

How a BRT reporter became 'deputy sheriff' in Alabama: theatre-maker Fien Leysen retraces her father's journey 45 years later

Article by Kristien Bonneure for VRT NWS, 01.02.2024

Fien Leysen decided to follow in the footsteps of her father, BRT reporter Kris Leysen. In 1978 he made a television report on young people in Alabama; today she travelled in his wake, in part to check a story that was hard to believe, and that is, that he had once been appointed 'deputy sheriff'. Fien Leysen intertwines the footage of the time with her new stories in the multimedia theatre performance 'Alabama'. It will premiere in Mechelen before moving on to other venues.

A word of introduction: theatre-maker Fien Leysen (aged 34) often combines video with text on stage while telling personal stories. Her father was Kris Leysen. He died in 2014 aged 66. Kris worked for many years for the public-service broadcaster, at the time when it was still called BRT. He presented 'Tussen hemel en aarde' (Between heaven and earth) and produced children's programmes such as 'Het liegebeest' (The storyteller) and 'Tienerklanken' (Teenage sounds).

In 1978 Kris Leysen travelled to the city of Birmingham in the US state of Alabama to interview AFS exchange students and prepare a television report. His daughter Fien took that report as the starting point for her new play, 'Alabama'.

Fien Leysen travelled twice to the same city as her father, with a clear purpose: 'I wanted to track down all the places he had visited and shoot footage from his viewpoints, but then forty-five years later. I was also curious about his position as an interviewer. I wanted to try to put myself in his place.'

The performance 'Alabama' combines the footage of father and daughter with live music by Steven De bruyn. The text that Fien Leysen performs on stage brings her years-long quest to life. 'I want to complement my father's report', she says. Or: 'I ask the questions he didn't raise.' But things are not that simple. The people from back then are no longer there;

the place has changed beyond recognition. At times, Fien Leysen resembles a detective, searching for the untraceable.

'I really couldn't recognize the Birmingham I saw in my father's report. I was looking for a vibrant city with a lot of life, with a lot of people on the streets. As we were driving around there, I thought to myself, We've made a mistake, something is wrong here, there are no people here, there is no centre. The shops have made way for supermarkets outside the city. What hasn't changed is the huge gap between rich and poor, which is perhaps even wider than in 1978. It's a different city now, a different time.'

Birmingham, Alabama. The city where Martin Luther King was jailed in 1963 for his peaceful opposition to the discriminatory treatment of blacks and whites. The city where, Fien Leysen discovered, people are now above all afraid of school shootings. At school today, children have CPR lessons and are given 'bleeding control kits'.

Kris Leysen came home with some incredible stories in 1978. One of them stuck. On his first night driving around Birmingham, he was pulled over by the sheriff, who asked him what he was doing there. 'My father said he had come to interview students. Nobody's going to let you in, the sheriff said. But you know what, I'm going to make you deputy sheriff. You show your card and then everyone will know it's OK.'

'I always thought that was a tall story. Didn't he just make that up? Or wasn't he exaggerating? I really wanted to find out.' And so, was it true? 'I'm not going to give that away. Anyone who wants to find out is very welcome to come and see the play', Fien Leysen laughs.

A great sense of deprivation and love emanates from the play 'Alabama', both from the footage and from the poetic text and atmospheric music. 'My father died nine years ago. I first studied something else and only later became a theatre-maker. So he never saw my work. This is also an attempt to find a teacher in him.'

'I learned that we are in fact more similar than I had thought at first. For a long time I thought we were doing different things, that television and theatre were different media. Through his report, which is very slow television, I learned that he was given the necessary space, *carte blanche* as it were. I find that space in theatre. We actually do the same thing: we interview people, we try to show and share those stories.'

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