

Actress Fien Leysen and musician Steven De bruyn treat viewers to a tender theatrical trip to 'Alabama'

Fien Leysen – a scion of the Leysen family of artists, which actor Johan Leysen also belonged to – prefers to go through life holding a camera. And she prefers to be on stage with a projection screen. Including in *Alabama*, a performance she made with the collective BERLIN.

'Boy, that wasn't a theatre performance, was it?', I hear a theatregoer say as we leave the auditorium. It depends of course on what you think of as a 'theatre performance'. If you expect it to involve at least two actors playing a role and performing a story together in a set, with or without some music or dancing, *Alabama* won't meet your criteria. *Alabama* is tender theatre that uses film as a backbone to tell a touching, autobiographical story. There are no actors interpreting a role here, there is no fictional story. There is, however, a stunning final song. (We won't give say anything more.)

And there is a set. On stage, there is a wooden 'bar' with a huge screen hanging above it. A football match in Alabama is being screened. On either side of the playing area are small podiums. One of them is occupied by musician Steven De bruyn, surrounded by musical instruments, including a guitar and a harmonica. On the other small podium are tables full of equipment which Leysen uses to coordinate the flow of images on the screen. And there is a large, glass vase. The flowers have been replaced by notes.

***Alabama* is tender theatre that uses film as a backbone to tell a touching, autobiographical story.**

The performance begins with those notes. Leysen relates how everyone at the funeral of her father Kris Leysen – about whom she made the 2020 performance *Wat (niet) weg is* (What's (not) gone) – was given a note to take home. Each note featured a phrase her father often said. Every time she takes a note out of the vase, she hopes it will say, 'Drive carefully, girl!' That throws her back to the car rides with her father and

how, when Jim Croce's 'Alabama Rain' came on, he would often talk about the report he made, as a reporter for what was then BRT, in 1978 in Alabama.

Leysen wanted to redo the trip. To go where her father went. Maybe finish something he didn't bring up in interviews. So she takes us with her on that trip. Her on-stage narration fits seamlessly with the film being screened. And Steven De bruyn creates a perfect soundtrack to accompany the narrative. That Leysen has made this performance under the wing of the collective BERLIN is no coincidence. Her language is closely related to BERLIN's theatrical language. They combine film with live acting and live music to make your view of a fragment of reality that little bit sharper, softer, more poetic.

One difference, however: Leysen's performance is rooted in her life. You see how, during the journey and on stage, she is moved when, thanks to some friendly Americans, she can experience the same ceremony as her father at a police station. What that is, we won't reveal. But she didn't 'find' her father, she notes afterwards, somewhat disappointed. Meanwhile, as a spectator, you know better. Leysen's father is woven into how Leysen herself makes her way through life, how she wants to tell stories and how curious she is about how others survive.

Alabama is most certainly a theatre performance. Not traditional. Nor especially innovative. But so carefully made that it could even have featured as a 'special' at the recent Ostend Film Festival. Because Leysen combines a great talent for storytelling and a poetic sense of language with a talent for accompanying the narrative with the right images thanks to the camera. She is a real Leysen. Or rather: really her father's daughter. He is in her, but she takes it one step further. She interweaves his journalistic impulse with her artistic necessity. The result is tender theatre with a backbone of film and a heart of music.

Alabama by Fien Leysen and BERLIN will tour the country until 22 March.

berlinberlin.be