

Fien Leysen, BERLIN / theater arsenaal Alabama

WAS FIEN LEYSEN'S FATHER ONCE DEPUTY SHERIFF IN ALABAMA?

THEATERKRANT

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Fien Leysen's father was allegedly appointed 'Deputy Sheriff' in a town in Alabama, all the way in faraway America, during a report. It is a story he liked to tell in his local café in Mechelen and at family gatherings. But was it a true story? In *Alabama*, his daughter goes in search of the state then and now, of her father's documentary work for television at the time, for 'answers to questions he didn't ask'. It is a warm and engaging road trip.

A large flickering neon billboard reading Alabama leads us into the auditorium with a long bar on stage, with five screens placed above it and a very large screen showing a football game. The volume is turned up loud. When Steven De bruyn, a renowned jazz musician, and Fien Leysen enter, the screen images go off. Leysen steps forward and begins her story, which she then continues from behind the little table where she operates video and narrates. Images and texts alternate. Images of her father's report forty-five years ago, images of her report today.

The starting point is her father's story. A brief word of context for Dutch readers. Her father, Kris Leysen, was one of the nine children of Bert Leysen, very well known in Flanders, the first television director, the pioneer of Flemish television. Kris was also the brother of the legendary actor Johan Leysen, who died last year, and of Frie Leysen, the festival programmer who, among other things, founded De Singel in Antwerp and then led the annual international Kunstenfestivaldesarts. The Leysens form an artistic family.

Kris Leysen died in 2014 at the age of 66 after a long illness. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was a well-known television-maker. Among other things, he produced the popular 'Tienerklanken' for young people, the 'Liegebeest' for children, and 'Tussen Hemel en aarde', a kind of talk show with reports. It is for that show that in 1978 he travelled to Birmingham in the state of Alabama to find about the experiences and feelings of foreign exchange students in the 'Magic City'. He was stopped by the sheriff who wanted to know what these men in a car full of recording equipment were doing there. The sheriff then appointed him Deputy Sheriff. This meant the locals would trust him more easily and it would be easier for him to make his report. For the rest of his life, he liked to tell that story, that he was Deputy Sheriff of Birmingham, Alabama. But was it really true?

After a long period of preparation, research in the BRT archives and interviews with former colleagues and acquaintances, Fien flew to Alabama herself. During her flight, she watched her father's report from back then again, went over the schedule for her search. Searching for people who appeared and spoke in Kris Leysen's report at the time would be difficult. She didn't know their names; the sheriff of the time had passed away. Were there still people alive who had met him at the time? What did the current sheriff know? Although she was there for five weeks, getting hold of him wasn't easy. Where were there residents from back then?

Fien also went looking for places. Some were recognizable and she tried to shoot them from the same point of view as her father. A lot of places were razed, there were new buildings, or there was nothing at all. The vibrant atmosphere of those days was completely lacking. Today, the Magic City looks like a dormitory town.

She compares footage from back then with her own footage. She lets the images unfold slowly, with and without commentary, often accompanied by atmospheric music. The harmonica occasionally reverberates, hums, howls. Slides, also on the guitar, stimulate you, let you slip into her feelings and doubts – about her father's work, about her approach, about how to tell a story, how to share something. Was his recurring question 'to be or to have?' appropriate at the time? He made slow

television, something that no longer seems possible now, something that can now only be seen in theatre.

Leysen makes slow theatre. The unhurried rhythm, the lapsing into time that leaves room to daydream, to settle into the atmosphere and soak up feelings, the melancholy and emotion, that is what makes this show so special.

It is not just a report with questions about her father, it is a universal quest for people, for the past, a quest with obstacles, with a lot of waiting and patience. Much goes recognizably wrong. But there are unexpected surprises, highlights.

Fien's first solo, in 2017, *Wat (niet) weg is* (What's (not) gone), was about loss and missing, about being able to erase memories, about wanting to erase them, having to erase them. The starting point was the death of her father. In *Alabama*, she goes in search of a piece of her father's life. Of his work. She actually does in theatre what he did for television. He never got to know her work. She now discovers his work. And searches for him as the maker behind that report.

At her father's funeral, there was a jar on the coffee table, with all kinds of phrases, sayings of his, 'something funny or unintelligible, or maybe something meaningful'. Whenever she gets into her car, she still thinks of his warning: 'Drive carefully, girl'. Leysen intersperses the account of her journey with such charming little facts and phrases.

The show isn't about the current political and social climate in Alabama. 'School shootings' come up briefly and she questions the approach to dealing with them, but otherwise she doesn't go into the poor-rich divide, politics, abuses. She does ask herself questions about these issues, but doesn't want to let go of her goal: to know whether her father was 'Deputy Sheriff' of Birmingham. And that is also what makes the performance beautiful.

A few years ago, Leysen explained to me what drove her to make theatre. 'I make and tell to stand still, to understand something better and to share it. And then behind that there is always the hope that it might be of interest to someone. That it will comfort, move, or release something.' She has done so with all her productions so far. Initially with limited resources. In *Alabama*, she does so with the same poetic commitment. But she can do it on a larger scale now, thanks to the techniques and skills she acquired with the company BERLIN.