



The 21st Garden State Film Festival Transcript

Story by Christopher Benincasa

Chris Benincasa ([00:01](#)):

This is Christopher Benincasa for the Jersey Arts Podcast. This year's Garden State Film Festival kicks off Thursday, March 23rd, and will be serving up a four-day weekend of more independent films and one-of-a-kind events than even the most diehard moviegoer could take in. Since the first festival in 2003, GSFF has provided opportunities for aspiring filmmakers and actors to network with industry pros and have their work showcased in one of the country's most iconic cities – New Jersey's Asbury Park. We recently spoke with Garden State Film Festival's Executive Director Lauren Concar, Festival Founder Diane Raver, Associate Director of the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Commission David Schoner, New Jersey PBS's Debra Falk, Award-winning Screenwriter Kelly Byrne, and Garden State Film Festival Host Sophia Lucia. Here's what they had to say:

OK, we've got *six* guests today – all excited to talk about this year's Garden State Film Festival. Let's do a round of introductions.

Lauren Concar ([00:55](#)):

Hi, I'm Lauren Concar. I am the Executive Director of the Garden State Film Festival and I'm so excited. This is our 21st year, and I have been involved each year.

Diane Raver ([01:07](#)):

Hi, I'm Diane Raver. I'm the founder of the Garden State Film Festival and I am just so grateful for these past 22 years to be able to present such wonderful content to our attendees. People come from all over the world. It's really been a great blessing to be associated with so many fine artists.

Debra Falk ([01:31](#)):

I'm Deb Falk. I'm Communications Director for NJ PBS, the Public Television Network of New Jersey. We're longtime partners with the Garden State Film Festival, although compared to some of your relationships slightly shorter, I think only up to 10 or 11 years now. Right, Diane?

PRESENTED BY ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



Diane Raver ([01:48](#)):

I think it might be 15, but let's, um, don't quote me on that.

Debra Falk ([01:53](#)):

Well, we've been around since 2011, so it's been it's been a long time.

Kelly Byrne ([02:00](#)):

Hi, my name is Kelly Byrne. I'm a writer living out in Los Angeles. I'm from Princeton, New Jersey though. So originally a Jersey girl.

David Schoner ([02:08](#)):

And you're also the winner of the Garden State Film Festival Screenwriting Competition!

Kelly Byrne ([02:11](#)):

And I'm also the winner of the Garden State Film Festival Screenwriting Competition! It's early here still. I'm sorry.

David Schoner ([02:22](#)):

So, my name is David Schoner. I am the Associate Director of the New Jersey Motion Picture and Television Commission. I am also the Chair of the Garden State Film Festival, Screenplay Competition. And I have a relationship with Diane Raver like Lauren does. We go back, uh, 21 years, 22 years actually. So, uh, long history with the festival and Diane.

Chris Benincasa ([02:46](#)):

And last but not least, Sophia.

Sophia Lucia ([02:48](#)):

Hi, I'm Sophia Lucia Perla, and I am one of the hosts for Garden State Film Festival. I joined in either 2015 or 2016. I love everyone who runs it. All these people in the room I respect greatly, so I'm just honored to be here.

Chris Benincasa ([03:05](#)):

Lauren, let's start with you. Could you sort of take us there to Asbury Park during the Garden State Film Festival weekend?

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



Lauren Concar ([03:11](#)):

We really have something for everyone. We're in Asbury Park, we take over the city and we also are in Cranford, New Jersey. So it's not just Asbury Park, but it's so much fun. This year we have nine venues, four days and over 237 films. So this year we're March 23rd to the 26th. On Thursday we have Meet the Filmmaker, which is a preview event and a lot of people are confused. Sometimes they think it's not open to the public, but we are open to the public and the filmmakers are there so that you can talk with them, find out, you know, what inspired you to make that movie. We have a cocktail hour and then we watch about an hour's worth of trailers. And then Friday is our special star-studded red carpet gala and we fill the Asbury leaned once again. Um, we have a cocktail party and then we have a short, and then an amazing feature called the Baker starring Harvey Kittel and Ron Pearlman, um, among others. And it's just great Saturday and Sunday. I hope you put your comfortable shoes on because we have films all over in Asbury Park and Cranford and it's just, uh, really exciting and we are listening to our audience. And this year we're in person only. There is no virtual component. The filmmakers and the audience, they want that real festival experience and we are giving it to them.

Chris Benincasa ([04:34](#)):

That's great. It's so nice to see film festivals coming back. Diane, you are one of the co-founders of this festival. Tell us how and why the Garden State Film Festival was created.

Diane Raver ([04:43](#)):

So first of all, before there was a festival, I had, um, more years than I cared to admit to in the business. I was the first woman president of a commercial production company in New York. And, um, we had the great opportunity, my family, to live in the south of France for a year. And while I was there, the ladies at the International School took me down to Cannes for coffee. And as I was looking over at the amphitheater, it occurred to me that New Jersey, where Edison invented the film camera and where the first movie studios were, didn't have an all-encompassing event. Well, it was like, like it kept floating around in my head. And when we came home, I had a chance encounter with the actor Robert Pastorelli in the Sea Girt Food Town. And I pitched the idea to him and he said, well, that's a great idea, Mrs. Raver, why don't you do it? So here we are 22 years later, um, with, you know, the largest film of event in the state of New Jersey, which we're very proud of. But again, um, it was an idea whose time had come and it just required a lot of work and a lot of tenacity and the great help from so many people - hundreds and hundreds of volunteers over the last 21 years. So thank you to all of them.

Chris Benincasa ([06:03](#)):

I think it's so cool that Asbury Park is the home of this festival. So much history there, so much culture

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



there. So much music, good food, so much Springsteen. It's like you're having a film festival on a film set. David, as a film person, what can you tell us about this location?

David Schoner ([06:19](#)):

Well, I have to tell you, it's actually electric. That's the phraseology I would use. It's actually electric, you know, everyone being at nine venues all over Asbury Park, you're constantly interacting, interfacing, and meeting different filmmakers and different people who love cinema and love independent cinema. And that's one of the great things that, you know, Garden State does really well, is they nurture that, that independent filmmaker, the, you know, you become part of the family. And so it is absolutely electric in a way that, uh, it's very tactile. You can feel the energy. And I'm not just saying that - it's amazing.

Chris Benincasa ([06:58](#)):

So, Sophia, as one of the hosts of the festival, what does the Garden State Film Festival weekend mean to you?

Sophia Lucia ([07:05](#)):

Oh my gosh. It is a party. It's going home, it's networking. I mean, on top of hosting, I'm also an actress and I've met some amazing people at the film festival that I've worked with. Someone I interviewed last year, Daniel Myers and Brian May, they cast me in their film this year - Glass Eyes - at a screening at the festival. I'm also in three other films that are at the film festival. So it's like a wonderful networking event. You make collaborations, you make friends, you get inspired and you meet wonderful people. It's so much fun being an Asbury, being able to eat and drink and watch movies and be with such creative people - the environment is just amazing. Everyone I talk to loves this film festival and I'm so excited to be there this year because there's great people coming.

Chris Benincasa ([07:51](#)):

Turning now to Deborah Falk from New Jersey PBS. Deb, I spent a lot of my career working in PBS world, and I think it's so great that New Jersey's PBS station has partnered with the Garden State Film Festival. Could you talk about that connection?

Debra Falk ([08:03](#)):

Well, you know, all of us who were speaking this morning know that Diane is very convincing <laugh>. Uh, so that's how it all started. It started with the conversation. Um, but to be, to be perfectly serious, our missions align. Both the film festival and NJ PBS seek to give our communities content that educates, enlightens and engages. And we are on the same page. So we, it's been a terrific partnership over the years. Uh, a little bit cross promotion happens there, but also this year we have a special extra layer to

PRESENTED BY  Arttride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the ARTS
arts.gov



that because we actually have some of our content being featured. We have a digital short film series that's going to make its debut at Garden State Film Festival this year called 21 that looks at changemakers around the Garden State, one per county.

Chris Benincasa ([08:59](#)):

That's great. I'm glad that partnership exists. Um, you know, David, since you mentioned Kelly's Award, could you sort of, uh, introduce her and tell us about that award and that award program?

David Schoner ([09:11](#)):

Well, the great thing is, yes, so the Garden State Film Festival has a screenplay competition - we have two, we have one for short content and one for feature lengths. And every year we're really diligent with reading the content. We have eight readers that are in the industry and read the content very carefully. And at the end of the day, uh, there is one script - Kelly's - that all the eight readers loved that was an absolute standout. And, uh, it's a really sweet story. I'm not gonna steal her thunder, I'll let her talk about it. But, uh, but it's really deserving. And Kelly actually, prior to this year, was one of our readers for the screenplay competition for, uh, several years. And so this year she completed, uh, this wonderful little script and, uh, I'm gonna let her, you know, tell you about it.

Kelly Byrne ([10:03](#)):

So, like David was saying, I used to read for the Garden State Film Festival and I had such a great time doing it. And, um, I've been a writer. I, I started writing when I was like 16, that's when I realized that people write things for tv. It doesn't just happen on TV unscripted all the time. I was like, you know, I'm gonna try my hand at creating something. So, during the pandemic actually, I was working on set in New York City for an NBC show. And we went down and I went home to New Jersey. And, um, I was like, okay, well I'm gonna fill my day with making up stories about where I wanna be, and where I can't go right now?

([10:51](#)): And, um, you know, what makes me feel good during kind of a dark and scary time. And, uh, for me the answer was summer camp. Um, I have a lot of really great memories of summer camp on the East coast, and, um, I was like, well we've, what kind of story haven't we really seen yet in a summer camp movie? Um, and so I decided to write a story about a kid who's like kind of a dork in school. But not like a good dork either. Like, he doesn't get good grades, he's kind of all over the place <laugh>, like, but he is a spunky kid who we - he is interesting and we wanna follow him. And, um, we immediately go with him to his summer camp world where you quickly realize like, oh, well this is where he is, like the popular guy. Like what is it about him that makes him like such a nerd at school, but really successful with a group of totally wack kids at summer camp for the next 10 weeks of his life. It's called Curly's

PRESENTED BY



Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).





Camp for Girls and Boys, um, which I should have led with <laugh>. But, um, <laugh> here we are four minutes later...

David Schoner ([11:58](#)):

We're gonna be your promotional team from now on. So between Diane, Lauren, and myself we're gonna take care of your promotion.

Kelly Byrne ([12:09](#)):

It's funny, I'm, uh, I know I'm a rambler, but I'm really, really tight on a page, and that's the <laugh> that's the difference in my head - left brain, right brain.

Chris Benincasa ([12:19](#)):

So, um, are, are you taking the next steps with this to get it produced?

Kelly Byrne ([12:24](#)):

Um, so I'm actually in the Peter Stark producing program at USC, which is why I'm in Los Angeles. Um, and I'm very interested in being a writer producer. In fact, last night we had, uh, an investor's pitch, um, and my classmate, um, pitched my film. We all had a choice of, uh, how to, like what scripts we wanted to get things that were unproduced but were of a caliber that you could take them right now and and go rack up a crew and get going. Um, so we're, you know, we're actually just on standby for that.

Diane Raver ([12:59](#)):

Part of the reason that we give the winning feature screenplay a reading is to, is to get, uh, you know, we've had many of the scripts produced because that's their venue for inviting people to the table read to see what it is and to help it get started. And we've been very successful in helping a lot of, um, screenplay writers with that over many years. And what I love is all of the readers, they do not have a cover page. They have no idea who wrote it. So they're reading everything, you know, blind, they have no idea who wrote any of them, which I really love. And at the table read it's professional actors that are reading this, the things, it's not just, you know, somebody's cousin, uncle, or brother. It's real pros and it's really a marvelous thing. We'd like to invite everybody to it. It's Sunday, the 26th of March at...

Lauren Concar ([13:55](#)):

The Oval Room in the Berkeley Ocean Front Hotel in Asbury Park.

Diane Raver ([14:00](#)):

What time, Lauren?

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the [New Jersey State Council on the Arts](#). Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#).



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the **ARTS**
arts.gov



Lauren Concar ([14:01](#)):

Oh, you know, in the morning. <laugh> It is at 10:00 AM to 11:30 Sunday March 26th.

Diane Raver ([14:20](#)):

One of the things that I am most proud of over the years that we accomplish every year is that we're on the front line of freedom of speech and expression in this country. We present different points of view from all over the world. It's really lovely. We embrace all ethnic cultures. We embrace all ADA situations. It's really a warm and fuzzy, uh, feeling – that what we present is so important. It's of course entertainment, but it's more than that - it's important.

Chris Benincasa ([14:59](#)):

Lauren, let's end with you. What else do people need to know about this year's Garden State Film Festival?

Lauren Concar ([15:04](#)):

You need to come because it's so exciting. Not only do we have over 237 films, we have a panel Saturday morning from 9:30 to 10:30 on March 25th, called Behind the Lens with Ron Vior. He is an award-winning cinematographer and you can't miss that. We also have a filmmaker breakfast Saturday morning from 8 to 9:30. It's open to the public. We stop everything to have everyone come together for a happy hour in the Berkeley Oceanfront Hotel in the Johnny and June room from 5 to 5:45. Everyone really loves coming together. So we stop all the movies so that we can do that. We have live podcasts with me from a shared universe going on nonstop before the festival and onsite live during the festival. And it's really amazing. We end everything with the black tie optional Awards Banquet Sunday, March 26th from 6:30 to 10:30. Tickets for that really sell out fast.

([16:07](#)): And we don't just say that. They're already almost sold out. So it's very exciting. You can go to our website, gsf.f.org, you can search Listings at a Glance, which shows you the whole big picture view of all of the films. And we always have ADA-compliant venues as well, and we always let you know when there are films with subtitles. We always have at least one entire subtitle film block. And this year there's an amazing film called Power Olympian. It's playing Sunday, March 26th at the Berkeley Kingsley Ballroom. And we're live humans. When you call us and email us, we get right back to you. So we're super excited for you to join us, and I don't know if you're aware, but in 2020 we were the first and only festival in the world to not cancel, and pivot in just 11 days and go to virtual.

([16:59](#)): So it's that spirit of not stopping - the show must go on. And, you know, each year we fulfill our obligation to our legions of fans, our sponsors who we can't thank enough and all of our volunteers and crew. And we're super excited because we do this for you. And I drank the Kool-Aid 22 years ago from

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the ARTS
arts.gov



Diane Raver, and we're super excited, and Brookdale Community College is one of our sponsors. We're so excited because we always involve the students there. Sophia is a former Brookdale student. Amazing. And we're just really excited. We can't believe it's already March and it's gonna be here soon. And we look forward to seeing you with us in Asbury Park and Cranford, New Jersey. And book your hotel rooms now because they sell out as well.

Chris Benincasa ([17:45](#)):

Okay. Lauren Concord, Diane Raver, David Schoner, Deborah Falk, Kelly Byrne, and Sophia Lucia. Thank you all for doing the podcast.

Lauren Concar, Diane Raver, David Schoner, Debra Falk, Kelly Byrne, Sophia Lucia ([17:53](#)):

Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Break a leg with the festival. <laugh> Garden State Film Festival! Woo hooo! See you there!

Chris Benincasa ([18:03](#)):

The 21st Garden State Film Festival will take place Thursday, March 23 through Sunday, March 26.

For more information – and tickets – go to gsff.org.

If you liked this episode, be sure to review, subscribe, and tell your friends.

A transcript of this podcast, links relevant to the story, and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found at: JerseyArts.com.

The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey: Advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on Arts, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

This episode was hosted, and produced, by Chris Benincasa. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud.

I'm Chris Benincasa for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

PRESENTED BY  ArtPride
NEW JERSEY

Discover Jersey Arts is presented by ArtPride New Jersey. The program was co-founded by, and is currently supported by funds from, the New Jersey State Council on the Arts. Additional support for JerseyArts.com content is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts.



NATIONAL
ENDOWMENT
for the ARTS
arts.gov