

69th Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin Forum



DIRECTED BY SOFIA BOHDANOWICZ

MIS SLAVIC 7

CO-DIRECTED BY DERAGH CAMPBELL

Canada Council for the Arts / Conseil des arts du Canada

MS SLAVIC 7

Running time • 64 minutes
Aspect Ratio • 1.78:1
Languages • English, Polish
Subtitles • English

CAST

Audrey • Deragh Campbell
Grzegorz • Mariusz Sibiga
Ania • Elizabeth Rucker
Harvard Archivist • Aaron Danby

CREW

Written and Directed by Sofia Bohdanowicz and Deragh Campbell • Produced by Sofia Bohdanowicz, Deragh Campbell and Calvin Thomas • Camera by Sofia Bohdanowicz • Editing by Sofia Bohdanowicz and Deragh Campbell • Sound Editing by Elma Bello • Re-Recording Mixer Matthew Chan • Mix Assistant Will Stephens

sofiabohdanowicz.com
deraghcampbell.com

SYNOPSIS

After being appointed literary executor, a young woman named Audrey uncovers a series of letters that her great-grandmother had written to a fellow poet. Both displaced from Poland, Zofia Bohdanowiczowa and Nobel Prize nominee Józef Wittlin corresponded from 1957-1964 between Toronto, Wales and New York City. Set over the course of three days, Audrey embarks on a journey to Houghton Library at Harvard University to translate and make sense of Zofia's words. Coming up against her aunt's disapproval as well as complications of access to the material, Audrey struggles to dig into an intimate past while facing her own existentially troubled present. Between silent segments of handling the letters at the archive and discursive monologues that articulate her findings, the film traces the emotional movement through the research process.

Co-directors Sofia Bohdanowicz and Deragh Campbell return to the character of Audrey Benac they created in *Never Eat Alone* (2016) and continued to explore in *Veslemøy's Song* (2018), again poignantly blending together family history and fiction. Complicating notions of temporality and distance, the film sensitively reveals the intangible qualities behind objects and the impressions they leave. At once deconstructing and participating in a search for meaning, *MS Slavic 7* interrogates the tragic beauty and transcendent potential of human connection.



SOFIA BOHDANOWICZ

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*. In 2017, Bohdanowicz won the Jay Scott Prize and had a retrospective of her work at BAFICI. Her second feature, *Mason du bonheur*, was awarded Best Canadian Documentary by the Vancouver Film Critics Circle and was nominated for the Rogers Best Canadian Film Prize by the Toronto Film Critics Association. Bohdanowicz is a Berlinale Talents alumni, and is currently in development on her fourth feature film.

DERAGH CAMPBELL

Deragh Campbell is a Toronto-based filmmaker and actor. Her performance credits include lead roles in *I Used to Be Darker* (Matthew Porterfield, 2013), *Stinking Heaven* (Nathan Silver, 2016), *Never Eat Alone* (Sofia Bohdanowicz, 2016), *Self-Criticism of a Bourgeois Dog* (Julian Radlmaier, 2017) and *Fail to Appear* (Antoine Bourges, 2018). She has received writing credits on a number of her acting projects, and was awarded a MacDowell Colony Fellowship for screenwriting. She was selected for the Rising Star program at the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival and for the Artist Academy at the 2018 New York Film Festival. *MS Slavic 7* is her first feature film as co-director.



INTERVIEW

What inspired the film?

Sofia Bohdanowicz: It began with the discovery of letters that belonged to my great-grandmother Zofia Bohdanowiczowa. I had already created a body of work based on her poetry and was doing research online to see what more I could find. I came upon the archive at Houghton Library at Harvard, where I discovered 24 letters written in Polish between her and a fellow poet, Nobel Prize nominee Józef Wittlin. I contacted Harvard, had them scan the letters and spoke with Deragh about making something about them. She then came up with a concept for a film that unfolds over three days.

Can you talk about the choice to return the character of Audrey Benac from *Never Eat Alone* (2016) and *Veslemøy's Song* (2018)?

Deragh Campbell: I see it as watching the process of a fictional character being created. Her being realized as a person and as a character over the course of the films, moving from me as a stand-in for Sofia, to an amalgam of Sofia and I, and becoming an independent creature. We had been interested in process, how it relates to performance, how you can have an actual experience as an actor and that can be captured in a film. We became interested in pushing the idea of me being a stand-in for Sofia further by reproducing her discovery of the letters, capturing me on camera discovering them for myself. I didn't read the letters before we started shooting. I would read them in the evening and the next morning I would do a monologue based on those readings. I would write it the night before based on a combination of two notebooks, one with my responses to the letters and one with Sofia's responses. She underlined what was most important and I also had my ideas about what was important, so those monologues are a hybrid of our reactions to the material. It was such a cool experience to perform.

When I was in university I loved preparing for an essay: doing the research, compiling ideas—but I hated the actual writing. The monologues have the rawness of that preliminary research and love for raw material and the first associations you make. A question we had after making *Never Eat Alone* was to understand more about why Audrey was looking into her family history, her motivations and what it satisfied for her. What she was looking for and what was she maybe running away from?

Bohdanowicz: When I saw François Truffaut's Antoine Doinel films, I loved the idea of watching this character grow over the years. What I like about what we're doing with Audrey is she's having these separate adventures and exploring pieces of her family history in different ways. She's trying to assert herself, develop a voice and decide what her beliefs are. How do you acknowledge the subtext of your family history while figuring out how you see the world and forming your own identity? These films are part of that journey, which is intensely weird and personal.

You've made several films together but this is your first co-direction. Can you talk about the nature of your collaboration?

Bohdanowicz: Our working relationship is seamless. I can insert Deragh into any circumstance or situation and she will deliver an interesting and consistent performance. In the character we've created, she really completes the conversation and ideas. It's very much a collaboration and now we have this body of work we're continuing to build on. This didn't start as a co-direction; Deragh came up with the concept and was going to get a writing credit and we had a collaborative dialogue, but when I sat down to edit I wasn't sure where to go and relied on her vision to navigate what we were working on. It was great have someone else's voice be part of the creation of the film.

Deragh, what is it like being brought into something so intimate and helping construct it?

Campbell: I've been working in microbudget film for six years now and there is already a certain intimacy to that, but with Sofia our collaboration feels different. Being part of the edit for my own performance was interesting because you're the best person to detect when you're being false. I could see when I was absorbed and when I wasn't. What you want as a performer is to be available, to be able to reveal yourself. I'm not trained as an actor and I've realized I have a lot of defenses up. With Sofia, it's the most available I've ever seen myself. When I'm nervous my face can become inexpressive, but in Sofia's films my face moves more than in other films. It's a testament to how I feel so completely comfortable, and that comes out of how she's the most respectful and generous director.

Could you talk about the obstacles Audrey faces in trying preserve Zofia's legacy, from both her family and from the archive?

Bohdanowicz: Archives are there to preserve, to hold, and to restore different objects and artifacts—and that's a positive thing. However, what I find difficult when I'm doing research, whether on my family or Kathleen Parlow [the subject of *Veslemoy's Søn*] is that institutions



control the access we have to various historical objects. At some point it's problematic. It's something we wanted to point to because there's a dissonance with Audrey's family history: it's in an archive and it's being preserved, but she has limited access to it. If an archive isn't there, then no one is taking care of it, but what's the point of taking care of it if you can't access it? In a family, certain people feel like they have ownership over history and just because a family member cares about it more, like Audrey, doesn't mean she owns it more.

The character of aunt Ania (Elizabeth Rucker) wasn't appointed literary executor and since Audrey was, there's jealousy in the mix which leads to Ania questioning her competence. There's this hierarchical structure within families, where if you're younger you're automatically looked down upon or spoken to in a condescending way. You're seen as a child even when you're an adult. Ania is a curator and Audrey is treading into her territory and thinks she can step in and do it herself.

Campbell: We were interested in showing how family is part of your identity and can be positive and fulfilling, but can also cause you a lot of pain. In researching her family, Audrey is facing insecurities that are largely formed by familial expectations. Neither Audrey nor her aunt are right or wrong. Audrey cares more, so she wants to make her great-grandmother's work active and Ania sees it as bratty entitlement. There can be a weird sense of dignity to leaving family history untouched, in referring to it but not going too far.

Your work moves between various formats and aesthetic approaches. Why did you choose to shoot digitally?

Bohdanowicz: Every project has its own medium and for us the film is a reflection of the variables we have to work with at that specific time. For me, it's important to move forward to preserve the energy and urgency I have toward a certain project. That matters more to me than waiting for the right amount of money and resources.

At the time, we had a 5D Mark IV to work with and I liked the look. If you're looking at *MS Slavic 7* compared to *Never Eat Alone*, it's a departure from that aesthetic while also enabling us to shoot in natural settings with minimal lighting, to be portable, and to continue working in this docu-fiction realm. We couldn't have shot this on film, it wouldn't have been feasible. With Deragh openly performing these monologues in a restaurant that was still functioning, we needed a good shooting ratio and therefore a format that gave us ease and flexibility.

Can you elaborate on the process of the shoot?

Bohdanowicz: It was important to shoot as much in chronological order as possible so that Deragh could build an authentic performance rooted in her reactions to the letters. Each day, we would shoot at Union Restaurant for the monologue, the Polish Consulate for the archive sequences and then the TIFF Bell Lightbox for the archivist interactions. We did this in a rotating pattern for three days. We only decided we would go and film my great-aunt and uncle's 60th anniversary party the day before. We didn't have everything in place structurally yet, and we shot Deragh there doing different things in different situations so we would have

an abundance of reactions to work with. Everyone was just acting naturally without knowing where we'd go with it. It was really interesting watching Deragh start to structure a performance, and how it fits with the world we created.

How did you cast and work with the other actors?

Bohdanowicz: Liz and I have worked together before and Aaron Danby (the Harvard archivist) is an old friend. They both come from traditional theatre backgrounds and needed scripts to support their performances. We had specific things they needed to share with the audience in order for the narrative line of the film to flow properly. Deragh and I were able to have small periods of rehearsal with them to work through the scenes so that when they came to set they would feel comfortable and ready to deliver their lines in a strenuous situation because we had a very limited amount of time to shoot. We gave them a lot of backstory, but it was a really non-traditional setting.

With Mariusz Sibiga (Grzegorz, the translator), we sent him a massive document full of my great-grandmother's poetry, Józef's poetry, as well as research I had done. It was important that his character underline the love affair that he saw within the letters to Audrey, and he needed to not only understand that history but to feel it in a sincere manner.

Campbell: I was on a short film and mentioned to one of the other actors that we needed someone who could speak Polish and he referred me to Mariusz. My grandfather, Douglas Campbell, who was a well-known Shakespeare actor, used to run a theatre company in North Hatley in Quebec, and it turns out Mariusz was a member! It was a weird coincidence. We ended up writing him and I think he came out of interest in the project, but also out of loyalty because my grandfather was his mentor when he was young. What are the chances: born in Poland, moved to Canada, and worked with my grandparents?

Can you talk about the use of music in the film?

Bohdanowicz: I don't like to overuse music in my films, but it's important to choose the right piece to create the right atmosphere and portray the right tonal palette. I come from a family of musicians, I played the piano as well, and my dad suggested Adagio B.W.V. 564 by Bach on the organ. He said, "it starts out soft, then there's a tonal shift and it gets psychedelic and weird." Deragh and I really responded to it. It's like this hero's theme, but there's a lot of horror and intensity to her journey. Studying family history isn't always cute and sweet, there are layers of your own ancestry that are slathered in really dark things—the history is heavy. It parallels Audrey's journey of scratching the surface of this thing, then really getting into it and suddenly being out of her depth.

Campbell: I was kind of obsessed with the repetition of it, like you're watching scene changes in a play, it seems like a weird Elizabethan theatre thing. That first time we see her setting out the props: the costumes she's going to wear the rest of the film, the books she's going to look at, the bottle of wine she's going to drink, I find it beautifully cartoonish.

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There's a beautiful sense of tactility in the film, how did you approach the letters formally?

Bohdanowicz: At first, Audrey is looking at the letters as physical objects, focusing on their materiality, really hearing and feeling the sounds. I spent a lot of time foley-ing with paper so you really felt how crisp they were, how delicate. It was important because she's interested in the letters as objects more than for their emotional content. We wanted to explore objects as talismans. What kind of special powers they hold, what have they been through and absorbed? It was important for Audrey to experience the weight of that history and what it meant to be holding the letters in her hand even if she didn't understand what they meant.

Audrey refers to the letters as "heartbreakingly desperate," and "horrifyingly raw." Was it important for you to not over-romanticize them?

Campbell: A letter is a monologue and you give an idealized self or your most articulate self, not necessarily the most honest version. It feels like a plea, you're writing it and sending and saying, "see what is inside of me!" It's incredibly vulnerable.

Bohdanowicz: In the film she also says it's, "almost like the effort of everything to become language." It's this struggle to be heard and seen made on the part of these people who have gone through so much, survived WWII, discrimination because they were Polish, and trying to build new lives for themselves in the UK and North America. There's something really special that my great-grandmother and Józef Wittlin, who was Jewish and survived the Holocaust, had the energy to connect and see each other after everything that they had been through.

Campbell: And by adding a third party, in the form of Audrey, two narratives are accessed: the narrative in the letters as well as the narrative of Audrey experiencing the letters. As Audrey interacts with her grandmother's letters, she is encountering her own insecurities, her own inability to articulate exactly what she feels. So both Audrey and her grandmother have the same goal of self-expression which makes for a very intimate exchange between them even when separated by time and generations.

One of my goals in the monologues was to show that when you're acting and writing you can go through so many ups and downs of excitement and extreme doubt. You're watching her battle with herself, become excited by an idea or association she's forming and then suddenly disappointed to the extent of existential crisis. The way you can grasp at meaning and lose it and it feels like the world is going to fall apart a tiny bit.

Bohdanowicz: There's something sad but deeply romantic about the struggle to connect and to fully communicate who you are through language. Before we made this film we saw Ruth Beckermann's *The Dreamed Ones* (2016) about the correspondence between Ingeborg Bachmann and Paul Celan. It was one of my favourite screenings I'd ever experienced because we were so in sync with our reactions, so devastated. There's something about Zofia and Józef's physical distance, the fact that they only met once yet are grasping to hold onto each other's essence.

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