



October 2024

## Measures for a Funeral

Sherry Coman

Martin Luther University College, Waterloo, ON, scoman@luther.wlu.ca

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### Recommended Citation

Coman, Sherry (2024) "Measures for a Funeral," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 28: Iss. 2, Article 23.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.28.02.23>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol28/iss2/23>

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## Measures for a Funeral

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Measures for a Funeral* (2024), directed by Sofia Bohdanowicz.

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### Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator, and story editor with more than thirty years' experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction, and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



***Measures for a Funeral* (2024), dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz**  
**Toronto International Film Festival: World Premiere**  
**Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4YN7Mo8olW0>**

Over the course of the past fifteen years, Canadian filmmaker Sofia Bohdanowicz has made short films and feature films, on 16 mm and digital, diving deep into the stories of her family which overlap her films in significant ways. As a result, she has become a kind of family ethnographer, lovingly transforming archival artifacts and family anecdotes into a richness of woven stories.

Her most recent film, *Measures for a Funeral*, which had its world premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, is a kind of apotheosis of this exploration. A fictional character named Audrey Benac, who acts as a thread throughout six of Bohdanowicz' films,<sup>1</sup> is a representation of the filmmaker herself who has evolved into her own character. It helps that Audrey has been played by the same actor, Deragh Campbell, throughout this journey. Campbell is also a collaborator both in front and behind the camera.

The film's story revolves around a young doctoral student who is exploring the connections of her own family to the work of Kathleen Parlow, a real-life concert violin virtuoso of the early 20th century who inspired the Norwegian composer Johan Halvorsen to write a concerto

specifically for her. This concerto was thought to be lost, and was only recently rediscovered in 2016 in Toronto. The filmmaker's grandfather was coached by Parlow as a violinist and Bohdanowicz grew up hearing stories about her. Parlow is also the subject of Bohdanowicz's short film *Veslemoy's Song*.

In *Measures for a Funeral*, the character of Audrey is given the moment of discovery of the composition and thus begins the film's journey of understanding its history and complex impacts on her own life. It's a journey that takes her first to London, and then to Oslo, and ultimately to Montreal to hear the concerto finally performed. The shooting of that performance was in fact the first time the concerto has been heard in North America.

The nature of identity plays a significant role in the film's underlying currents: not only through the exploration of Bohdanowicz' own identity in the character of Audrey, but also within the subtext of the film's obsessions. The character of Audrey and the character of the violinist Maria who performs the work (violin virtuoso María Dueñas) and the character of Parlow herself become morphed into a kind of singular figure. The film culminates in a fifteen-minute uninterrupted performance, an extreme rarity in a feature film. It is a tremendous gift to hear this work offered in such a loving way and with such tremendous musical integrity. Performed by the Orchestre Métropolitain of Montreal and led by Yannick Nézet-Séguin,<sup>2</sup> who also appears in the film, the concerto acts like a resurrection of Parlow herself and is beautifully reflected in the emotional responses of Audrey as she listens to it for the first time.

Bohdanowicz has said in interviews<sup>3</sup> that she reviewed certain films in order to prepare for this one. One of these films was Kieslowski's *Three Colours: Blue*. In that story, the character of Julie (played by Juliette Binoche) tries to finish a composition that her composer-conductor husband was working on before he died tragically in the film's opening moments. The essential

goodness of Julie leads her into a series of experiences with people she reluctantly encounters, which turn out to be redemptive for them, even as she is trying to grieve in reclusion. In that film's final moments, we hear the composition completed, and interspersed within it are cutaways to the lives of those whom Julie has impacted with her goodness.<sup>4</sup>

In *Measures for a Funeral*, Audrey is almost an inverse version of the Binoche character, in her seeming insensitivities to her dying mother and her relationships with friends whom she appears at times to use, sometimes insensitively. But it would be too easy to assume that there isn't more going on here. It becomes clear that Audrey's pain is a genetic one, passed down through her mother from events surrounding the life of Parlow and Parlow's violin, a rare Guarneri del Gesù. In this way, *Measures for a Funeral* is like a coda to *Three Colours: Blue* and there are other comparisons as well between the two films. Both Kieslowski and Bohdanowicz are filmmakers of Polish heritage who spent considerable time in France, influenced by French film. Both filmmakers were/are interested in narrative threads between their own films that amount to *series* work. As well, in the final performance of the violin concerto in *Measures*, we revisit people we have met, just as takes place in the finale of *Blue*, but this time, it is the people who influenced Audrey that we see: archivists and historians and specialists whose work it is to preserve what is precious in our cultural life and make sure it endures. It is too vivid a reference to Kieslowski to be a coincidence and a beautiful way of bringing forward that influence.

In her earliest work, Sofia Bohdanowicz made a quintet of short films<sup>5</sup> inspired by her great-grandmother Zofia Bohdanowiczowa's poetry. In those films, poetry and language itself became stimulating and unifying elements. Now that Sofia Bohdanowicz enjoys a reputation and following of her work, it would be a valuable investigation to review these earliest films for their comparative relationship to the most recent films that feature Audrey Benac's character. (Zofia's

poetry reappears in *MS Slavic 7*, where Audrey investigates a literary relationship that Zofia had with another renowned poet.) These earlier films hold the same kind of meditative beauty as the later ones. Although the earlier quintet were shot in Toronto and Iceland, they lay the groundwork for Bohdanowicz' future vision by visually translating text into landscape.

In three of the five short films, we see how lived experience intersects with layers of memory and the absence of both. In *Modlitwa (A Prayer)*, Bohdanowicz' grandmother (a new 'mother' figure for this discussion) is observed doing everyday household activities, in a manner evocative of Chantal Ackerman. *Wieczór (An Evening)* visits the house after her grandmother has died and the house has been sold. Finally *Dalsza Modlitwa (Another Prayer)* visits the same house and projects images from the first film onto the empty walls of the house. This is ethnography working in reverse: instead of uncovering truths, Bohdanowicz is adding layers of seeing.

In *Measures for a Funeral*, these visceral landscapes have been exchanged for seemingly cold urban settings, concrete and glass. Even so, they nonetheless have a startling beauty, matched and underwritten by Olivier Avary's haunting score. Even when the film's story travels to England to visit the one-time home of Parlow, that house turns out to be in ruins. The visual architecture of the landscape of the filmmaker's stories reflects the deep pain of the characters.

As a lens of aesthetic reflection, Bohdanowicz has said in interviews and also at the film's premiere, that her grandfather who had formally been taught by Kathleen Parlow himself once gifted Sofia with a violin when she was four. When her grandfather passed away five years later, she was too sad to continue playing. This small anecdote is a helpful underlying layer to the film's discourse about grief, and indeed, there is a 'grief' layer in almost all of Bohdanowicz' work.<sup>6</sup> In a recent short film, *Point and Line to Plane*, she uses art to reflect on the death of a dear friend. If the films are any clue, art and music are often the keys to her own healing.

Bohdanowicz has said that this film will be the final one of the Audrey series. Audrey has made a breakthrough as a character and therefore her stories don't need to be told anymore. With this realization, Bohdanowicz has found a maturity of voice that is especially meaningful to see. The digital format works breathtakingly well and is almost a freeing from the 16 mm Bolex work of the filmmaker's past Audrey films. Those formats were right for those movies and this one is right for this one. It is as if the screen itself has overflowed with an abundance of reckoning and realization and has expanded to include it. The resulting richness fills every frame.

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<sup>1</sup> The six films that revolve around the fictional character Audrey Benac are: *Never Eat Alone* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada, 2016, 67 min); *Veslemøy's Song* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada 2018, 8 min); *MS Slavic 7* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Deragh Campbell, Canada 2019, 64 min); *Point and Line to Plane* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada 2020, 19 min); *A Woman Escapes* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Burak Cevik and Blake Williams, Canada/Turkey, 2022, 82 min) and *Measures for a Funeral* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada, 2024, 142 min).

<sup>2</sup> N  zet-S  guin has a history of coaching cinematic performances: he acted as a consultant to Bradley Cooper's *Maestro* (United States, 2023), and Chlo   Robichaud's *Days of Happiness* (Canada, 2023).

<sup>3</sup> See Chris Cassingham, "Meeting the Moment: An Interview with Sofia Bohdanowicz," In Review Online, September 23, 2024. (<https://inreviewonline.com/2024/09/23/meeting-the-moment-an-interview-with-sofia-bohdanowicz/>).

<sup>4</sup> See Krzysztof Kieslowski, *Three Colours: Blue* (France/Poland, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> The five short films are: *Dundas Street* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz and Joanna Durkalec, Canada, 2012); *Modlitwa (A Prayer)* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada, 2012, 7 min); *Wiecz  r (An Evening)* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada, 2013, 19 min); *Dalsza Modlitwa (Another Prayer)* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada, 6 min); and *Last Poem* (dir. Sofia Bohdanowicz, Canada, 2013, 12 min).

<sup>6</sup> The story of the childhood violin is also in *Veslem  y's Song*.