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Beloit International Film Festival to cheer 10 years

By Ann Fiore

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The first Beloit International Film Festival opened Jan. 19, 2006, with a modest 80 films and a glimmer of hope that it would become an annual event.

That hope is brighter than ever as the fest enters its 10th year in 2015. BIFF has become not only an annual event, but one that has earned the respect of film festivals around the world.

The 2015 fest looks much different from its predecessor. It now stretches 10 days—Feb. 20 through March 1—and offers 200 films and various special events, including a Janesville sneak peek, a “Grease” sing-along and a block party celebrating the performing arts.

The festival’s website, beloitfilmfest.org, goes live Thursday, Jan. 1, with the 2015 lineup and tickets.

Short films are a focus this year, said Kristin Peterson, BIFF’s marketing and development director. The 2015 lineup includes 16 short slots—groups of short films—compared to 10 in 2014. Peterson’s own three-minute film, “DOG*WALK,” which was made in Janesville, will be shown Feb. 21 and 28.

Its inclusion in the lineup is special in more than one way.

“It’s kind of a birthday premiere for the two little girls,” Claudia Lasiowski and Tabitha McKay, who starred in it, Peterson said.

Peterson shared five other things to know about the 2015 BIFF:

- 1. Janesville preview.** Like last year, Janesville residents will get to see top BIFF films during a two-day screening Jan. 30-31 at the Ramada, 3900 Milton Ave. One special event will be a beach party by the indoor pool, complete with a screening of the 1965 film “Beach Blanket Bingo,” movie-themed cocktails and a sing-along.
- 2. Encore films.** Now that BIFF is 10 years old, it actually has a history. The fest will bring back 10 audience favorites from past years, including “The Lutefisk Wars,” a comedy about Norwegian mafia families; “Artois the Goat,” a goat cheese comedy; and the Wisconsin-centric documentaries “Fish Fry Milwaukee” and “Wisconsin Supper Clubs.”
- 3. “Block party of the century.”** BIFF will open Friday, Feb. 20, in downtown Beloit with a birthday block party that Peterson said pays homage to the humanities. The event will offer various performing arts acts, including a live performance of “Casablanca” by the JPAC Radio Players, a life-sized puppet show, a comedy mini-fest by Isthmus of Misfits, live music and more.
- 4. BIFF Cares.** This series screens socially important films and offers panels of experts to discuss them. The 2015 films are “Someone You Love: The HPV Epidemic,” a documentary about the cancer-causing human papillomavirus, and “The Starfish Throwers,” a documentary about three people who fight hunger in different ways.

“It’s a really inspiring, kind of call-to-action film,” Peterson said of “Starfish Throwers.”

Three of four screenings will include a panel of health experts who can answer questions, she said.

- 5. Wisconsin-Illinois Showdown.** The showdown, which debuted last year, highlighted work by regional filmmakers and brought in films such as “Date America,” an entertaining look at online dating that earned the best documentary award.

Word of the showdown has spread, and BIFF is offering 50 regional films and four short slots this year—nearly double last year’s lineup, Peterson said.

“We have seen so many more regional films—of higher quality—from so many people we weren’t aware of before,” she said.

Audiences should keep an eye out for the drama “Dig Two Graves” and the documentary “Food Patriots.”