

# Who Is Robert Mugge and Why Did He Film That Thing Called 'Rizzo'?

By CAROL WALLACE

THE TELEPHONE conversation began sweetly enough.

"Is Robert Mugge there?" the woman caller asked gently.

"This is he," Mugge replied.

"Is this the Robert Mugge who made the film about Mayor Rizzo?" the woman continued.

"Yes it is," Mugge replied.

"Well, I hope you appreciate what you're doing to this neighborhood!" the woman shrieked.

Mugge, no fool, realized he was not talking to the president of his fan club. He hung up.

Since "Rizzo," the controversial movie written and directed by Mugge (pronounced "muggy") and produced by Heidi Neumann Trombert appeared Jan. 21 on national public television, the 28-year-old independent filmmaker has been no stranger to crank calls and hate mail. ("If we were you, we'd move," one anonymous author warned him.)

Even his "WELCOME" mat was ripped off from outside his South Philadelphia apartment.

"I CONSIDER that very symbolic," Mugge grinned.

Well, what do you expect, Mugge is asked, when you live in South Philadelphia and make a film about Frank Rizzo that both pro- and anti-Rizzo people don't like, a film that so infuriated Rizzo that he threatened to sue for libel?

"I can't believe the emotional reaction this film has caused, even from people like your editor," Mugge said in a recent interview. (Daily News Editor F. Gilman Spencer called the film, among other things, "an amateurish piece of garbage.")

"I expected people to be able to deal with it as a film, not as a socio-political incident, which it seems to have become," Mugge added.

Has the controversy, then, placed him in great demand on the local lecture circuit?

"I am shockingly unsought," he laughed.

**THE FILM** — originally 75 minutes and called "Amateur Night at City Hall," — was trimmed to 58 minutes and retitled "Rizzo" for airing on the Public Broadcasting Service. "I was very unhappy when they changed the title," Mugge said. "It was not meant to be the definitive story on Rizzo."

The movie was made two years ago without the sought-after cooperation of Mayor Rizzo and other high-ranking city officials.

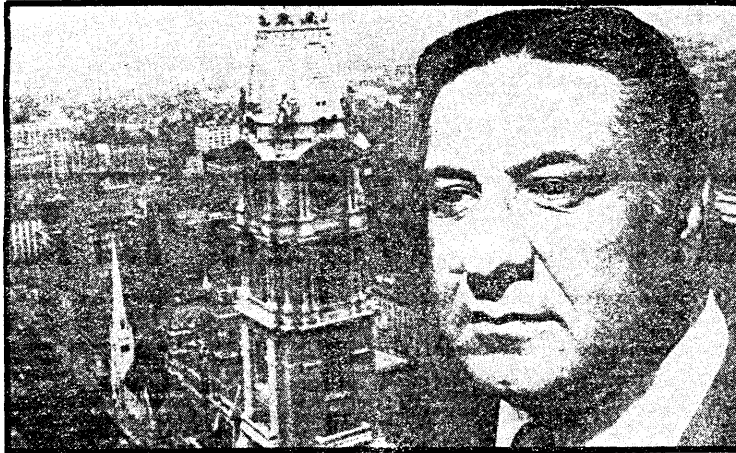
"We did everything to try and get him to cooperate," Mugge said. "I was interested in doing a portrait of the man, of following him around, of getting a personal glimpse. Without his cooperation, I decided to make it a thematic film, a film about politics as show business."

The film opened without incident at the Walnut Mall theater on the University of Pennsylvania campus last February. When it aired nationally on PBS, however, the mayor was



Robert Mugge: 'I don't believe we made an anti-Rizzo film'

Photographed by Patrick Bernat



Mayor Frank Rizzo: A heroic myth gone haywire?

so outraged that he nearly reneged on a deal to lease the city-owned Living History Center to WHYY (Channel 12), the public broadcasting station here, for having shown the film.

**THE OUT-OF-TOWN** press loved the film. "Balanced ... a sense of fairness ... most absorbing" wrote the John J. O'Connor, *New York Times* television critic. "Interesting, provocative ..." wrote the *Los Angeles Times*. The film also won the top documentary award at the Chicago Film Festival last year.

But in Philadelphia, with the exception of a glowing review in the

weekly newspaper, *The Drummer*, the reviews in the major dailies were, to be polite, mixed.

City Solicitor Sheldon Albert and City Representative Joseph LaSala fired off a fairness complaint to PBS in Washington. Many said the filmmakers intentionally maligned Rizzo. And there were complaints that South Philadelphia's Italian-Americans were portrayed — to borrow a quote from LaSala — as "beer-guzzling, illiterate clods."

Mugge seems genuinely stung by such accusations.

"I just don't believe we have made an anti-Rizzo film," he said flatly.

"For people to say I intended to malign the mayor is absurd."

**MUGGE LIVES** in an apartment — an extra lock went on the door during the making of the movie — in South Philadelphia, a few steps around the corner from the Italian Market.

"I'm very happy in my neighborhood, and I love my neighbors," he said. "They are good people. It's not me who's calling them all of these names. It's the outsiders and the press."

"The people in the film (sequences were shot at South Philadelphia's Triangle Tavern and Frank's Luncheonette) were the people I always

heard talking about Frank Rizzo in glowing fashion. So these are the people I went to for opinions.

"A lot of them really liked the film, a lot of them didn't. Some didn't care.

"Look, no film is made without a perspective. I feel I was very fair. He (Rizzo) may have been unhappy with the tone, but there is no such thing as complete objectivity. If people don't like my perspective, let them make their own film."

**ONE REASON** many labeled the film "anti-Rizzo," was Jon Blum, a long-time political foe of Rizzo and a former head of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). Blum was given the credit of "executive producer."

Mugge insists he knew nothing of Blum's politics, only of his ability to raise money. He and Trombert approached Blum and his friends for financial help. Blum personally bought only one share of the film for \$2,500. "Blum didn't come into all of this until the film was nearly finished," Mugge said.

"We gave him the 'executive producer' credit as a way of saying 'thank you,'" Mugge added, seemingly bored with retelling the story. "All I cared about was raising the money. He had no editorial input into the film at all."

Mugge is friendly and outgoing and hardly the type to be cast as a political hit man.

**A KNOWN PRANKSTER** during college (he admits to having flung a pie or two at a fellow student or two), his sharp sense of humor has helped him keep this episode of his career in the proper perspective. ("What have I learned from all of this?" he said, repeating an interviewer's question. "I learned never to do it again ...") and then breaks into a hardy laugh.)

He graduated from the University of Maryland with a film degree and did graduate work at Temple University for two semesters. Several of his films have already appeared nationally on PBS.

"I had intended to do a film on Rizzo since 1973," he explained. "I thought he was a fascinating character. He's loud, colorful and demonstrative. His story is right out of a heroic myth. Here is a man who pulled himself up, was rewarded with authority and power and then did all kinds of bizarre things with that authority and power."

"It was just 58 minutes of celluloid," Mugge said in a why-is-everybody-getting-so-excited tone. "You know, there's an old story that filmmakers tell about how Ingrid Bergman got very upset when Alfred Hitchcock told her to do something during a movie they were making."

"The story that Hitchcock turned to her and said: 'Ingrid, my dear, it's only a movie.'"

"Well, this is only a movie."