



The Beaufort International Film Festival

THE ANNUAL INDIE MOVIE MECCA BY THE SEA

By Frank Dunne, Jr. PHOTOGRAPHY BY Nancy McGregor

Isn't it cool when you're watching a movie—whether it's the summer's biggest blockbuster, the "feel good" hit of the year, or a great indie film with no recognizable names in the credits—and something on the screen looks kind of familiar? A house, like the mansion in Beaufort seen in *The Great Santini* and *The Big Chill* (Yep, it's the same home.); or a park bench, like the one in Savannah's Chippewa Square from which *Forrest Gump* shared his box of chocolates; or the Edisto Island beach where Benjamin Martin hid his family from Col. Tavington's Dragoons in *The Patriot*.

Not long ago the film industry considered Beaufort and the surrounding Lowcountry a film location gem of the Southeast. A "Movie Mecca by the Sea," beamed the *Wall Street Journal*. You may have heard of other films set or shot, in whole or in part, in or around Beaufort, Charleston or Savannah: *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Chasers*, *Conrack*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *Forces of Nature*, *The General's Daughter*, *G.I. Jane*, *Gone Fishin'*, *The Jungle Book*, *Last Dance*, *The Prince of Tides*, *Rules of Engagement*, *Something to Talk About*, *The War*, and *White Squall*. Film directors, the likes of Lawrence Kasdan (*The Big Chill*), William Friedkin (*Rules of Engagement*) and others, were enchanted by the area's beautiful scenery, history, and friendliness—all those things that we love about living here.



Renowned novelist Pat Conroy, a Lowcountry native, was largely responsible—without really trying. “They found us through Pat Conroy,” points out Ron Tucker, president and CEO of the Beaufort Film Society. Choosing Beaufort as a location for *The Great Santini* (1979) in this case was a bit of a no-brainer. “If you’re making a movie about a Marine fighter pilot based in Beaufort, why go anywhere else to shoot?” says Tucker. The state film office seized the filming as an opportunity to promote the area as a set for other moviemakers. *The Big Chill* (1983) followed a few years later when, while scouting locations, Kasdan was captivated by the same house that appeared in *The Great Santini*. “I still remember the phrase he used,” says Tucker. “He said, ‘I just loved the bones of the house.’” Thanks to the success of those two films, the industry gave the Lowcountry an enthusiastic green light as a shooting location.

By the end of the 1990s though, productions in the area tapered off, setting in motion a series of events that led to the creation of the Beaufort Film Society and its signature event, the Beaufort International Film Festival (BIFF), which returns for its annual incarnation this February. Though much younger and smaller in scope than Cannes, Sundance and other more celebrated and, perhaps, more glamorous film festivals, in seven short years BIFF has carved out its own special niche. Rather than putting the spotlight on famous movie stars, directors and producers, BIFF’s aim is “to recognize aspiring filmmakers of almost every genre to include independent film, music, animation, short and long features, documentaries and screenwriting.” In other words, BIFF is for “the little guy” trying to break into film. What’s more it’s truly an international festival. Film and screenplay entries come in from all over the globe to compete for Best Feature, Best Screenplay, Best Animated Film, Best Student Film, Best Short, Best Documentary and Audience Choice awards.

“The way we look at it, this is the next generation of filmmakers—the guy who is just getting started, the guy who had to use Kickstarter.com to get his film made, the guy who had to borrow money,” says Tucker. “That’s the person we roll out



the red carpet for. And that’s one thing that filmmakers keep telling us. Make sure that your eye is on them. They are your stars and that’s what we try to emphasize.” Some festivals, he points out, the big deal is going to see which movie stars show up. “We’re never going to be that.”

BIFF’s other priority is to showcase Beaufort, the South Carolina Sea Islands and the entire Lowcountry as a film-friendly region to a new generation of filmmakers—introducing them to the sweeping marsh vistas, antebellum homes and quiet Old South charm that has served as the backdrop for more than 20 major motion pictures.

The venture really started as a survival move for Tucker. After retiring from the Marine Corps, he opened a location scouting service, Sandbar Productions, in 1994 for movie scouts checking out the area. But no movies were filming here at that point so he posed a question to the Chamber of Commerce: What can we do to help bring the movies back?