

A Standing Ovation for BIFF 2012

Written by Mark Shaffer

Wednesday, 29 February 2012 08:16 -



The 6th annual Beaufort International Film Festival



has audiences on their feet.

THE WRAP

Two days after the sixth edition of the Beaufort Beaufort International Film Festival is officially in the books, festival runners Ron Tucker and Rebecca Berry have the exhausted look of marathoners who know they've run the race well. Sitting in the Beaufort Film Society offices on Carteret Street, just across from the festival's new home at the USCB Center for the Arts, there is a sense of the sort of relief that comes only with deep satisfaction.

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“ I knew it was going to be pretty good when we still had about three weeks to go before the festival and the online ticket sales were double what they were last year,” says Tucker.



Each year since its inception BIFF has grown at a near exponential pace. While often doubling attendance from year to year, the fest has also consistently raised the bar for the quality of the films being submitted and shown. Simply put, if I'd bought stock six years ago that behaved like BIFF, I'd be sipping boat drinks on a beach in the Maldives leafing through the latest edition of "One Percent Monthly" in search of a small nation to buy. But I digress.

This year's festival got a makeover from the ground up moving across the river to the historic downtown district and into a much larger venue. Seating capacity went from 163 to a little less

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than 500. Tucker and Berry also brought in Beaufort's Fandango Productions South to design and stage every physical aspect of the festival. Jodie Miller, Fripp Langford and their team transformed the event space above the Old Bay Market into a posh rooftop affair for the Opening Ceremony and remade the Center for the Arts into a vintage movie house – twice. The space was completely flipped within a two-hour window between the final film and the Awards Ceremony to spectacular and elegant effect complete with the Film Society's logo projected onto the exterior of the building.

"We wanted people who attended the films to come back for the awards and feel like they were walking into an entirely different place," says Berry.

Fandango's efforts were so impressive they've already been retained for the 2013 festival with an



enhanced set of responsibilities and a mission to take it to the next level.

"Everyone loved the new venue," says Tucker. "They loved the spaciousness of it. They loved

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the convenience of being downtown. When we were on Lady's Island we were sort of isolated from downtown. This year there was more of a sense of a walking community.

Everything about this year's festival was on a higher level."

"It really was," says Berry. "We were more organized in nearly every way. And a lot of that has to do with the volunteers."

"A colonel I once worked for used to say, 'A single man can accomplish great things if he doesn't care who gets the credit,'" says Tucker. "We just keep saying 'thank you, thank you, thank you. We want everyone to feel they're part of the whole festival experience."



The numbers show another remarkable spike in attendance, from 5000 in 2011 to 7000 in 2012 – a 36% increase. And one figure tells the tale: average estimated attendance per

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screening for 2012 appears to be nearly double the *total* seating capacity of the old Lady's Island space. Although growth is a key factor in the festival's continued success, Tucker is quick to point out that on the film festival circuit bigger is not always better.

"When you have someone like Tom Berenger stand on stage and say, 'Yes it's bigger but it's also better' that means a lot. It's more important to be better than previous years. Some festivals get bigger but not necessarily better."

Part of "the better" includes this year's class of honorees. As one of the surviving legends in film and



TV stunt work (key word: *surviving*), Cal Johnson ("Hannibal," "The Patriot," "Army Wives") recalls he's been killed on screen around 90 times and broken his back more often than most people vote. Film Editor Craig McKay won an Emmy for his work on the groundbreaking mini-series, "Holocaust," and garnered Oscar nominations for "Reds" and "Silence of the

Lambs.” McKay received his award from “Lambs” colleague and Lowcountry transplant, Sound Editor Eugene Gearty. Gearty himself is twice Oscar nominated – both for Martin Scorsese films – 2002’s “Gangs of New York” and this year’s “Hugo.” Actor Powers Boothe burst onto the scene with his chilling, Emmy winning portrayal of the title character in “Guyana Tragedy: The Story of Jim Jones.” His vast resume of film and TV characters include the likes of “Tombstone’s” Curly Bill Brocius and Alexander Haig in Oliver Stone’s “Nixon” as well as “Deadwood’s” cold, calculating Cy Tolliver. He’s also in our Phone Book Hall of Fame (we’d pay to hear him read it). Boothe next appears alongside Kevin Costner, Bill Paxton and his pal (and Beaufort resident), Tom Berenger this June in the History Channel mini-series “Hatfield and McCoys.”

HERE THERE BE DRAGONS

Part of the film festival experience is to exhibit films that get people talking, engender debate and



discussion – films that move the audience to react on an emotional level. There was no shortage of such films on this year’s slate. Indeed, one inspired immediate action. “Awaken the Dragon,” Charleston filmmaker Liz Oakley’s documentary on a group of cancer survivors’ immersion in an ancient Chinese sport inspired the creation of Dragon Boat Beaufort seemingly within minutes of the end credits. Oakley was floored.

“I was at the reception prior to the awards ceremony and one of the members of Dragon Boat Charleston handed me a business card,” she says, “I couldn’t believe it. It had only been 3 hours since our screening and I’m looking at a card for Dragon Boat Beaufort. I hoped

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“Awaken” would inspire the formation of other all-cancer survivor dragon boat teams around the country. I never imagined it would happen in an afternoon.”



Oakley's film took both Best Documentary and the first ever Audience Choice Award, but she says watching the audience connect with such emotion “was the greatest gift a filmmaker could ever receive.”

“And the town of Beaufort welcomed us with open arms,” she says. “I can't imagine having a better festival experience. In fact, everyone who came down from Charleston is planning on coming back again next year... myself included.”

Rebecca Berry recalls the comments of a local woman who won a pair of all events passes in a Film Society contest.

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“She came up to me after “Dragon” and said, “I know this sounds cliché, but my life has really changed because of this film festival. She didn’t get specific about whether it was a single film or the experience. I assume it was a bit of everything. But that film seemed to hit an emotional chord with a lot of people.”

The emotional chords rang loud and clear from the very first film, “Cultures of Resistance,” a sobering look at four isolated areas of war and conflict around the globe.

“A gentleman came up to me right after the screening and said, ‘Wow, what a way to start this film



festival,” Tucker recalls. “He said, ‘I’m an educated man. I’ve seen a lot of the world, but this movie made me feel ignorant.’ And I thought the exact same thing when I watched it.”

An Oscar nominee for last year’s “Living for 32”, Kevin Breslin’s highly anticipated “#WhileWeWatch” offered a searing inside look at how Occupy Wall Street protesters in

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Manhattan's Zuccotti Park formed a corps of "citizen journalists" to counter the apathy, inaccuracy and disdain of the mainstream media. The documentary made its World Festival Premier at BIFF. Breslin, who cancelled at the last minute to meet with a potential distributor, missed a golden opportunity for some heated discussion in an extended talk back session. The filmmaker's absence was one of the very few disappointments of the entire festival.

THE NEXT GENERATION



Another strong slate of student films and short features proved that brevity is indeed a great charm of eloquence. Once again the University of North Carolina School for the Arts dominated the student category. And once again UNCSA student Austin Taylor took home the animation trophy. He won the category last year with his first student film. This was his second. The Vegas smart money's on an Austin Taylor three-peat in 2013 (watch his interview at lcweekly.com).

UNCSA may have dominated the Student Film category but a former student at the Savannah College of Art and Design claimed the prize. Matt Allen's senior thesis project, "The Road to Jacob" starred veteran regional actor Daniel Jones as a recently released convict trying to come to terms with his freedom and a young son he's never known.

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Allen – as well as many others – was impressed with the audience's sophistication.

"The audience was extremely intuitive – able to pick up on all of the subtle motifs that were in the film," he says. "They asked thought-provoking questions and showed sincere interest in both me and the film. I was so impressed with everything that Ron and Rebecca put together to make this festival feel intimate while giving wide exposure to both the films and filmmakers. To win an award here was a dream come true."

Jones, nominated in the inaugural Best Actor category, has been the go-to guy for a number of student filmmakers in the area and around the nation. Many have moved on to careers in Hollywood. Jones – who bears a striking resemblance to veteran character actor Bruce McGill – is L.A. bound with a number of projects in the works including a starring role in a feature that evolved out of a previous festival collaboration.

"As an actor, you just can't buy that kind of exposure without the help of festivals like BIFF," he says. "Meeting the right people at the right time is essential for anyone trying to take the next step on their career path. Unlike many festivals around country – and the world – BIFF is frequented by industry professionals at the top of their game who are happy to share their own "lessons learned" along the way."

WORD GAMES

A Hollywood writer once told me the scariest thing in the world was the blank space after typing the first FADE IN of a screenplay. “The next worst thing,” he said, “is actually making the damn thing.”



This year's Best Screenplay winner should suffer such misery. Local writer Teresa Bruce's original comedy "The Wedding Photographer" was her third straight trip to the finals and first trophy. Last fall she took home first place in the Oaxaca International Film Festival with an original drama – a connection that also brought Felix Martiz and his feature, "Santiago," to Beaufort.

"I'm pinching myself," she admits. "Because I wrote this screenplay specifically for the Beaufort International Film Festival. It had to debut here - it just had to."

The backdrop of the script is Beaufort's location as a wedding destination and it got some very specific post-awards commentary from actor/producer Tom Berenger.

So, does setting the story in the Lowcountry make it all seem a bit more possible?

"Yes, because it helps my writing," she says. "They say write what you know and I know how my characters talk and joke and comfort each other and I know the settings are enchanting. I think "The South" is the character you fall most in love with in this screenplay. And if Tom Berenger wants to play the antagonist - the town's sugar daddy whose darling is planning the wedding of the century - I'd be over the moon."

OUR FEATURE PRESENTATIONS

This year's trio of Feature Film finalists were anything but laugh riots. Seriously. Lowcountry Weekly Editor, Margaret Evans, proclaimed the Italian World War II drama, "The Duck Hunter," to be "the saddest film I've ever seen." Judging from the amount of tissue floating around the room after the film we're okay with that assessment.

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The rest of the major competition awards split between New York and Los Angeles.

Writer/Director



Lorrel Manning and Actor/Producer Michael Cuomo took home Best Feature for “Happy New Year,” their gutsy, unflinching look at the devastating effects of Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome on group of combat veterans in a V.A. hospital. Cuomo also picked up a Best Actor nomination. This was the 15th and final festival for the duo. The film played to a packed house and featured an emotionally charged moderated discussion afterward. The BIFF screening also represented a pair of milestones.

“We were excited to bring it to Beaufort because it was our first screening in a military town,” says Cuomo. “And it was the first time that Lorrel’s family would see the film. It seems as though this will be our last festival screening as we build up to the national release, so to have such a successful screening and cap it off with a Best Feature Award --- well this was incredibly unique and special.”

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“With Beaufort, I had no idea what to expect,” Manning confesses. “We’ve screened for thousands of veterans in the past year, but we’ve never screened in a military town.”

“There was an 85 - year old man (most likely a WWII veteran) absolutely sobbing as the credits rolled,” says Cuomo. “I’ve never seen an older man so emotional in my entire life. The film really touched people here.”

“I knew that the probability of the film ruffling some feathers would be quite high, and that the post-panel discussion might get a little heated,” Manning admits. “I was prepared for it. I even prepared my mother for it.”

The one thing Manning and Cuomo were completely unprepared for was the audience’s warm embrace on awards night. “I was not expecting two standing ovations,” says Manning whose family traveled to Beaufort en masse from the Upstate. “That literally brought tears to my eyes.”

If the subject matter for “Happy New Year” was a tap dance around a powder keg, Writer/Director Felix Martiz’ “Santiago” was a free style salsa through a minefield.

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A gritty, violent glimpse of immigrant struggle in the barrio, the film's title character is a pimp, drug dealer and cold-blooded killer. The film also marks a turning point for BIFF.

"It's the edgiest film we've ever screened," says Tucker. "It also represents the true spirit of independent filmmaking." Audiences and judges agreed.

Martiz (reluctantly) boarded the plane to L.A. with his trophy for Best Director and the Best Actor award for his star and friend, Jesus Guevara. Guevara inhabits Santiago with a toothy serpentine cool – he's the kind of guy who can blind you with a smile while he slits your throat.

Guevara couldn't

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