Ocean County a Hot Spot on Region's Filmmaking Map

By: Victoria Ford



"It is our mission to transform the way you look at the world, and life, through film … and to give independent film a voice," the Lighthouse International Film Festival's Managing Director Christine Rooney told the cozy dining room full of festival participants and supporters that September day. The occasion was a "Filmmakers High Tea" event, held in the back room at Little Bite of Italy in Surf City, complete with finger sandwiches and donated vintage tea sets.

LIFF was founded by a collection of filmmakers, film critics and film industry professionals who share a passion for film and simply wanted to create an event for film enthusiasts. Since its inception in 2009, the festival has incubated a culture of filmmaking in Ocean County inspired by the natural landscape and native people.

The 2016 festival, set for June 9 through 12, will be the eighth annual three-day celebration of the art form, featuring shorts, animations, documentaries, experimental pieces, full-length features, multimedia works, music videos, narrative fictions and movies made for television – as well as filmmaker meet-and-greets – all held in various venues throughout Long Beach Island. Submissions are now open at **lighthousefilmfestival.org.** High School students can submit for free and should email **liffinfo@gmail.com.**

If any question had arisen about Ocean County as a locale for cultivating filmmaking genius, just look to IndieWIRE, which listed the Lighthouse International Film Festival as one of the world's 17 best film festivals in June – one of only a handful of festivals in the United States to receive the honor. Consider also the festival's location on Long Beach Island, a short, easily commutable distance from New York City and Philadelphia.

Kirk Jarvis of Jarvis Video Productions is one Ocean County filmmaker who is "in" just about as deep as it gets, shooting documentaries about locals and the environment, and he is an enthusiastic proponent of the film festival.

"I hope they never give up," he said of the LIFF organizers.

Jarvis goes from spot to spot talking to true "Pineys," he explained, interested in topics such as the history of the grist mills on the Mullica River, Batsto, people who still make a living off the land, covering points of interest throughout all of South Jersey, really.

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"Sittin' the Wood" is a documentary he shot about the Ship Bottom Beach Patrol a few years back, and "Both Sides of Sandy" is a documentary about the local recovery process after the 2012 superstorm that rocked the Jersey shore and about the people who rallied to help others in need. He's currently looking for someone to edit it.

Another current project is a TV series about the Pines featuring the multi-talented Paul Evans Pedersen Jr.

Jarvis grew up in New York City and Connecticut in a show biz family, his dad a director and his mom an actress. When he was 15 he started acting and later transitioned to writing. "I never thought I'd be doing it from this side of the camera," he said. As it turns out, he's been making movies most of his adult life, including one with his dad called "A Working Forest," a documentary about sustainable forest management.

Each year, LIFF champions a selection of new, often unrecognized films from the U.S. and around the world for its competition and audience award categories, which screen alongside award-winning spotlight films from Sundance, Cannes, SXSW, Toronto and Tribeca – e.g., "The Tribe," "When Animals Dream," "Applesauce," "Hellion," "Appropriate Behavior," "Evolution of a Criminal," "This Time Next Year" and "Fort Tilden."

The festival also features a star-studded jury, which in 2015 included representatives from numerous prominent distributors and alumni filmmakers from past festivals.

Other alumni filmmakers were present at September's formal tea.

Sam Garland made the humorous fiction short "Ella at the Library," which showed at last year's festival, where she was impressed by "the willingness of this community to challenge themselves," she said. Garland studied film at Columbia University and has become interested in the different kinds of audiences, e.g. maybe 40 in the intimate festival setting, compared with 3,000 anonymous viewers online.

She's always enjoyed the episodic format and way of storytelling – she enjoys "falling in love with characters over time," she said – so now she is transitioning to web series. "Like a short film version of TV," she said, comprising videos that average five minutes in length, web series are a good way to learn TV arc, to grow reach and to build audience.



"It's the way of the future for film and a great format for me to practice," she said.

"Ella at the Library" tells the story of a life coach whose best friend steals her business and writes a best-selling book about it, resulting in the life coach's feelings of anger and betrayal, which has made her cynical, which influences the way she advises clients, which helps her achieve pathos along the way. The premise raises questions about the processes of grief and rage for women and how society accepts or rejects certain outlets for women to express those emotions.

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Acting was Garland's true motivation, though binge-watching helped her find her calling in writing, producing and starring in her own series. Now on each project she brings in collaborators with vision to pool talents and resources.

NYC's Eleanor Wilson also transitioned from acting to writing, directing and co-producing upon discovering "the community around independent film," she explained. Her film "Everything All at Once" won Best Short Film in the festival, starring Mary Anisi, an actress some might recognize from the TV series "Rectify;" it's now being shown on the cable television channel Sundance.

At the Neighborhood Playhouse she studied the Meisner Technique. She currently belongs to a peer mentor group called Film Fatales. Her work tends to be female-centric, she explained, underlain by themes of "the unbearable need for family," and mother-daughter relationships in particular. Her newest project centers on four women (though men will find it relatable too, she said).

Anybody can figure out "the technical stuff" of how to make a movie, she said. But these days, when the industry is experiencing "a return to story," a really good plot is what stands out.

Festivals open a lot of doors, and LIFF in particular, by allowing filmmakers to connect to an audience. Shorts are coming into their own, in Wilson's view; the short film occupies an amount of time just about everyone has available in a busy world full of tight schedules and short attention spans.

Actor-turned-writer/ director Tom Bentey's film "Flat Brim" was also a 2015 LIFF selection. At last year's festival, a guy who saw his film approached him afterward and proposed a collaboration, which turned into his next filmmaking endeavor. The film festival scene is "all about opportunities," Bentey said.

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Catherine Brabec's documentary "A Life Outside" was a 2014 LIFF Jury Award winner. Described as "a story of passion and obsession"; of friendships complicated by competition; of humans' connection with water and weather; and of "lessons learned from the ocean," about the power of nature and the power within us all to live courageously, fully and without compromise, "A Life Outside" focuses on the relationships of six New Jersey surfers who have been riding waves together for 50 years – "pioneering the surf break at the Casino Pier in Seaside Heights in the '60s, surfing freezing waters before wetsuits existed," caught up in a compulsion only surfers understand. Brabec visited Long Beach Island in November to attend a screening of her film at South End Surf 'N Paddle in Beach Haven, an LIFF-sponsored event held in conjunction with Small Business Saturday. She was then gracious enough to entertain a Q&A with O&A:

O&A: Where are you based?

CB: NYC.

O&A: What is your filmmaking background?

CB: I've been producing and directing commercials, television, web content for years now. "A Life Outside" is my first feature documentary.

O&A: What is your main focus/ message as a filmmaker?
My main focus is to tell a great story, and that starts with interesting characters. "A Life Outside" got underway because I was so pulled into the stories and passion of the New Jersey surfers featured in the film.

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O&A: In what locations have you shot?

CB: New Jersey, of course. We filmed a lot of the water/surf photography in Baja, Mexico. I traveled to the homes of the surf legends in the film – Oregon, California, Mexico.

O&A: How did it go at South End? What were the reactions to the film?

CB: It was a great screening and such a great setting for it! Several members of the New Jersey cast were there and joined me for the Q&A afterwards. Chris Mesanko owner of Thundering Surf Water Park in Beach Haven), Greg Mesanko, Jim Purpuri and Richard Luthringer were there. Very responsive audience; people seemed to really connect with the story.

O&A: What were some of the interesting points of discussion that came out of the Q&A?

CB: There were questions about the water cinematography; people are curious about how that was done, being in the water with cameras right at the break. Also, Hurricane Sandy plays a big role in the story, and there were questions about my timing with that. I was about finished with filming and ready to start the edit when the storm hit. It impacted the lives of the surfers, and so the filming continued for about another year. The story took on a whole new direction because of the storm.

O&A: Why is filmmaking an important art form?

CB: Such a big question, I don't know where to start! Films take us into other worlds, films teach us, films move us, make us laugh, outrage us. Films can change the way we perceive things. Films can change the world.

O&A: Why did you feel "A Life Outside" was an important film to make?

CB: I got caught up in the passion these guys have for surfing, and how that passion has not waned over so many years. I love stories about people following their dreams and staying true to who they are. I think the impact of the hurricane deepened the story and opened up other aspects of their characters to the story.

O&A: What are your thoughts on the film culture of Ocean County? And how does it compare to places like Philly, NYC, or anywhere else you've observed?

CB: There is a much more concentrated scene in NYC and LA, but there are great filmmakers everywhere. Working on my film allowed me to connect with other filmmakers, especially surf related filmmakers, in Ocean County. Very passionate talented people with a variety of stories to tell.

O&A: How well are you received/ accommodated in the communities where you shoot?

CB: Always well received. Shooting on location offers the opportunity to meet the locals and get a glimpse into their community. I love that part of filming.

O&A: What are some of the most rewarding and more challenging aspects of making movies?

CB: Money and time are the challenges – never enough of either! Weather can be challenging, too. Nothing like a rainy day when you had planned on a sun-filled day of exteriors. The rewards are many: creating beautiful imagery, telling a story that moves an audience is an intensely rewarding feeling.