



### The 13<sup>th</sup> Beaufort International Film Festival Runs February 19-24

By Mark Shaffer

As I write this, the Sundance Film Festival has once again flooded the notoriously uptight state of Utah with a crazed mob of the film industry's hippest, designer-clad, indie auteurs. Past, present and future. Each year the sleepy little ski village of Park City transforms into Cannes in the Wasatch Mountains. Although there are undoubtedly fewer scantily clad starlets preening for the paparazzi in the cold and the beer is 3.2%. For a dozen days and nights this is schmooze central for the movie biz, where the term "bidding war" is practically blowing in the wind.

When Robert Redford founded it in 1985 to nurture and showcase independent films, he never saw this coming. It's mutated into an auction house for the coming year's hot "prestige" properties, each film bolstered by the official "Sundance Film Festival" watermark.

Even old Sundance himself has admitted the whole thing's gotten a bit "haywire" recently. There's just one problem, Bob. You can't put the genie back in the bottle.

There's no doubt an awful lot of film festivals use Sundance as a model. A lifetime ago I spent a miserable year on the board of what is now the Las Vegas Film Festival. Apart from a

seriously bizarre embezzlement scandal, what I recall most about the experience was how that dysfunctional bunch of A types couldn't stop talking about emulating Sundance. They completely failed to understand that this was not only an impossibility, it was exactly opposite of what needed to be done, which was to embrace all things Vegas and run with it. They still haven't figured that out, it seems. Bless their hearts.

Which brings us (finally) to the Beaufort International Film Festival. 2019 marks a decade since Ron and Rebecca Tucker assumed control of the fest from the Chamber of Commerce and founded the non-profit Beaufort Film Society as a home for BIFF. From the very first independently produced festival, the Tuckers made it absolutely clear that this event would be like no other. Comparisons be damned. No "Sundancing" allowed.

I look back on the 2010 edition of BIFF as its coming out party. To paraphrase a line from *Bull Durham*, that's the year the Tuckers announced the festival's presence with authority. Beaufort's favorite adopted son, the late author and Oscar nominee, Pat Conroy, took center stage that year. He was reunited with two stars from the film adaptation of his novel *The Great Santini*, Blythe Danner and Michael O'Keefe (Oscar nominated for his role as Ben Meechum). And just like that, Beaufort was on the map.

Soon after, *MovieMaker Magazine* named BIFF one of the Top 25 Coolest Film Festivals in the World. The Southeast Tourism Society listed the festival as a "Top 20 Event Happening in February" and Film Freeway recognized BIFF as one of the "Top 100 Best Reviewed Film Festivals in the World," according to filmmaker's reviews. This last one is key. The buzz began to build and never stopped. Filmmakers who came to Beaufort fell in love with the Lowcountry, the town and the concept of an international film festival housed under one roof at the USCB Center for the Arts. It's a bit like an intimate little movie circus under the big top with seating for just under 500. This doesn't happen at Sundance. For most of the first-time filmmakers in attendance, this is an entirely new experience: a complete immersion with the audience and their fellow artists.

The festival's grown at a near exponential rate over the years, from a few hundred intrepid souls huddled under a tent the first year, to an estimated 14 thousand tickets sold in 2018. Rebecca Tucker marshals an army of over 100 volunteers to make it all happen.

"We couldn't do it without our volunteers," she says. And this year they've signed on for extra duty.

As the festival enters its teens, the Tuckers have added a day and expanded the list of screenings.

"Now, we just have to wait and see if anyone shows up for that extra day," says Ron. This is not unusual for Ron. In the 10 years I've covered this event, Ron's always worried that tumbleweeds will be rolling through the aisles on opening day.

"One of the biggest changes this extra day makes is that it allows us to show almost twice the usual number of films," says Ron. "As one of our filmmakers says, we're a 'films first film festival. That's what it's all about and this year's schedule is jam packed.'"

Among the fest's most unique and endearing appeals to filmmakers is the commitment to audience feedback.

"Once we confirm a filmmaker is coming," says Ron, "we build time into the schedule for audience Q&A. Even if their film is only five minutes long, they're going to have 10 minutes to talk about it. And the audience loves it. Filmmakers always tell us our audience is one of the best they've ever encountered."

The audience will also have a chance to spend some quality time with the 2019 VIPs.

Charleston-based hairstylist/make up artist, Joyce Gilliard is this year's Behind the Scenes honoree. Gilliard is also the founder of the iSAFE TV & Film initiative (see the accompanying interview in this issue). Gilliard will anchor a panel discussion on safety in the film industry on February 20, the fifth anniversary of a deadly accident on the set of the Greg Allman bio-pic, *Midnight Rider* which killed camera assistant Sarah Jones and severely injured Gilliard and several others.

This year's Pat Conroy Lifetime Achievement Award Winner is acting legend, singer and author, Paul Sorvino. Perhaps best known for his role as the imposing mob boss, Paul Cicero in Martin Scorsese's classic *Goodfellas*, Sorvino will discuss his life and career on the afternoon of the 22<sup>nd</sup>. In a stunning case of "six degrees of BIFF,"

Sorvino's longtime family friend, actor/filmmaker Wally Marzano-Lesnevich, returns with two films in festival competition. His 2016 feature *Almost* *st Paris*

took home the audience choice award. Among the cast were Sorvino's son, Michael and Scorsese's daughter, Domenica.

"The relationships that we build with these filmmakers is extremely important," says Rebecca. "They all want to come back."

"Win or lose, we stay in touch," adds Ron.

The Tuckers both agree that the 2019 festival boast the strongest collection of feature films in festival history.

"Several of our judges couldn't stop using the word 'wow,'" says Ron.

Funny, that's a word a lot of the filmmakers tend to use to describe their BIFF experience. And as always, I suspect that at some point during the awards night afterparty at Breakwater, the Tuckers will turn to each other and say something like, "How do we top *this* next year?"

In explanation I offer a (slightly) altered classic scene from *Shakespeare In Love*:

Henslowe: Mr. Fennyman, allow me to explain about the [film festival] business. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.

Fennyman: So, what do we do?

Henslowe: Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.

Fennyman: How?

Henslowe: I don't know. It's a mystery.

### GET MORE

The 13<sup>th</sup> annual Beaufort International Film Festival runs February 19-24. Check out the entire schedule of screenings and events and reserve your tickets at [www.beaufortfilmfestival.com](http://www.beaufortfilmfestival.com)

### ANNOUNCING A VERY SPECIAL AWARD



*This year, BIFF will introduce a new award in honor of our dear friend Susan Shaffer, who lost her life in a car accident in May of 2017, after spending the day much as she might have had she known it was her last – volunteering with the Sea Turtle Conservation Project on her beloved Hunting Island. Susan was a nature lover, an activist, a student, a teacher, and a friend to everyone she met. The inaugural **Susan A.K. Shaffer Humanitarian Award** transcends category and genre and will be presented to the filmmaker whose work best exemplifies the need for positive social, cultural and/or environmental change in our time. The "Susan" is*

## BIFF Comes Of Age

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