



Ready for Our Close-Up

For more than 60 years, Oxford and its environs have graced the silver screen

By Dicki King



In 1949, the Oxford Square set the scene for *Intruder in the Dust*. Above, crews film on the east side of the Square, just in front of Neilson's. Right, Brazilian actor Juano Hernandez talks with locals between scenes on the Square. Unlike the white actors in the film, Hernandez could not stay in local hotels at the time; black families in Oxford hosted him in their homes. Photos provided by the Patricia Young Collection.

When William Faulkner wrote about his “little postage stamp of soil,” he probably did not envision the close association this hill country would develop with Hollywood. From its cinematic debut in 1949 with *Intruder in the Dust*, Oxford has been a familiar backdrop for many films shot in the South.

INTRUDER IN THE DUST

Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* had been published only a year earlier when director Clarence Brown brought a whole movie crew to film on location in Oxford.

Barrett Kiesling of MGM's publicity department said in the *Oxford Eagle* that the film was “an exciting experiment in super-realism. This production is the first ever made 90 percent on location – exteriors and interiors.”

Recognized by many as film noir, the film was dark – black-and-white literally and figuratively. Phillip Bryant, a child actor in the important crowd scene, says that most local movie extras probably did not realize the full depth of the movie, certainly not its direct treatment of racism.



Juano Hernandez, a Brazilian actor who played Lucas Beauchamp, the proud black farmer accused of a white man's murder, found that he could neither eat at local white restaurants nor stay at the local hotels with white cast and crew. He had to stay in the homes of Oxford's black residents.

From the angry crowd scene on the Square to country stores in College Hill,

the movie is full of familiar images, even for people who only came to know Oxford in the last few years.

Two local churches were filmed: St. Peter's Episcopal for exterior shots and Oxford-University United Methodist Church for interiors. Parks Barber Shop appears much as it really was for a short comedic relief scene. The home of Thomas Windom on South Lamar Boulevard and the upstairs of Rooster's Blues House (then Sneed's Hardware) on the Square were all used in the movie. Mayor R.X. Williams spoke several lines, altered to sound high-pitched and whiny. He also owned a farm used for some settings, as were the nearby national forest and a cemetery.

Faulkner himself was seen at many of the filming locations, said T.C. Smith, who was the teenage stand-in and double for Claude Jarman Jr., who played Chick. He remembered that the author talked mostly with the director Brown.

HOME FROM THE HILL

In 1959, the cast and crew of *Home from the Hill* arrived, and Oxford became a small Texas town. Mansions on North Lamar Boulevard were used for some scenes. Blaylock's drugstore became countrified with a screen door that slapped shut and a drop ceiling fan, long after most Oxford stores had been air-conditioned. Like *Intruder*, reality was reality enhanced.

When David Nelson was asked if his North Lamar Boulevard mansion could be used for lead character Wade Hunnicutt's home (played by Robert Mitchum), he reluctantly agreed but wanted no payment. The studio insisted, so Nelson asked for \$2.

That check, according to Pat Tatum, who later grew up in the home, still hangs on the study's wall. The house appears in exterior shots in the film, with interior scenes shot later on a Hollywood soundstage.

Mitchum, George Peppard and George Hamilton were in town for filming. Though each would later star in iconic films as romantic leads, neither Peppard nor Hamilton were well known then. Hamilton was mobbed in the halls of University High School by girls who thought he was Anthony Perkins. He hid in the principal's office and slipped autographs through the mail slot. These teenage recipients wondered, "Who is this George Hamilton?"

Directed by Liza Minnelli's father, Vincente Minnelli, *Home from the Hill* was praised by critics, who called it "one of the finest examples of Western melodrama."

HEART OF DIXIE

Heart of Dixie was filmed in Oxford and Holly Springs in the late 1980s. Adapted from a novel by Anne Rivers Siddons, it depicted 1950s sorority girls at Alabama's Randolph University against a backdrop of growing civil rights unrest.

Oxford and the University of Mississippi served as a stand-in for the small Alabama college, and locals auditioned to act alongside Brat Pack stars Ally Sheedy, Phoebe Cates and Treat Williams.

Oxonian Barbara West was a teenager in 1959 when her family's home on North Lamar Boulevard (now owned by Tom Davis) was used to film scenes in *Home from the Hill*. During filming, West became friendly with stars George Hamilton (below, with West) and Luana Patton, who were both teenagers themselves. Photos provided by Barbara West.



Anne Dye Haire, who grew up in Oxford, dreamed of being a movie star. She auditioned but thought she had blown her interview for a part. "I just went home and cried," she said. "Then I got the part."

Haire played Cornelia, a part with eight speaking lines.

Critics panned the movie, nominating Sheedy for a Razzie for worst actress.

THE GUN IN BETTY LOU'S HANDBAG

1992's *The Gun in Betty Lou's Handbag* starred Penelope Ann Miller, who was later nominated for a Golden Globe, Julianne Moore, who has since been nominated for four Oscars, and Alfre Woodard, who had already been nominated for an Oscar at the time of filming and has won several Emmys.

During filming, Oxonian Mary Ann Britt answered a knock at the door to find Hollywood calling.



The University of Mississippi's iconic Lyceum becomes Randolph University in 1989's *Heart of Dixie*. Filming the movie attracted large crowds in Oxford, but that didn't translate to box-office success. Photos by Carra Hewitt.



Her former residence on South Lamar Boulevard was chosen for the interior scenes of Betty Lou's home.

"They came in and changed the downstairs rooms, even the wallpaper," Britt said. "We had to stay upstairs, and our house had to be on call at a moment's notice."

The crew even filmed in the middle of the night. After filming was over, the interior of the house was repainted; even the wallpaper was restored to its original pattern.

The movie, filmed in Oxford and Greenville, was universally panned for its clumsy juxtaposition of humor and violent murder. The *Washington Post* said: "It's a bit like finding a severed head in an Easter basket."

THE PEOPLE VS. LARRY FLYNT

The controversial 1996 movie that chronicles the attempt to rein in the excesses of *Hustler* magazine was filmed predominantly in Memphis.

Local actor Johnny McPhail traveled to Memphis for a casting call only to return disappointed. He was running errands, standing in line at the Courthouse back in Oxford, when he struck up a conversation with a woman who turned out to be the location

manager for the film, scouting Oxford's Courthouse for a scene. McPhail got a part after all.

The movie crew arrived in town at dusk. Exterior shots were filmed at the Courthouse in only five nights with little interaction with locals. Except, of course, for McPhail, who played a reporter who was standing by Woody Harrelson (as Larry Flynt) when he was shot.

COOKIE'S FORTUNE

Filmed in the late 1990s and set in Holly Springs, *Cookie's Fortune* is an atmospheric Southern mystery directed by Robert Altman. The acclaimed film featured Glenn Close, Julianne Moore, Charles S. Dutton, Chris O'Donnell, Patricia Neal, Liv Tyler, Courtney B. Vance, Ned Beatty and musicians Lyle Lovett, Rufus Thomas and Ruby Wilson.

Besides Thomas, a Memphis soul legend, the most important link for the movie to Oxford is with the movie's screenwriter, Anne Rapp. Earlier, while working on the script for the movie version of *The Firm* by John Grisham, she became interested in Faulkner's Oxford.

Rapp actually moved to Oxford, took creative writing courses from Barry Hannah, taught creative

writing herself and ended up staying in Oxford for two and a half years.

BIG BAD LOVE

Like Faulkner before him, Larry Brown examined his native Lafayette soil. His collection of short stories called *Big Bad Love* was adapted into the movie of the same name.

Filmed in 2000, *Big Bad Love* brought Debra Winger, Patricia Arquette, Angie Dickinson and Arliss Howard, who also directed the film, to Oxford. Set in rural Lafayette County, Red Banks and Holly Springs, the film focuses on the life of a struggling writer.

Many locals appeared in the film, either in credited roles like McPhail and Larry Brown himself, or in crowd scenes (look closely to see former Mayor Richard Howorth). Local musicians Kenny Brown, Cedric Burnside and the late R.L. Burnside appeared in a juke joint scene.

Love premiered in Oxford, at Fulton Chapel on the Ole Miss campus.

SMALL FILMS

Several smaller films have been made in Oxford. *Barn Burning*, based on a Faulkner short story, was filmed in 1980 for the *American Short Story Collection*. It starred Tommy Lee Jones, and in the cast were Jimmy Faulkner, William's brother, and Julie Kaye Fanton, a set designer also from Oxford.

The Bear, another Faulkner story, was filmed at a nearby farm. Starring in this *American Short Story Collection* edition were Jimmy Faulkner; Chooky Falkner, William's nephew; and James Webb, then-chairman of the English department at Ole Miss.

In recent years, thanks to more widely available movie-making technology, small, independent filmmakers – many of them local – have blossomed.

But these movies aren't small-time, appearing at regional film festivals. Small movies filmed in this area include: *Glorious Mail*, *Nightshade*, *Southern Gothic*, *Overhearing Ron*, *Double Decker Confidential*, *Night of the Loup Garou* and several others.

FULL CIRCLE

And now, 60 years later, there's talk of remaking *Intruder in the Dust*. Mary-Kathryn Milner of the Oxford Tourism Council says a production company is gathering funding and scouting locations around Oxford for the project. Hollywood is not yet done with our "postage stamp of soil."