

On the Fly, LLC
presents

A film by Vivian Ostrovsky
co-directed by Ruti Gadish

67 min

ELIZABETH BISHOP

*FROM BRAZIL
WITH LOVE*

a film by
Vivian Ostrovsky

co-directed by
Ruti Gadish

Haunted by loss and driven by language, American poet Elizabeth Bishop journeys from a fractured New England childhood to the vibrant landscapes of Brazil—where love and art collide to shape one of the most unique literary voices of the 20th century.

SYNOPSIS

Elizabeth Bishop: From Brazil with Love delves into the intimate and transformative period that American poet Elizabeth Bishop spent in Brazil from the early 1950s to the mid-1970s. Immersed in a foreign land, Bishop encountered an unexpected but profound love with Brazilian architect and urbanist Lota de Macedo Soares, whose vibrant presence and cultural roots brought Bishop into the heart of Brazil's artistic and social circles. Through a blend of Bishop's personal letters and poems, rare archival footage, and Bishop's own voice together with new recordings of her poems by poet Anne Carson, the film constructs a layered portrait of a foreigner captivated by Brazil's spirit while contending with its complexities and her own vulnerabilities. In this unique collage, *Elizabeth Bishop, From Brazil with Love* invites viewers into Bishop's Brazil, revealing how this relationship and country profoundly shaped her poetry and life.



STATEMENT

Rather than a biographical chronology, *Elizabeth Bishop: From Brazil with Love* offers the viewers an immersive composition that reflects Bishop's own poetic sensibilities and fragmented explorations of identity, love, and belonging.

Eschewing conventional documentary formats, our film captures Bishop's spirit through the materials she left behind, embracing a layered and introspective approach. Visual and auditory fragments contribute to a larger tapestry of memory and emotion, situating viewers within Bishop's experiences as a foreigner in Brazil. Her recorded voice along with her intimate, often humorous correspondence with contemporaries such as Robert Lowell and Alfred Kazin, combine with found footage of Brazil in the 1950s and 60s, testimony to the nuances of her life there and that country's impact on her art.

The Vassar College Special Collections has generously granted us access to Bishop's drafts of poems, notes, letters, watercolours, and photos, enabling us to construct an authentic, textured portrayal of a woman whose life and work continue to resonate deeply. The film is also an homage to Brazil — the country where Ostrovsky grew up and a place that profoundly influenced Bishop, serving as a wellspring for some of her finest, most introspective poetry. *Elizabeth Bishop: From Brazil with Love* is a visual ode to the legacies of a poet and a place, each transformed by the other in lasting and intimate ways.

Vivian Ostrovsky & Ruti Gadish

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Bishop (1911–1979) was an American poet celebrated for her precision of language, and her painterly attention to detail. Bishop's emotional power lies in her restraint, in the silences and subtleties of what remains unspoken.

Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, she experienced her father's death and her mother's institutionalization before she was five. Throughout her life, she struggled with chronic health issues—including asthma, eczema, anxiety, and depression—as well as a deep shyness that often set her apart. While studying at Vassar, Bishop began developing her distinctive voice as poet and writer. She co-founded a literary magazine called *Con Spirito*, kept journals and wrote letters extensively.

After early critical success she traveled widely and, almost by accident, fell in love with Brazilian self-taught architect Lota de Macedo Soares. Lota invited her to live in Brazil, Bishop accepted and stayed permanently from 1951 to 1966, finding in Brazil a landscape that deeply shaped her writing. After Lota's death in 1967 she returned for extended visits off and on until 1974. Poems and prose from this period reflect a deep engagement with Brazilian culture, and language, while also providing the distance she needed to finally explore her childhood memories of Nova Scotia.

Bishop published relatively few poems in her lifetime; her early major works include *North & South* (1946) and *A Cold Spring* (1955) which earned her the Pulitzer Prize in 1956. *Questions of Travel* (1965), and *Geography III* (1976) followed, garnering other honors including the National Book Award, the Neustadt International Prize for Literature and the prestigious Brazilian, Ordem do Rio Branco prize.

Bishop's role in introducing the US to Brazilian literature was a crucial one. *Time-Life* commissioned her to write a book about Brazil. Although it was a project she later regretted, it helped raise Brazil's profile in the United States and positioned her as a cultural ambassador between Brazilian and American literary worlds. While there, she also translated the works by writers who intrigued or impressed her. These included Clarice Lispector's short stories, and poetry by João Cabral de Melo Neto, Vinicius de Moraes, and Manuel Bandeira.

The Anthology of Twentieth-Century Brazilian Poetry (1972) edited with Emanuel Brasil was significant for bringing Brazilian modernist poetry to a broader North American audience.

She returned to the United States and eventually settled in Boston, where she taught for several years at Harvard University, offering courses in poetry and literature. Despite her lifetime struggle with alcoholism and periods of depression, she remained respected in the literary world and found a measure of stability.

In her final years, Bishop met Alice Methfessel, a younger woman who became her close companion and later served as her literary executor, ensuring that Bishop's work would be preserved and accessible to future generations.

Since her death in 1979 of a cerebral aneurysm, Bishop has increasingly been recognized not only as a poet but also as a masterful letter writer. Her correspondence—witty, observant, and deeply personal—has been widely published. Fittingly, one of the courses she taught at Harvard focused on the art of letter writing, reflecting her belief in the literary value of the form.

A QUICK GUIDE TO BRAZILIAN POLITICS DURING ELIZABETH BISHOP'S STAY THERE

• 1951-1954: Getúlio Vargas's Second Presidency

- Former dictator (1930-1945) during the Estado Novo period, labeled "Fascism with Sugar" — authoritarian yet paternalistic.
- Returned to power via democratic election in 1951.
- Faced economic troubles and corruption scandals.
- Committed suicide in 1954 amid political pressure.

• 1954-1960: Juscelino Kubitschek – Democratic Instability

- Elected in 1956 with the slogan "50 years of progress in 5."
- Spearheaded rapid development and built Brasília, the new capital.
- Policies led to significant inflation and increased foreign debt.

• 1961-1964: Jânio Quadros, João Goulart, and After

- Jânio Quadros elected in 1960, resigned mysteriously after seven months.
- Vice President João Goulart (Jango) faced resistance due to leftist views.
- A short-lived parliamentary system was adopted.
- In 1964, the military deposed Goulart with U.S. support, fearing a communist shift.

• 1964-1970: Military Regime

- Military promised civilian return but tightened control instead.
- Political parties dissolved; in 1968, AI-5 suspended civil liberties, shut Congress, and legalized censorship and torture.
- Under General Médici (1969-1970), repression intensified.
- Despite short-term economic growth, thousands were imprisoned, tortured, or exiled — estimates range from 20,000 to 50,000 victims.

• Mid to Late 1970s: The 'Abertura' (Opening)

- President Ernesto Geisel (1974-1979) began a slow liberalization.
- Dismissed hardline generals; torture decreased but persisted.
- Exiled politicians and artists started to return.

• 1985: Transition to Democracy

- Tancredo Neves elected indirectly by Congress, signaling end of the dictatorship.
- Neves died before taking office; José Sarney became president.

• Cultural Resistance

- Throughout the dictatorship, music, film, and literature thrived underground or in exile.



ELIZABETH BISHOP AND THE MILITARY COUP

Bishop's time in Brazil coincided with major political events.

Though her poetry seldom addressed politics directly, her long-term relationship with Lota de Macedo Soares—a prominent architect and member of the Brazilian elite—drew her into that world. Lota was closely connected to Carlos Lacerda, the conservative, anti-communist governor of Guanabara, who played a significant role in the lead-up to the 1964 military coup.

At first, Elizabeth Bishop did not believe the 1964 coup in Brazil was especially repressive. Influenced by Lota's conservative circle, she saw student protests and leftist fears as exaggerated. Over time, her view shifted. As censorship, arrests, and reports of torture surfaced, Bishop acknowledged the regime's brutality, later admitting the students had been right.

ELIZABETH BISHOP AND CARLOS LACERDA

Though initially struck by his brilliance and charm, she later described him in her letters as self-absorbed, rigid, and consumed by personal ambition. His political posturing increasingly repelled her, and she grew critical of the way his ego drove both his public persona and his relationships — including his influence over Lota de Macedo Soares.

LOTA DE MACEDO SOARES AND CARLOS LACERDA - Flamengo Park

Lacerda and Lota became closer in the early 1950s; they shared the same social circles and intellectual interests as well as a common wish to modernize Rio de Janeiro.

When Lacerda was elected Governor of Guanabara (1960 – 1965) he invited her to design and lead the development of Flamengo Park (Aterro do Flamengo)—a massive project that fused landscape design and urban planning under Lota's creative authority. Lacerda's invitation was all the more surprising since she had never been formally trained as an urbanist.

At first very fruitful, their collaboration became increasingly fraught amid political tensions and diverging priorities. For Lota, Flamengo Park became a source of personal strain and emotional decline, especially after 1965, when Lacerda left office and she was sidelined.

VIVIAN OSTROVSKY

Vivian Ostrovsky is best known for her thirty-some films, which range from exuberant short montages to diary-like meditations and experimental portrait essays crafted from Super-8, found footage, and diverse sonic textures.

Born in New York and raised in Rio, she studied film in Paris. Her multilingual, hybrid cinema blends humor, politics, autobiography, and poetic collage. A longtime advocate for women's cinema and the avant-garde, she has curated, supported, and championed others' work since the 1980s. Her recent film, *Elizabeth Bishop: From Brazil with Love*, traces the poet's life in Brazil and joins a series of portrait-essays on women artists including Clarice Lispector, Mathilde Monnier, Sei Shōnagon, and Chantal Akerman. Ostrovsky's richly textured films defy category and convention.

RUTI GADISH

Ruti Gadish was born in Haifa. Grew up in Tel Aviv. Started to use a camera early, developed and printed her photos. Loved going to see films in a small cinema called "Paris". In 1993 graduated from the Jerusalem Sam Spiegel Film School. Moved to France and since then have been living between Tel Aviv and Paris. Since 2007 collaborated with filmmaker Vivian Ostrovsky as editor and as artistic director in site-specific, ephemeral installations.

Co-director and editor in *Elizabeth Bishop: From Brazil with love*.

Also directed:

Time - short documentary 16 mm film

A film - short experimental 16 mm film for the Batsheva Dance company

CREDITS

A film by Vivian Ostrovsky

Co-directed by Ruti Gadish

Production: On the Fly, LLC

Voices: Elizabeth Bishop - Anne Carson - Vivian Ostrovsky

Camera: Louise Botkay - Andrea Capella - Vivian Ostrovsky (Super8)

Editing: Ruti Gadish

Original Music: Mahut

Sound Design: Benoit Glig

Sound design and Mix: Quentin Chiappetta

Mixed at Media Noise NYC

Illustration: Rutu Modan

Animation: Shuli Tager & Daphna Awadish

Visual effects: Amelie Vappereau

Color grading: Thomas Bouffioulx

67' - b/w & Color

English with Portuguese or french subtitles

CONTACT

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That of being isn't hard to master
 of losing isn't as hard to master
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 only I may learn the well spent
 only I may learn the well spent

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was at or about the nest.

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