

FRANK RIZZO ON FILM

A New Movie About Your Favorite Mayor

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Way back in 1971, when Frank Rizzo was first elected mayor, many of the "progressive" political elements in this city felt that the Big Bambino's victory meant the Fascist State was right around the corner. At the time this wasn't considered idle paranoid speculation, but legitimate fear grounded in fact, based on the past performance of the former police commissioner. After all, here was a man who had made himself a local, even national, reputation by being the toughest of all tough cops, a man who, even as commissioner, personally led police charges and was responsible for the harassment of "hippies," coffee houses, and black students. Rizzo seemed to represent the flag-waving, anti-black, pro-Vietnam law and order movement at its worst, and that scared an awful lot of people.

Looking back now those fears seem a bit ridiculous, for even though the Riz is still our mayor, he has proven himself in the ensuing seven years to be more of a political bullyboy a la the posturing Benito Mussolini than a real heavy-duty fascist creep, like the crop of generals who now run Chile. Sure, he's done some major league fascist things — arresting the July 4th demonstrators, stripping the Panthers naked in the street, among others — but mostly his administration has been the corrupt and strangulatingly over-

patronized kind, like Daley used to run in Chicago. In fact, Lincoln Steffens' description of Philadelphia (from his great investigative work "The Shame of the Cities") as "corrupt and contented" is as true today as when it was written in 1903.

But beyond bullyboy and head of a smoothly running big city political machine, you can also relate to Rizzo on the level of clown and cheap entertainer. It takes a sense of Dada in your soul, but like Idi Amin, who is a treacherous murderer but also a cartoon image of world politics, Rizzo has often done such unbelievable things they can only be seen as bad show business.

How else do you explain the famous lie detector incident, or the request for 15,000 federal troops on July 4th, '76 (a move I don't think even Nixon would have made) or the neo-Roman mansion, or best of all, the Riz and Blaze Starr.

Las Vegas lounge act cross-pollinate with South Philly (or are they one and the same?), and there you have it: The One, The Only, The Riz!!

Or call it *Amateur Night At City Hall*, which also happens to be the title of a new feature length documentary about Rizzo, made by two local young filmmakers, which opens at the Walnut Mall Cinema beginning February 8th. The 75 minute color film, which is also booked into theaters in New York and Washington,

D.C., is not only a very professionally put together documentary about Rizzo's career, but an attempt to relate the man and his "style" to the kind of cheap, third-rate entertainer that South Philly has been turning out for years.

The filmmakers, director Robert Mugge and producer Heidi Trombert, have successfully accomplished their task by use of a number of special devices that run throughout the feature, interspersed with newsreel footage and interviews with the likes of Cianfrani, Clark, Camiel, the Inquirer's Michael Pakenham, Longstreth, etc. The first of these "shticks" is the use of footage from last year's Mummer's parade and an amateur night at the Triangle Tavern, a famous eating and drinking place in the heart of Rizzoland. These scenes point out the chintz nature of things, and provide a humorous overlay that is reinforced by the frequent use of title cards that provide an outline for a "B" melodrama about show business.

The cards, which introduce specific sections of the film, bear notations like "The Lure of the Footlights," "Developing A Character," "Building An Audience," "The Big Break," etc. Far from being simple humorous punctuation marks, they actually describe a specific part of the Riz' career. The footage which follows each title focuses on the part of the Rizzo story. "Critic's Choice," for instance, introduces a short section that discusses Rizzo's relationship with the press, from the days when he brought almost every newspaperman he knew into his administration, to those when he refused to hold formal news conferences for years at a time. "Playing the Palace" talks about Rizzo's entrance onto the national political scene and his love affair with Nixon; "Family Entertainment" delves into the Joe Rizzo connection, the Bambino's outrageous house, and patronage; and so on, and so on.

What all this does is to help the movie work on two levels: as a well-researched and very professionally put together piece of film journalism, and as a kind of tongue-in-cheek interpretation-assessment of Rizzo's career. If this sounds like a difficult combination to carry off, have no fear: Mugge and Trombert have done a good job of it, so much so that quite a few of Rizzo's bon mots evoke instant hilarity — the kind of laughter at the absurd that occurs when a terrible entertainer makes a bad joke. This combination of the serious and the silly makes for an interesting viewing experience.

Amateur Night At City Hall cost \$60,000 to make, and is the creation of two talented and ambitious young artists. Mugge is a native of the Washington, D.C. area who went to graduate film school at Temple and already has one major production under his belt — a documentary about the composer George Crumb that will be shown on PBS this spring. Trombert is a Connecticut native who has been a resident here for 10 years, and has a background in film as a writer and assistant production manager.

The duo met at a preview screening for Mugge's first film, and decided to collaborate on the current project because, says Bob, "it was something we felt we could both raise money on, and we were both interested in the topic." The basic structural idea came primarily from Mugge, who lives in South Philly, occasionally frequents the Triangle, and had been thinking about the cheap show business aspects of the area for quite some time.

"But," he says, "we also intended it as a sort of heroic myth, the idea of the man of the people who risks death for the people,

and is rewarded for doing so, even though he may let them down eventually."

"There's the other side to the character though," adds Heidi, "if he fails, the people see their own failures as justifiable; he's heroic, but has human frailties that people identify with."

But enough of assessment. Even though *Amateur Night at City Hall* has its share of problems — and what film doesn't — it's still a tight, professional piece of work, one that should be enjoyed, but by whom? Documentaries aren't exactly the hottest properties at the boxoffice these days, and Frank Rizzo's is not quite the most glamorous tale to hit the silver screen, so it would appear that distribution could be a major problem.

Mugge and Trombert have, as you would expect, a lot of hope for this film, and they're also doing something, at least in this city, which might be unique in the annals of documentary distribution: they're "four-walling" it. Which means that they're renting the Walnut Mall on a weekly basis at a fixed rate; unlike most distribution patterns, where the studio or filmmaker gets approximately 90 percent of the gross receipts after the theatre owner has first taken out his weekly "nut" (expenses like salaries, etc.). Four-walling means that once the rental fee is paid to the theater, all receipts go to the filmmaker. This system, first perfected by those outfits that gave you films like *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*, can, of course, cut both ways: if the film is a smash, everything you take in beyond the weekly rental is yours; if it flops, you're not only down your production costs, but your rental also.

Trombert and Mugge feel that "four-walling" can make them more money, and point to the fact that because their film cost so little, they don't have to take in millions to make a profit. They further add that recent "personality" documentaries such as *Pumping Iron*, *Idi Amin Dada* and *Homage to Chagall* managed to find their audience, so why shouldn't theirs?

Why not indeed, but the business is still a tricky one, and the question remains as to why the duo preferred to initially go the theatrical, rather than TV, route.

"We don't want something just thrown on TV," responds Mugge, to which Heidi adds that "if you want to put something on TV, there are a lot of political concerns involved. Besides, I prefer the theatrical experience anyway."

So do most of us, but that doesn't stop the entertaining of honest doubts as to where an audience will come from. It's not a concern as to whether people recognize who Rizzo is — he's known and laughed at around the country — but whether they'll be willing to plunk down some money to see a very professional film about an unprofessional clown. And is the Riz' own city a proper testing ground? If it bombs here, will it do the same all over, and if it packs 'em in, what about in D.C.?

In other words, it's all one big crapshoot. But the work has merit, and it's vitally important, in this era of conglomerate take-over of the film industry, that all independent filmmakers be encouraged, even those who shoot porno in super 8. The studios don't want to tackle the kind of stuff that the likes of Mugge and Trombert do, and the chances to see quality documentaries are so rare that when one comes along it's usually advisable to take advantage of the opportunity afforded.

Amateur Night At City Hall is such an opportunity; it's well done, has something to say, and will give you some laughs along the way. But most of all, your admission dollars could help give some good local talent the chance to turn out more films of this nature. Lord knows we could use them.



Robert Mugge and Heidi Trombert

Drummer (Philadelphia)