

'Alabama', a disarming road trip

Review by Nina Dillen for De Tijd, 02.02.2024

In the multimedia performance 'Alabama', Fien Leysen travels with her camera to the American state of the same name in an attempt to find out what her late father was doing there in 1978. By cleverly dosing humour with poignancy, she manages to strike a sensitive chord.

'Drive carefully, girl', Kris Leysen often said to his daughter Fien when she left by car. When her father died in 2014, she filled a glass jar with notes recording the typical things he used to say. At the funeral, she had a number of them read out. It helps to keep the memory of him alive, the 34-year-old theatre- and documentary-maker Fien Leysen says at the beginning of her multimedia performance 'Alabama', co-produced by theater arsenaal and BERLIN.

Nine years after the death of her father, who was a television producer at what was then the BRT, Leysen has to keep digging deeper and deeper to get hold of tangible pieces that will keep him close to her. That is why she decided to travel with her camera to Birmingham, Alabama, where her father, in his thirties at the time, made a reportage in 1978. Her aim was to shoot the same places he shot and to look for the people he interviewed at the time. At the centre of the quest was a hell of a story she wanted to verify on site forty-five years later: her father had claimed he was temporarily appointed sheriff in Alabama in 1978. But would she find proof to support his claim?

The quest conducted by Leysen – who previously worked on performances by Yves Degryse's company BERLIN and who with 'Alabama' is making her first solo performance there as associate artist – fits perfectly into the standard BERLIN formula: documentary footage shown on a big screen alternates organically with pieces of theatre monologue on stage, supported by wonderful music by harmonica player and all-round musician Steven De bruyn.

Leysen combines footage from her father's 1978 report with what she herself filmed in the exact same places. The modest set on stage – a long bar with stools set in front of a large screen – exudes the atmosphere of an American bar.

Tension arc

A minor disenchantment: Birmingham turned out not to be as bustling as Leysen had gathered from her father's stories. Getting to shoot the same sheriffs and interviewees again also proved no easy task. But Leysen didn't give up. Her quest follows an infectious tension arc that she spices up with humour and self-deprecation. And of course, BERLIN wouldn't be BERLIN if the audience wasn't occasionally caught off guard.

At the same time, Leysen's ambitious mission is an alibi for a wide range of questions she asks herself. What was her father like as a television producer? What could she find out about him that she didn't already know? And to what extent were they similar, as television producer and theatre-maker? One thing for sure is that they are both equally stubborn, she discovered after convincing her crew to make a detour of more than 100 kilometres to visit a specific petrol station which her father 'supposedly' passed through.

Beneath the performance's light-hearted tone, a great sense of genuine love and deprivation is palpable. Leysen manages to maintain the balance in such a way that the performance doesn't risk becoming sentimental. With obvious naturalness, she alternates funny scenes with more thoughtful, poetic text passages on loss and absence. In the process, she weaves into her text a number of striking observations about the US. Such as the fact that medical first-aid kits in schools are handed out in schools, which students are to use in the event of a shooting. In passing, Leysen wonders whether such a first-aid kit exists to help keep the memory of the dead alive.

With her disarming flair, she manages to keep a grave subject light, without dealing with it too lightly. Leysen achieves the right balance and in doing so strikes a sensitive chord. Towards the end, you fervently hope that she will succeed in her particular search.

'Alabama' is on at theater arsenaal in Mechelen until 10 February, then goes on tour.

Source: <https://www.tijd.be/cultuur/podiumkunsten/recensie-alabama-een-ontwapenende-roadtrip/10523833.html> (accessed 02.02.2024)