



De Roovers collective on adapting Blue Remembered Hills for the great outdoors

Sofie Sente doesn't have long for our call. "I'm about to get on the ground to play a rat," she says gleefully. An actor and co-creative director – or 'player', as she and the company like to refer to themselves – Sofie is one of four core performers with De Roovers, a theatre collective based in the Flanders region of Belgium. The company is bringing one of its most popular site-specific shows, *Blue Remembered Hills*, to Greenwich + Docklands International Festival (GDIF) this year, writes *Holly O'Mahony*...

"We're a collective of players. We work without a director and have been working like this for 25 years," explains Sofie, about the style of the company. "It's very horizontal; everybody does everything."

Inspired by Dennis Potter's 1979 television drama of the same name, *Blue Remembered Hills* was first adapted by De Roovers some years ago. "We watched the play on TV and were so charmed," recalls Sofie. "It's adults playing children, so you get a kind of distance from the story. The distance makes it easier to reflect on the contents of the play."

The company adapted the story into Dutch, the primary language of the Flanders region, and spent 10 years performing the show at indoor venues, before transforming it into an outdoor spectacle for The Summer of Antwerp Festival, where it first caught the eye of GDIF artistic director Bradley Hemmings. Bringing it to the UK for the first time this summer, De Roovers – who brought their acclaimed show *A View from the Bridge* to the festival in 2017 – have referred back to Potter's original play and are performing the show in English.

"We've been studying hard as it's

written in the Forest of Dean dialect, so hopefully the public will accept our strange accents," chuckles Sofie.

Blue Remembered Hills takes audiences on a journey through a restricted landfill site in Thamesmead. Set under the shadow of the Second World War, the story follows a group of children playing in the countryside. When the boundaries between fun and cruelty blur, disastrous consequences ensue.

The show was originally due to be performed at the scaled back 2020 GDIF, but "we couldn't get in



[to the country] and we couldn't get out," sighs Sofie. "Nobody was vaccinated so it was impossible."

When we speak, the company is still at home in Belgium – and most of them, including Sofie, are yet to see the Thamesmead location that's been scouted for the show. "It's a very special site because it's not normally open to visitors," says Sofie, adding that on arrival, they'll take some time making micro alterations to the play to suit the new site. "We know the play so well and have played it on so many sites we're used to adapting it."

Past settings have seen the audience be guided through a forest before settling at the site, other times the entire site is more of an open expanse. Often, there will be a man-made structure around which much of the action plays out.

When the audience arrives, "we are already in character, building and playing like the children. They see us moving around like little rats, building camps, shooting at one another and falling," says Sofie.

While set to a backdrop of the Second World War, Sofie believes *Blue Remembered Hills* speaks of the

experiences of children growing up in contemporary conflicts, too. "In the play, the war is far gone but you feel through the children they're reflecting on what happened to their parents," she says. "There's humour but they're also recovering from it. It's healing but it's very hard, and it ends with a big trauma," she cautions. "You recognise yourself in the play, even when you're older; some things don't change."

Sofie believes performing the show outdoors brings performers and audience members closer together. "It's a different experience," she muses. "Whatever the environment, be it rain or sunshine, you're connecting with the audience in another way."

So, what can audiences expect from the show? "It's a good combination of funny and serious that makes this play charming and agonising at the same time; it's a strange combination," Sofie ponders.

"We're very much in love with everything Dennis Potter has written, so it's an honour for us to come to your country and perform it on stage," she beams. "We hope that the people who see the show like it so much we can do a whole UK tour in the future." And with that, she's off to transform herself into a rat.

Blue Remembered Hills is showing as part of GDIF. Pick up point is outside Abbey Wood station from 6pm - 6.45pm. September 7 - 11, 7:30pm. Admission: £15/£10 concessions. www.festival.org/whats-on/gdif-bluerememberedhills/



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