

## Angel:legnA Collective Memories

By Helena Eflerová  
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*"It is a mistake to talk about the artist 'looking for' his subject. In fact the subject grows within him like a fruit, and begins to demand expression. It is like childbirth ... The poet has nothing to be proud of: he is not master of the situation, but a servant. Creative work is his only possible form of existence, and his every work is like a deed he has no power to annul. For him to be aware that a sequence of such deeds is due and right, that it lies in the very nature of things, he has to have faith in the idea, for only faith interlocks the system of images (for which read: system of life)."*<sup>1</sup>

Universal themes of the human condition - existence, identity, home, origin and belonging - can be sensed from viewing the Angel:legnA moving-image film, even without prior knowledge of it, the process of making it or indeed the director's approach to his work. While all are highly important aspects of the filmed work, they nevertheless remain secondary to its subjects - which are life's cycle and the kaleidoscopic nature of the collective memories and dreams of the people who participated in this project.

Director Kye Wilson's main inspiration and point of departure was an un-realised short film idea entitled 'White Feather,' mentioned in celebrated Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky's book 'Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema.' Tarkovsky never actually made the film, but he included certain ideas and visuals from this short proposal in scenes from his feature film, Nostalghia.

Wilson's initial idea was to film the unrealised short film himself, before passing all original source files (un-edited) to local artists, students and film-makers, enabling them to create their own new film works. As a direct consequence, each film subsequently created by participants in the project resulted in a completely different and unique perspective and outcome. By giving others a creative voice and opportunity, Wilson ensured that both his own and their own final created works were less ego centric in nature. This initial concept and approach is mirrored in the final Angel:legnA project.

*"Art is by nature aristocratic, and naturally selective in its effect on the audience. For even in its 'collective' manifestations, like theatre or cinema, its effect is bound up with the intimate emotions of each person who comes into contact with a work. The more the individual is traumatised and gripped by those emotions, the more significant a place will the work have in his experience."*<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by Tarkovsky's poetic visual language, subject matter and awe-inspiring photography, Angel:legnA has provided Wilson with an outstanding opportunity to process his own biographical dreams and childhood memories, exploring his understanding of the world and his relationship with others.

Wilson has always enjoyed listening to and familiarising himself with his mother's childhood stories at family gatherings. Their bond has become a vital inspiration in most of his personal works (many of the main characters in his works are represented by female protagonists). He became increasingly aware that his own subconscious recollections and remembrances were not always in alignment with

those of others - due to the fact that everyone recalls their own anecdotes and experiences in a slightly different way, according to each individual's own personal interpretation. It matters not that these perceptions are different - because what *is* significant is the fact that they are connected.

Wilson chose to use family photos and object references in the film. However, during production it became apparent that *Angel:legnA* it is not simply one individual person's ego-driven project. Wilson demonstrates great maturity in this work, moving beyond his own personal concerns to create a participatory, collective activity.

In preparation for this project he undertook a period of extensive research, which included:

- Studying the technical, theoretical and thematic context of Tarkovsky's work.
- How to present time and memories in an abstract way, by seamlessly editing colour and black-and-white footage together.
- Ascertaining suitability of specialised camera movements and equipment to create uninterrupted tracking shots, to embody the film's characters and places - and the audiences viewing the completed works.
- A greater understanding of notions of time and duration, with a focus on the work of theorists Andre Bazin and Henri Bergson.

Wilson also undertook training to gain insight on what it is like to live with dementia, thus attaining an understanding of memory capacity and its limitations, which led him to think about how people retain and lose their memory, become confused, and lose facets of reality and identity. From this he noticed synergies between motifs used in Andrei Tarkovsky works, that seemed to relate directly to how disabled people experience the world in a seemingly more abstracted, non-linear way yet much closer to how reality is actually lived.

*"Aligning Tarkovsky's metaphysical explorations of the human condition to the way in which disabled people might experience and perceive life. This hidden parallel in the work introduces many of us to an unfamiliar perspective, and an almost uncomfortably raw 'reality' emerges. Tarkovsky's influence was very apparent in the filmic structure, as was Wilson's own artistic eye in creating a highly thought-provoking piece on dreams, perceptions, and how art and its audience connect."*<sup>3</sup>

This led to Wilson's desire to celebrate difference and collective human experience by enabling adults with learning disabilities from the Lantern Community, Ringwood to engage with and create quality art inspired by their own human condition, a core theme of Tarkovsky's work. Wilson states, when talking about *Angel:legnA*:

*"Working in collaboration with adults with learning disabilities, alongside artists and creatives has enabled me to use this activity as a platform to create the genuine collaborations integral to my practice."*<sup>4</sup>

Wilson introduced his project to vulnerable adults by giving a talk and screening excerpts of Andrei Tarkovsky's key works. As workshop co-coordinator at The Lantern Community, I helped bridge the gap between Wilson, Tarkovsky and the

disabled adults by using Makaton language, then gathering group ideas with key Tarkovskian themes. I supported individuals to draw their memories and dreams. I had to find many creative ways of accessing and communicating their experiences, and processes of working, taking a person-centred approach. This project has given the opportunity to challenge perceptions surrounding arts and disability, and enable others to reimagine perceptions of ability (i.e. the vulnerable adults working on a quality contemporary arts project). Direct benefits for the participating adults with learning disabilities included time for self-reflection, recognition of participants' skills and valued input. Instilling in participants a sense of pride and the feeling of being included in part of something bigger was essential to this process.

All collected workshop participants' drawings and text were passed to other creative practitioners, who used these contributions as inspiration to inform all elements of the final film's audio/visual content (script, set design, sound-track and voice-over components).

The disabled adults' creative process of accessing memories using drawing and limited written language was very rewarding. Inspirational drawings with a contemporary edge were created. Techniques included using abstract expressionism in shapes and colour score that was analysed, with accompanying words added to align with the work. Some participants used surrealistic compositions in architecture - homes would become an extension of a body and size and scale were distorted. The single line drawings of house and body, connected in obscure ways, could be compared to work with the childhood drawings by Louise Bourgeois. Animals and domestic objects were used repetitively, some with unusual perspectives combining a naïve style combined with an authentic creative vision. In addition, music, movement and gesture were also used to help the adults with learning disabilities to access, formulate and share their own memories and dreams.

This Arts, Health and Wellbeing perspective with an interdisciplinary approach gave an opportunity for everyone to participate and take something out of the project. Using a social therapy setting combined with collective ways of working and community aspects gave the adults with learning disabilities a sense of home and self, reassurance and security. As with all of us, seeking a safe place to live, to make a home and be part of a family unit, thereby obtaining a sense of self-worth and purpose is of paramount importance when it comes to living a fulfilled life. *Angel:legnA* does not force you to enter this romantic ideal but instead enables the viewer to recognise our similar yet individualised experiences, both happy and sad.

Wilson followed Andrei Tarkovsky's heavy mood that was set in the emotional landscape of melancholia, nostalgia, solitude, being together, happy moments and a sense of loss. Nevertheless, the cinematographer (Neil Hunt, Wilson's long-term collaborator) hidden behind the invisible camera, that represents the audiences' eye acted as witness of this unusual, yet familiar world.

*"Angel:legnA gave me the opportunity to continue my creative collaboration with Kye. The use of long-duration developing shots both challenging and exciting to experiment with. It was also really important that the contributions by the participants and Lantern Community were at the heart of the film and it was a really enjoyable and fascinating process to develop the ideas using these methods. It also made me consider how I might use this collaborative approach to create future projects and I am very proud to have been a part of this innovative process."*<sup>5</sup>

Wilson used poetic visual language, combined with carefully chosen main protagonists, selected for the professional expertise they bring to the film and the suitability of seamlessly fitting into Tarkovsky's world. Both the main performers (Vincent Adams and Helena Eflerová) seem to transcend time and embody more than one character, as each of us do, in reality, being a combination of our ancestors who have lived before us. Another way Angel:lengA shows us different time zones in the same diegetic film space is by using Tarkovsky's 'doubling' technique, as on occasion, each character re-appears in the same continuous tracking shot, like a doppelgänger. Wilson's chosen title for his work 'Angel:lengA' is directly reflective of the doubling technique evidenced in Tarkovsky's own body of work.

*"It was fascinating to work on a piece which had its beginnings in the thoughts and memories of so many people and to perform a role with such clear awareness of the potential universal and particular meanings. Without a through-line, the performance became about the sincerity of the moment and trusting that the details contributed by the initial participants when animated by performers, will resonate with an audience's own memories such that they will provide their own contexts."*<sup>6</sup>

Vincent Adams plays the role of father and son and gives weight to his character with his Tarkovskian appearance and strong use of voice.

As performer of the piece I added to the role my Eastern European personality traits, durational and slow movement performance methods, strong non-verbal facial expressions and natural behaviour in front of camera allowing the viewer to embody and deeply connect with my character of the mother and daughter.

To perform both mother and daughter I felt like I was growing up, becoming a young woman, maturing, getting pregnant, having/losing a child, growing old and settling with my partner. It was very emotionally challenging to express life's cycle in one durational filmed take of around 15 minutes in duration, and the happy and sad moments in between. Each critical moment of life happened in different sections of the film locations like a chapter in a book. The site was damp and cold, this added to life's misery and being alone, after several takes it was not difficult for me to cry when gazing directly into a mirror and asking for hope, to find again a lost home in Makaton sign language.

I remember how much the location played a part in filming, even outdoors surrounded by ruins. Slowly walking across a bridge with my dog Jonas (who is now deceased), I was inundated with sadness that was amplified with each camera take, the audience is able to sense my strong bond with him. Nature reclaiming man-made objects, crumbling houses overgrown with trees, missing roofs, windows and doors, has spoken to me so strongly, that I sensed the inevitable death in objects. Its loss of purpose and abandonment - automatically sadness replaced a happy moment and I come to the realisation of life and its temporality. The film location a poetic place, no longer suitable for military purposes, becomes ambiguous and right for a film back drop, giving this place a second life. Behind the camera keeping busy and giving a higher purpose to the location, two gardeners/guardians who keep this place alive and secretly locked away from the outside world, a private space for dreaming as if time has stopped here.

My steps emboss the woodland moss covered earthy ground, cracking a few fallen tree branches as I make my way to the bridge. Stroking and hanging onto the

bridges metal rails with a long gaze into nowhere, the future, the past or somewhere better, accompanied by my loving dog Jonas who shows empathy and loyalty. Jonas walked and stopped by me just as if he possessed a degree in acting, as he seemed to know what to do, when and where. His natural gaze and walk were perfect, he got his speed right, and blended into the scene seamlessly. His aged old wrinkled face, penetrating eyes, and long legs carrying his slim body - showing wisdom and good nature. Our powerful connection over the years fitted this old place so well.

A heart-breaking scene by the bonfire, I was standing by a wall waiting, then I slowly disappeared while my man burned letters one by one, making smoke clouds which reflected clouds of sadness in my mind. This sublime scene contradicted with a found paradise by the lake with gorgeous tall grasses and silver birches, melancholic and peaceful, I look around strong and committed, again and again. And finally, happiness in the film's last scene when I have an encounter and meet my life partner in a darkened house, he finally comes and stands by me, together gazing out of rustic window slightly obstructed by a long thorny branch.

Angel:legnA is not trying to answer our primary question: Why are we here? But rather it invites you to access your own inner voice. Deeply affecting, Angel:legnA elicits an emotive response from the viewer - enabling them to contemplate and get closer to making sense of life.

In some ways, all the people who took part in writing and drawing their memories and dreams to make the content of Angel:legnA are influenced by their cultural and social upbringing, and their childhood, relationships, and daily life struggles, which in this film has captured well.

Wilson has given equal creative opportunity to vulnerable adults, artists, writers, actors and others to express their dreams and childhood memories and merged it all together into one collective story. This proves Angel:legnA is not all about one individual but rather the collective memories and dreams shared by us all. Wilson's interest has always been to get input from others to create his realistic vision that is situated in a fantasy emotional landscape throughout time - between childhood and adulthood.

1. Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, University of Texas Press, 1989
2. Ibid.
3. Charlotte Bradley, *Precise Moments of Existence*, Unpublished essay on Kye Wilson's Film, Angel:legnA
4. Email correspondence with Kye Wilson
5. Extract from Angel:legnA Arts Council England evaluation (feedback from Neil Hunt)
6. Extract from Angel:legnA Arts Council England evaluation (feedback from Vincent Adams)