

The Repeat Contender

Written by Mark Shaffer
Wednesday, 17 February 2010 20:20

John Schwab's glad to be back at BIFF

Last year John Schwab's entire family gathered in Beaufort to see his short feature, "The Applicant," take the trophy in its category at BIFF. This year John – who lives in England – once again makes the long hop across the pond, as his full-length feature film "The Hide" is in competition as a finalist. While he now makes his home in Old Blighty, John's an American military brat who spent part of his youth in Beaufort and can't wait to get back to the Lowcountry. He is just one of a number of filmmakers traversing oceans and continents to participate in this year's festival. We spanned the vast expanse of the Atlantic via email.



Mark Shaffer: Why travel such a distance and undertake such expense for this thing - what makes BIFF so special?

John Schwab: It's funny. As a producer, one is always looking to save money or find an excuse not to spend money. I know that sounds weird, but it's kind of the truth. We love to spend money, but we also hate to spend money. I could explain in detail but I would need more words than your magazine would allow. I'm absorbing the expense of international travel because I believe that any festival that has taken the time to watch your film and select it – whether it be a short film or a feature or a documentary – It's the filmmaker's duty (in my opinion) to support the film on that journey as best as they can. Film festivals rely not only on the support of the filmmakers but the audiences who turn out to watch the films. I live in London, but I think a flight across the Atlantic to Beaufort, South Carolina is a small price to pay to support "The Hide."

M.S. "The Hide" has already had some festival success.

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J.S. "The Hide" has had a great run on the festival circuit and we've tried to attend as many as possible. Obviously, the reality is that you cannot attend every one. For example, we premiered at the prestigious Dinard Film Festival in France which showcases the best of British cinema of that year. The following week we had our South American premiere at the Sao Paulo International Film Festival. It wasn't possible to attend them both, but we do honestly try. Now enough talk about money! And distance! I really wanted to go to Brazil!!!!

M.S. What was last year's experience like and was it what you expected?

J.S. It was my first time, and I can absolutely assure you that this year will not be my last. I think that Beaufort has an amazing cinematic history that is well worth supporting. I will continue to attend BIFF whether or not I have a film at the festival. I must say that I did have preconceptions about how the festival would be supported, knowing that it is a festival in its infancy and all that that entails. But Ron Tucker and his team put together a great festival last year. I was impressed with the amount of people attending the screenings of every film. I have been to film festivals around the major cities in England (and beyond) that haven't had as many people attending the screenings as Beaufort had last year.

M.S. Would your participation in something like BIFF influence your decision to shoot a film here someday should that possibility arise?

J.S. I was lucky enough to win the Best Short Film award last year. In my acceptance speech, I mentioned the fact that South Carolina didn't have incentives in place to attract local, nationwide and international projects to South Carolina, and that SC was losing out to its neighbors in the north. I am sure that the people of Beaufort know about their film heritage, but not many people outside of Beaufort do. When I tell people in England that I am going to Beaufort for their film festival, they always say "Beaufort? Where the hell is that?" I always tell them that it's where they have filmed some of the most memorable films of all time including "Prince of Tides," "The Big Chill," "Full Metal Jacket" and "Forrest Gump." Also, one of my favorite and most underrated films "The Great Santini." I would love to one day add to that list.

I am currently Exec Producing a film that I would love to film in and around Beaufort, and the producers and I have been looking at South Carolina, New Mexico and Texas as possible locations. South Carolina is looking the most attractive. And if anyone out there wants to talk

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about the project, you know where I will be on the weekend of the 17th of February! Script and budget available on request.

M.S. How did you find out about BIFF?

J.S. Last year I happened to stumble upon the fact that Beaufort had a film festival while submitting my short film "The Applicant" to various festivals via withoutabox (an invaluable tool for any independent filmmaker). The fact that I spent 3 years growing up in Beaufort, I thought it would be a great idea to submit to the BIFF.

M.S. What would you change about it?

J.S. It's hard to say what I would change about the festival. I think it's just about right for its size. Obviously, as the festival gets bigger, things would have to change logistically. I think at least feature films could be screened from their 35mm prints. I totally understand the logistics involved in getting 10-20 prints projected over 2 days, but it adds that much more prestige and glamour to the festival.

M.S. What would you absolutely not change?

J.S. I would absolutely not change the charm of the festival. Keeping it a smaller festival (at least for the next few years) is going to allow BIFF to show the filmmaking community what a small film festival can achieve. Beaufort is a stunning city in architecture, culture and people. The more people who come and sample the hospitality of the BIFF, the more people will return with future projects. Last year was such a great experience, and I immediately thought about submitting "The Hide" into this year's festival. We were in post-production at the time, but Ron Tucker, the festival director, mentioned it and I thought "Why not?" It's worth a shot. I'm glad I did, and there are five good finalists in the feature film section this year.

M.S. Aside from the festival itself, what are you most looking forward to during your time here?

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J.S. Aside from the festival, I am most looking forward to seeing my family. Or at least part of my family. My parents are coming in from Pensacola, Florida and my brother is coming in from Chicago. Sadly, my sisters aren't able to come this year. Last year the entire family drove through the night on Thursday (including my sister Kathy who drove from Austin!) just to get to Beaufort in time for the festival. And the FOOD!!!! I live in London but hail from the Deep South. So I seriously miss the food. Cornbread, sweet tea, fried catfish, fresh oysters, crab, a good steak (the English although great cattle raisers, haven't seemed to master a good steak!) pecan pie, shrimp gumbo... I'll stop, or I'll start sounding like Forrest Gump!

M.S. What's your best memory of last year's BIFF?

J.S. My best memory of the BIFF was watching my short film "The Applicant" in the cinema with my entire family. The Six of us hadn't been alone together for many, many years. So to spend those two days in each other's pockets was a real Godsend. We looked at our old schools, our old house, walked along the riverfront, visited the shops - just had the most wonderful time.

The one moment to maybe top that – in fact, it probably does... My parents lost their house in Hurricane Ivan. Many things were destroyed, memories collected from around the world in Dad's thirty years of military service. One thing that was lost was a painting of a flower lady (I believe) that Nancy Ricker Rhett painted. It was utterly precious to my mom. We went into her gallery and found a print of that same painting. While Mom and Dad were distracted, the kids pooled their money and bought the print. We gave it to them outside the gallery. Mom and Dad welled up with tears, then we did. Many hugs followed. That's what the Beaufort International Film Festival gave to me last year. And that's why I will be returning again and again.