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Violet Braeckman on Cinema and the Weight of History

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In an exclusive conversation, Violet Braeckman reflects on her role in HEYSEL 85, the responsibility of portraying one of Belgium's darkest historical tragedies, the limits of female agency and the personal encounters that changed her understanding of the disaster.

There are some tragedies that resist the distance of history. The Heysel Stadium disaster, which claimed 39 lives ahead of the 1985 European Cup final between Liverpool and Juventus, remains one of them. Its images have been documented, its circumstances examined, its consequences remembered. Yet behind the familiar chronology of that evening lie the quieter histories of those who witnessed it, those who were unable to prevent it and those left to make sense of what happened. In HEYSEL 85, it is through these human perspectives that the past begins to take shape again.

For Violet Braeckman, approaching such a story meant negotiating a particular responsibility: how to portray a fictional character within a real tragedy without allowing the historical event to overwhelm her humanity. The disaster is not distant history in Belgium; its memory remains close to those who experienced it. Braeckman was therefore conscious of the need to approach the material with sensitivity, speaking to people who had been present that night or whose lives had been touched by it. The intention was to remain respectful towards the victims without turning away from the horror of what unfolded.

Her character occupies an uneasy space between public obligation and private loyalty. As the stadium descends into chaos, her allegiance to her father begins to fracture. Yet she is not positioned as the person who can change the course of events. Instead, she observes, navigates and attempts to maintain her composure as the world around her begins to collapse. Braeckman describes her as a kind of guide through the stadium's hidden corridors and its underbelly, a figure through whom the audience encounters the confusion and the human behaviour that emerge under extreme pressure.

There is an intriguing tension in this approach. The character is close enough to power to recognise its failures, but not powerful enough to intervene decisively. Her struggle is therefore as much about the limits of her own agency as it is about the disaster unfolding around her. That tension becomes even more pronounced in a film whose outcome is already known. The question is not whether the tragedy will happen, but how the people surrounding it arrived at that moment. Braeckman sees the film's dramatic possibilities in the decision-making processes that preceded the disaster, particularly those that remain

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obscured by the historical record.

While documentaries and archival material have preserved much of what happened that night, she notes that the conversations and decisions behind closed doors within the Royal Circle remain less clearly understood.
Her character exists close to that machinery, able to sense the weight of its consequences but unable to dismantle it. It is a position that Braeckman initially struggled with when reading the script. She wondered whether her character was doing enough in the face of what was happening, whether her inability to intervene made her seem too passive. But gradually, she came to understand that what might appear to be inaction was, in fact, a reflection of the world the character inhabited.

"She's really not passive," she says. "We sometimes get that response from audiences: 'Well, doesn't she do anything?' But she's just not able to."
The distinction is important. Positioned close enough to power to recognise its failures, she nevertheless lacks the authority to challenge the people making decisions. Her frustration is not simply personal; it speaks to the restrictions placed on women within the football establishment of the 1980s, an environment in which their voices could be dismissed almost as soon as they were raised.

Rather than resolve that frustration through a conventional gesture of heroism, the film allows it to remain. For Braeckman, there is something revealing in making the audience experience that sense of powerlessness. The character's position offers a glimpse into the everyday restrictions women faced within such institutions, and perhaps still face in different forms today. Her significance lies not in changing the course of history, but in what her inability to do so tells us about the world around her.
But the most unexpected shift in Braeckman's understanding of the disaster came not through the historical material, nor even through the script. It came from the people standing alongside her on set.

Among the production's extras were individuals who had attended the match in 1985. Some were in their eighties and nineties, and for several, it had been their first experience of watching football in a major stadium. Their decision to participate in the film carried a significance that went beyond simply recreating a crowd scene. They were returning, decades later, to an experience that had remained with them, this time within the controlled environment of a film set.

Braeckman recalls listening to their accounts of that evening. They spoke about the heat, the strong Belgian beer, the absence of numbered seats and the loose bricks scattered around the stadium. Their memories offered a picture of the atmosphere before and during the disaster that was difficult to grasp through archival footage alone. They described a crowd that had become increasingly unruly, even animalistic, as the circumstances deteriorated.

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For the actress, these encounters complicated her own understanding of what had happened. The historical record can establish the sequence of events, but it cannot always convey the texture of an experience: the conditions inside the stadium, the behaviour of those present, the atmosphere that people carried with them into the night. Hearing these recollections brought her closer to that reality, while leaving her with questions that no amount of research could entirely resolve.

There is something particularly poignant about the former spectators returning to the stadium's chaos through cinema. Their participation offered a way of revisiting the past, but under circumstances in which the events could be reconstructed without the same uncertainty and danger. For Braeckman, their presence became one of the most formative parts of the experience, a reminder that the people who remember history do not necessarily remember it in the same way it is preserved.

Perhaps this is the difficulty, and the necessity, of returning to Heysel. The disaster is already part of the historical record, but the act of remembering is never simply a matter of revisiting what is known. It means listening to those who were there, recognising the limits of what can be reconstructed and remaining attentive to the individual lives that history can so easily reduce to a single night.

In HEYSEL 85, Braeckman finds her way into that space between the public record and the private experience. Her character cannot undo what is coming, nor can she offer an easy explanation for it. What she can do is bear witness to the pressures, silences and decisions surrounding it. And in a story whose ending is already written, that may be where its most human questions begin.

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