



MAISON DU BONHEUR

A documentary that studies the day-to-day life of a Parisian astrologer, who has been residing in the same Montmartre apartment for over 50 years.

TECH SPECS

Running time: 62 mins

Aspect Ratio: 1.37:1

Original Format: 16mm

Screening Format: DCP

Language: French

Subtitles: English

CAST

Juliane Lumbroso-Sellam

Nadia Cassel

Roberto Cassel

Albert Eddassouki

Manouk Kurdoghlian

Claude Tougard-Lumbroso

Pierre Tougard

Nadia Parlot

CREDITS

Written and Directed by Sofia Bohdanowicz

Produced by Sofia Bohdanowicz and Calvin Thomas

Photographed and Edited by Sofia Bohdanowicz

Subtitles by Sofia Bohdanowicz and Rachael Watson

Post-production Lab Film Factory

Sound Editing by Elma Bello

Re-recording Mixer Matthew Chan

Funding: Ontario Arts Council

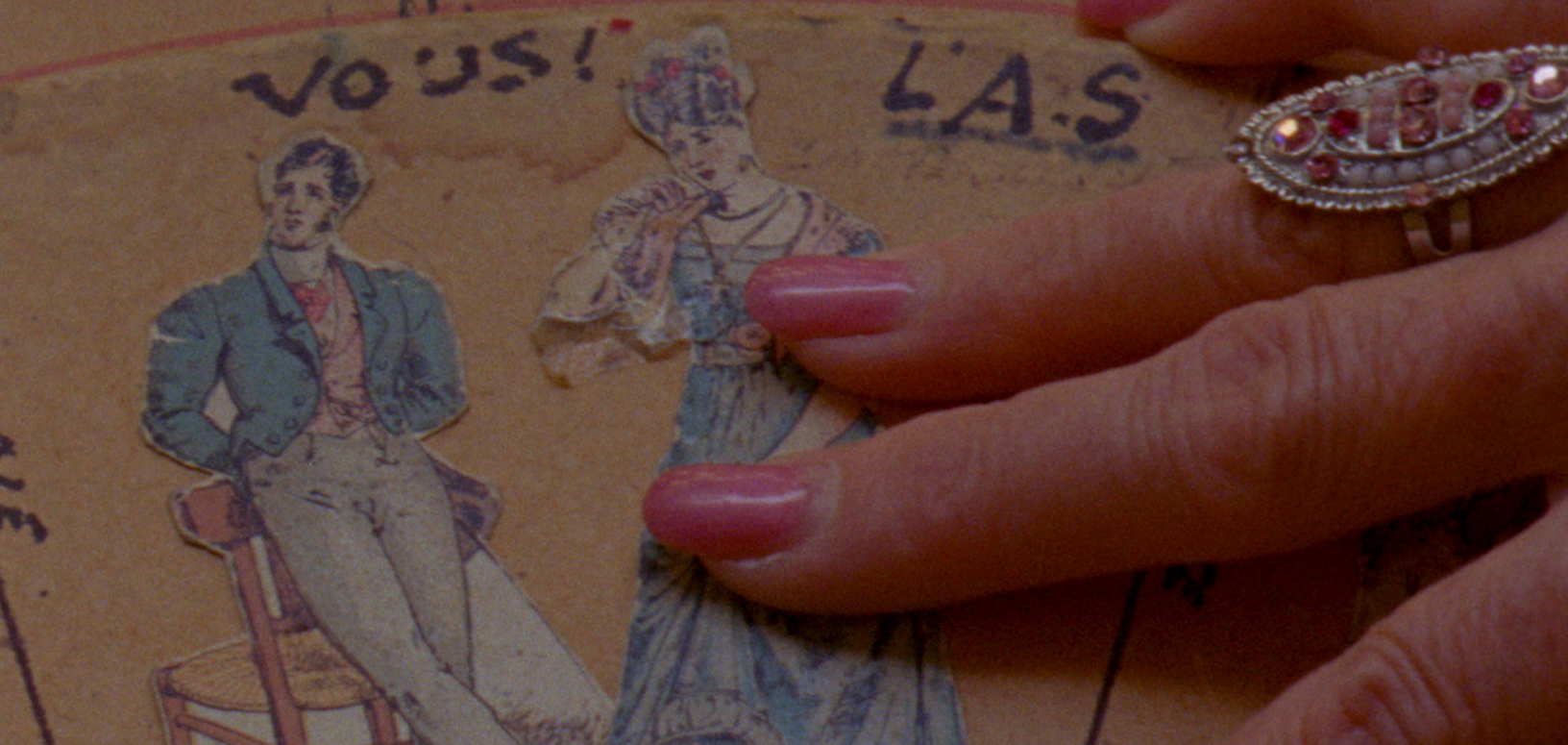
Website: sofiabohdanowicz.com



SYNOPSIS

Filmed in the Montmartre quartier of Paris, *Maison du bonheur* is a portrait of 77-year-old Juliane Sellam, who is as full of life and vibrancy as the iconic neighbourhood she calls home. Director Sofia Bohdanowicz, however, doesn't turn her camera on these frequently photographed streets (once walked by the likes of Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso and Vincent van Gogh) or attractions like Sacré Cœur. Instead, Bohdanowicz focuses on the daily life of Sellam in the pre-war apartment this French astrologer has lived in for half a century. In this intimate and eclectic space, Sellam's world proves to be as expansive as the universe that lies at her doorstep.

Over 30 beautifully shot segments, which are narrated by both Sellam and Bohdanowicz, the matriarch's life and rich inner world crystallizes through her daily rituals of making coffee, applying makeup and caring for her magnificent geraniums. By the end, the effect is a cumulative one: Bohdanowicz's ability to capture the beauty and humour in the minutia of everyday acts shows that it's in these seemingly mundane moments where we can find proof of a life well-lived.



DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

What was the origin of the film?

When I was a teenager, I did a student exchange and lived in France with a family in Normandy with whom I had a little bit of a complicated relationship. As a result of this difficult experience, I had not been to France in a long while and wanted to face a few ghosts. I also wanted to saturate myself in French culture, which I still had a deep love and appreciation for. I felt like I would be able to face the past by allowing myself to have a new experience there. I was looking for a way to create new memories and was hoping that they would in turn cleanse the bad ones. After seeing a screening of my shorts in Toronto, a colleague proposed that I make a film about her mother, an astrologer who lived in Montmartre in the same apartment for 50 years: Juliane. Being a little bit of an amateur anthropologist, I am very fascinated by the way people live, and I was immediately transfixed by the idea of possibly making a film with her. A year later I was buying 16mm film, a Bolex and packing my bag to go to Paris.

There's clearly a deep sense of trust between you and Juliane. How did go about forging this relationship?

I didn't speak with Juliane or exchange any emails or texts with her before my departure. Maybe this was a little naïve, but I had an intuitive feeling that it was going to be an adventure, which is what I was looking for. Juliane did ask for my birth date beforehand, as she wanted to look into her astrological chart (and perhaps mine!) before I came to ensure our personalities would mesh. Needless to say, the stars lined up nicely for me, because she had no hesitation in having me come live with her and document her life, which I found to be quite generous and courageous.

What led you to choose the formal structure of 30 segments?

The summer that I shot *Maison du bonheur* was the summer I turned 30 and things seemed to be themed by that number. I was in France for 30 days, and I could only afford 30 rolls of film.

I figured that the easiest way for me to stay on my toes, to be present and use my film stock as wisely as possible, was to use one roll a day and to focus on a different aspect of Juliane's life with every roll. This concept didn't always work out perfectly, I would use two rolls on some days and half rolls on others. I was ready to cut scenes out if they didn't flow properly, but in the end, it simply worked out that the final edit had 30 segments. I had 90 minutes of footage in the end and used 60 minutes, which gives the film a 1:1.5 shooting ratio.

While Juliane is your subject, you also infuse the film with your own voice. Can you talk about this choice and this process?

I have experimented with inserting my voice and presence into some of my previous films. In *Dalsza Modlitwa* (2013), when I am holding a projector and projecting my grandmother's image onto surfaces of her empty home. In *Last Poem* (2013), when I am awkwardly arguing with a German tourist named Tobi in frozen fields of Iceland. I was very careful about putting myself into my films, as I didn't want to feel like I was imposing myself in a vain or self-centred way.

In *Maison du bonheur*, I found the confidence to give my voice a larger space to exist, and in turn it helped to contextualize the plot of the film (as simple as it is). My perspective in the film offers a window into the process of production as well as a commentary on the development of mine and Juliane's relationship.

The film has been compared, or feels indebted to, the work of Chantal Akerman. How has she influenced your filmmaking?

I remember watching *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* for the first time and being hypnotised by this film that followed

the day to day domestic habits of a holocaust survivor who was living alone at home. I had never seen a film that portrayed a woman who was simply existing, and that let us be privy to these quiet moments of introspection that you usually never see on screen. This film was an anomaly for me because it gave me the confidence to start capturing the life of my own grandmother. I suddenly had this new cinematic language that had all sorts of possibilities. Akerman's *Hotel Monterey* also had a lasting impact. I didn't know that this kind of filmmaking existed, and this film helped give me a better understanding of the kinds of films I wanted to start making.

In addition to Akerman, Agnès Varda's film *Les Daguerriotypes* was a huge inspiration. I loved the idea that she was simply working with what she had available and in turn made a gorgeous study of the people that lived on her street. This gave me the confidence to work with the elements in my own environment and to continue my own study of how elderly matriarchs exist within their own communities.

In Jem Cohen's *Museum Hours*, I was drawn to the oscillation between documentary and narrative, which was done in such a seamless and intriguing way. I loved the development of these two elderly characters, who become friends as well as support systems for each other in a very tender and yet non-romantic way. I find that the film has a beautiful combination of naturalism and rigor that really works for me.

You shot the film alone. Can you talk about the process of working solo or with small crews?

I have learned how to shoot on my own for two reasons: it allows me a strong sense of control and precision, and it also is cost effective. When I get an idea for a film, I like to develop

it loosely and then go out and shoot it. I have a relatively simple production process and I like to keep it that way. The reason being is that if I waited for funding and took a more calculated route it would take much longer for the project to reach the production stage and my enthusiasm and energy I had from the beginning would dissolve. Filmmaking is a process of experimentation and discovery for me; like Francois Truffaut said, “The film of tomorrow will not be directed by professionals, but by artists for whom shooting a film is a challenging—and thrilling—adventure.”

When I shot *Maison du bonheur*, I shot it by myself on a hand-wound Bolex from the 1960s (no batteries required), and working on my own allowed me the freedom to move around Juliane’s home in a fast and efficient manner. If I had a crew and had to explain what I was doing and justify my actions, it would have taken much longer to create what I want to create. I also find that shooting on my own gives me a level of intimacy with my subjects that I would not be able to achieve with a lot of people around. When you bring a camera out into a space, people’s behaviour changes dramatically. Then there is another level of self-awareness that comes with having a crew and I find that I am able to capture a high level of naturalism, honesty and authenticity from my subjects by approaching them on my own. It’s a system that I have refined over the years and it works very well for the kinds of films I am interested in making.

How did you arrive at the choice to shoot on film with a Bolex?

I learned how to shoot on a Bolex when I took a private workshop at Main Film in Montréal, which is an affiliate of Liaison of Independent Filmmakers – Toronto. I was shooting a 16mm film, *A Drownful Brilliance of Wings*, with my

good friend Gillian Sze and we were interested in using a Bolex. When the footage was processed, I was quite happy with the visual outcome and had really enjoyed shooting on that camera during production. All of the knobs and the process of setting the exposure just right gave me a new meditative tone and process that I adapted when I shot. Shooting on film is tough because you really don’t have a lot of room to make mistakes, so I learned how to take my time, evaluate a space and decide what was essential in order for a scene to cut well together.

After finishing *A Drownful Brilliance of Wings* with Gillian, I knew that I wanted to continue shooting on film. When the opportunity came to shoot *Maison du bonheur* there was no question that it would be shot on 16mm. It was a risky thing to shoot a documentary on film, but I was up for the challenge. I liked the idea of the constraints I had set up for myself: to shoot a long form film with limited time and budget, and since I was approaching it with a very open mind, I was ready to capture whatever came my way. There was a lot at stake for me financially, so I was ready to push myself as hard as I needed to make it work. However, when I met Juliane, I immediately felt a sense of ease and knew that we were going to make something really interesting together. I know for a fact that *Maison du bonheur* would be a very different film if I had shot it digitally and I think that it would not be as interesting either. I think the pressure that I put on myself to shoot on film in combination with the aesthetic of the medium itself created a film that has quite a special tone and magnetic pull that gives us a very unique glimpse into Juliane’s world.

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BIOGRAPHY

Sofia Bohdanowicz is a Toronto-based filmmaker. She won the Emerging Canadian Director award at the 2016 Vancouver International Film Festival for her debut feature, *Never Eat Alone*, and had a retrospective of her work at BAFICI in 2017. Bohdanowicz is the winner of the 2017 Jay Scott Prize from the Toronto Film Critics Association, and won Best Canadian Documentary for *Maison du bonheur* from the Vancouver Film Critics Circle. She is a Berlinale Talents alumni, and is currently in post-production on her third feature film, *MS Slavic 7*.

FILMOGRAPHY

MS Slavic 7, 2019
The Soft Space, 2018
Veslemøy's Song, 2018
Maison du bonheur, 2017
Never Eat Alone, 2016
A Drownful Brilliance of Wings, 2016
Last Poem, 2013
Dalsza Modlitwa (Another Prayer), 2013
Wieczór (An Evening), 2013
Modlitwa (A Prayer), 2012



AWARDS

Toronto Film Critics Association, Rogers Best Canadian Film 2018 (nominee)

Oak Cliff Film Festival, Best Documentary Feature 2018 (nominee)

Sarasota Film Festival, Independent Visions Award 2018(nominee)

Toronto Film Critics Association, Jay Scott Prize 2017 (winner)

Vancouver Film Critics Circle, Best Canadian Documentary 2017 (winner)

Vancouver Film Critics Circle, Best Director of a Canadian Film 2017 (nominee)



CRITICAL ACCLAIM

“A profound delight.”

– Glenn Kenny, *The New York Times* (NYT Critic’s Pick)

“Shot on beautiful 16mm and constructed with marvelous subtlety, *Maison du bonheur* is a work of empathic delight, conveying the feeling of a life lived while providing only a glimpse at it.”

– Corey Atad, *Vice Magazine*

“Bohdanowicz undertook the project without having previously met her subject, but for both the filmmaker and her audience, making Sellam’s acquaintance proves a rare pleasure.”

– Alan Scherstuhl, *The Village Voice*

“A supremely thoughtful and careful study of one elderly Parisian woman, *Maison du bonheur* is as revealing as it is honest and sincere. This is a film to seek out and cherish.”

– Barry Hertz, *The Globe and Mail* (Top 10 Films of 2018)

“With absorbing narrative variety paired with great aesthetic unity, *Maison du Bonheur* reverentially depicts the significance of a feminine legacy.”

– Chelsea Phillips-Carr, *POV Magazine*

“At a point where documentaries are becoming increasingly flashy and frantic, watching *Maison du bonheur* feels like arriving at an oasis.”

– Norm Wilner, *NOW Magazine*

“A remarkable achievement that is sure to delight cinephiles.”

– Matt Fagerholm, *RogerEbert.com*

“This compilation of soulful segments doesn’t overstay its welcome. Like director Bohdanowicz, the film is a perfect guest.”

– Brad Wheeler, *The Globe and Mail*

“It is a work made with discipline and scrupulous artistry, and a warm, welcoming movie”

– Nick Pinkerton, *Reverse Shot*

“A disarming, romantic vision of the small moments that define a life. It’s also a rare representation of the elderly that challenges the notion that one must turn grumpy and grey in old age.”

– Tina Hassannia, *CBC Arts*

“The most entrancing documentary of the year.”

– Gary Shannon, *The Young Folks*

