



By Margaret Evans, Editor

By now, it's old news that the Plaza Stadium Theater has closed after 44 years. But as 80-plus visiting filmmakers, along with thousands of movie lovers, descend upon USCB Center for the Arts this week for our 13th annual *international*□ film festival, the cut feels somehow deeper. Beaufort is a movie town without a movie theater.

And isn't it ironic, don't you think?□

Reports of the Plaza's closing came long before it actually happened, and like many of you, I kept hoping it was fake news. It was just too crazy to comprehend, a city of our size and cultural sophistication without a traditional movie theater. Don't get me wrong – the Hwy 21 Drive-In is wonderful. (And talk about *traditional*!□ It's one of the last drive-ins in the country.) But when you're a matinee person like me – a "mature" viewer hard-pressed to stay awake through a late movie, especially in summer when the sun doesn't set till almost 9 – it's not a practical option. Not for the film addict who needs a regular fix, anyway.

I understand the tribulations of owning a movie theater in this age of umpteen-thousand entertainment outlets, but I kept hoping, until the very last minute, that some savvy mogul with deep pockets might seize the opportunity to purchase the Plaza and renovate it. Apparently, people won't go to movies anymore unless they can kick back in heated Barcaloungers and sip adult beverages. As a film fanatic who takes her movies very seriously – probably *too*□ seriously – I honestly don't get that. Y'all know I love my wine, but I don't like watching movies under the influence. I like to keep my senses sharp, my mind focused, and my nappish tendencies at bay. Movie-going, for me, is not about relaxing. It's about *engaging*.□

Watching closely, feeling deeply, being intensely alive. I relish being *literally*□

on the edge of my seat. A theater should be reasonably comfortable, of course, but it doesn't

need to be Club Med.

The Plaza was never fancy, and that was fine with me. Tickets were cheap, and even the concessions weren't outrageous, as movie concessions go. Best of all, it was five minutes from my house. (Apparently, there will now be a new Publix five minutes from my house, and that's great. But there's *already* a Publix five minutes from my house, and this is all about me, people.)

We made a lot of treasured memories at the Plaza. It's where we took our little girl, now 17, to see her first movie. I could have sworn it was a Pixar film – maybe *The Incredibles*? – but Amelia's sure it was

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.

She says it's one of her very first memories, and who am I to quibble? The Plaza's where we fell in love with Hogwarts – I saw the first Potter movies before reading the books – watching Harry, Hermione, and Ron grow up as if they were our own children. It's where Jeff and I first caught our breath at the sight of Tolkien's Middle Earth magically realized on screen, and where my daughter and I, more recently, quietly wept through

A Quiet Place.

We're an abnormally movie-obsessed family, I admit. Jeff and I tend to see one most every weekend, and sometimes more than one. Until recently, when the Plaza was still around, we'd occasionally even sneak away in the middle of the workday for a matinee. If I told you I was "in a meeting" when you called later, chances are I was actually at a movie. Small business owners can do things like that. A "flexible schedule" is one of the perks, a trade-off for working pretty much all the time, even when you're not.

Of course, we're far less likely to do that now. With the closest theater in Bluffton, there can be no quick "movie break" – the kind we used to justify as a long lunch hour. No, when you have to drive to Bluffton for a movie, you feel like you should make a grand occasion of it – hit the Factory Outlets afterwards, go out to dinner, or at least make a Target run. Gotta get your gas money's worth, limit the ol' carbon footprint. We need a whole afternoon for a movie now.

You're probably asking yourself, after first crying me a river, "Has this woman never heard of Netflix? Amazon Prime?" And yes, of course I have! I avail myself of those services regularly. I'm an addict, remember? In fact, I recently watched one of my favorite movies of the year – *Beautiful Boy* – while lying in bed, in the dark, on a four-by-six inch Kindle screen. It was

one of the most riveting, emotion-battering movies I've seen in ages. I was completely engaged, mesmerized from beginning to end, except for the couple of times my mind wandered into "this would be even better on the big screen" territory. That errant thought was my only distraction, but it was a distraction.

And it's true, isn't it? Movies are just better on the big screen. If you want the full cinematic experience – total immersion, mind, body and soul – you really need a theater. I can't imagine having watched *A Star is Born* on anything less than an enormous screen. Or *Bohemi an Rhapsody*.

Or
First Man.
Or
Black Panther. *Mary Queen of Scots*
and
The Favourite
were big screen movies, too; so were
Mary Poppins Returns
and
Crazy Rich Asians.
I suppose
The Hate U Give
and
Green Book
might have been okay on a small screen, but I'm sure glad I didn't have to watch them that way.

But take heart, my friends. Even as we mourn our dearly departed Plaza, there is hope. USCB Center for the Arts has been steadily growing its Monday Night Movies audience, treating folks to everything from award-winning indie films that would never have come near the Plaza, to fairly recent major motion pictures you might have missed the first time around. In March, for example, you can see *A Star is Born*, *Green Book*, *On the Basis of Sex*, and *Vice*. I haven't even seen the last two yet, so I'm thrilled, and the first two I recommend with all my heart. These big-name releases are pricey for the CFA to acquire, so we all need to come out and make it worth their while, so they'll get more!

And, of course, we have the ever-phenomenal Beaufort International Film Festival, starting Tuesday night and running through Sunday, February 24th. If you've never been to BIFF, now's a good time to start. Take it from this movie maniac – you won't be sorry. For tickets and a complete schedule, visit

www.beaufortfilmfestival.com

, or just head on over to USCB Center for the Arts. Tell 'em Margaret sent you.