

RADIO / TELEVISION

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**'Amateur Night'
is a real pro job**

By TOM TOPOR

WHEN FRANK L. RIZZO was elected mayor of Philadelphia in 1971, the city's liberals, an alarmist bunch, predicted that a right-wing reign of terror was on the horizon.

Rizzo, who came from a white working-class section of the city, had been elected as a straight law-and-order candidate — starting as a policeman, he had worked his way up to commissioner by speaking loudly and brandishing a big nightstick — and he made polite Philadelphia cringe.

Things did not turn out quite the way Philadelphia expected. Though Rizzo occasionally acted like a minor-league tyrant — he once had a group of Black Panthers stripped in the street and his police department was very quick to arrest any kind of demonstrator — most of the time he behaved like an *opera buffa* villain.

On Sunday night at 8, Ch. 13 will air a documentary called *Rizzo* that perfectly captures this quality of the mayor — his knack for turning politics into show business.

Directed by Robert Mugge and produced by Heidi Neumann Trombert — they both live in Philadelphia — the 60-minute movie is an edited version of a 75-minute feature called, more appropriately, *Amateur Night at City Hall*.

The filmmakers have used a simple — but dazzling — framing device to pull together all the disparate elements of Rizzo's personality: they have intercut footage of the mayor (and his opponents) with scenes from performances by amateurs at the Triangle Tavern, a well-known bar in South Philadelphia, Rizzo's political and emotional base.

They also introduce each sequence with title cards, reading, "The Lure of the Footlights," "Building an Audience," "The Big Break" and "The Show Must Go On." Once in a while this device gets a little forced — one title called "A Secret Romance" implies that Rizzo and the Philadelphia business community were clandestine partners but the sequence doesn't show this.

Moreover, perhaps because of the 15 minutes of cut footage, the show business metaphor tends to make too much joke of Rizzo. Buffoon or not, his actions, unlike the actions of most performers, had real effects — people were hurt, jobs were lost, lives were changed.

The history of the film is interesting in itself. Trombert and Mugge managed

to raise about \$65,000 to make the movie, but City Hall and Rizzo refused to be part of it. Almost all the shots of the mayor are footage borrowed from TV files.

Once the movie was made, the filmmakers had a very hard time getting a theater in Philadelphia to show it; they finally wound up renting a theater — and opened during a blizzard. In Trombert's words, "We were a big flop."

Once the film was sold to PBS, the Philadelphia public TV station busied itself trying to keep the film off the air. As of today, the station, WHYY, intends to show the film — but it has warned Philadelphians that it might schedule either a commentary or a Rizzo-backed movie about the mayor.

(The Philadelphia edition of TV guide lists the program but does not emphasize it in a Closeup, an odd editorial choice for a documentary about a city's mayor.)

According to both Mugge and Trombert, neither supporters nor oppo-

nents of Rizzo are pleased with the movie, which is understandable since the filmmakers have given their central character his due. If at times Rizzo comes across as a clown, he projects such vitality, such reality, that he never comes across as less — or more — than human.

His enemies, on the other hand, seem all too typical of what the working class detests about liberals — their concerns seem to be abstract and totally removed from everyday experience; they come across as prissy, fussy and gelded.

In its original form, the movie won the top award given in the documentary category at the 1978 Chicago Film Festival.

Most people who watch Philadelphia politics seem to believe that the rule of Rizzo is over — officially his term is up next January and his effort to get the charter changed so he could run again failed dimly.

Rizzo neatly shows the mayor's turn on the stage, and, unlike the man himself, the movie is a class act.



Mayor Frank Rizzo of Philadelphia: Sunday night's show on Ch. 13. portrays him realistically.