strict religious community in northern Norway, the play explores belonging, faith, and self-determination – offering young audiences a direct and emotionally accessible point of entry. Its premiere in March 2025 at the National Theatre in Oslo was a highly symbolic moment: for the first time, this long-suppressed minority language was heard in the Norwegian capital on the stage of its most iconic cultural institution.

A chorus of voices: Global solidarity in Bautzen

In July 2023, *phōnē* created a different kind of gathering: not a performance, but a space for reflection and exchange. If the project began as an idea I was asked to design, Bautzen was where it came alive through theatre – where strangers became collaborators and languages met face to face. An international conference in Bautzen (Germany) brought together theatre makers, activists, and scholars working in more than fifteen endangered languages from Europe, North America, Australia, and the Pacific. The opening moment still stays with me: languages that had survived suppression and erasure – many of them rarely heard in public – filled the same stage in one shared listening.

The days that followed combined discussion with practice. Alongside case studies and conversations about the politics of language in theatre, participants led workshops that made language visible as embodied knowledge: through rhythm, gesture, song, and movement. What mattered most was not only what was said, but the relational shift that happened when people recognized their struggles in one another – across very different histories.

One of the most resonant contributions came from Annie Lokomaika’i Lipscomb (Honolulu Theatre for Youth), who offered a workshop in hula and spoke about starting from *ōlelo makuahine* – the Indigenous language base – and the *mana’o* (thoughts) carried within it. Later she captured the feeling of the week in words that circulated among us long after the conference ended: “Intertwined like foliage in a garland, the sound of languages

encircled each other . . . But now we can say, in our own languages, and in the languages of others, with certainty – yes, they have. We heard them with our own ears.” Her closing reminder landed with particular force:

I ka ‘ōlelo ke ola, i ka ‘ōlelo ka make.

“In the language is life; in the language is death.”

Other voices echoed this sense of shared purpose. Rebecca Duncan (Coast Salish) reflected on realizing “we are all in the same situation . . . trying to revitalize our languages,” and said: I always thought us Indigenous peoples were the only ones suffering from those atrocities but learned that even the Indigenous of Europe are suffering as well! Ha7lh stélmexw kwelh tiná7 chet (We come from good people).”

From Western Australia, Noongar theatre artist Maitland Schnaars described the conference as “incredible and enlightening,” affirming the importance of continuing to make theatre in “our” languages.

Nyin	Sit
Yoowart Waangk	No talking
Djinang	Watch
Dwangk-kaaditj	Listen
Kaaditj	Understand

A concrete outcome was the founding of a worldwide association for theatres working in endangered languages – an attempt to turn this chorus of voices into an ongoing infrastructure of solidarity.

Looking ahead: From *phōnē* to polyphony

The theatres in our European partnership are funded to varying degrees by their countries, regions, and municipalities – a privilege we do not take for granted. EU support enabled *phōnē* to run for three years, and although that funding ended in March 2025, the work did not end with it. The collaboration has already grown, and our next milestone is confirmed: in September 2026 we will meet in Norway to begin the next phase together.

That next phase is Polyphony – Celebrating the Voices of Europe’s Endangered Languages. With eleven partner theatres, Polyphony will expand what proved most meaningful in *phōnē*: artistic co-creation, youth-centered and intergenerational engagement, and stronger public visibility for endangered languages – through festivals, regional pop-up formats, and structured opportunities for peer learning across partners.

A key element will be the Theatre Mediation Programme (TMP), developed by the University of Agder (Norway) and the University of Derby (UK). TMP equips artists and educators to work with language as lived experience – building bridges between generations, between minority and majority language speakers, and between schools and communities. After this long journey – and with a growing number of committed artists from across many RML communities – I am more convinced than ever: if we want endangered languages to thrive, we must give them stages, not just

documents, declarations, or reports. theatre is where language becomes visible, audible, and unforgettable. As one artist beautifully put it during our final gathering:

“Languages are not fading echoes of the past – they are living instruments for shaping the future. Theatre gives them breath, movement, memory, and meaning.”

Online Resources:

phōnē website <https://phone.rml-theatre.eu> where you will find a documentary of the La Pli community event as well as our handbook for theatres performing in regional and minoritized languages.

And here you can listen to all languages involved in phōnē: <https://rml-theatre-voices.eu/>.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).