

LIFE & CULTURE

# PBS doc on Mayor Rizzo almost cost WHYY its headquarters

**When the film was set to air nationally, “Rizzo went kinda nuts,” said filmmaker Robert Mugge.**

**By Stephen Silver**  
For The Inquirer

In 1978, fledgling documentary filmmaker Robert Mugge made a film called *Amateur Night at City Hall: The Story of Frank L. Rizzo* about the city’s controversial mayor at the time. On the day of its release, Mugge donned a “keystone cop” uniform and carried a sandwich board with Rizzo’s picture on it around City Hall, just steps away from where a statue of the mayor would later stand.

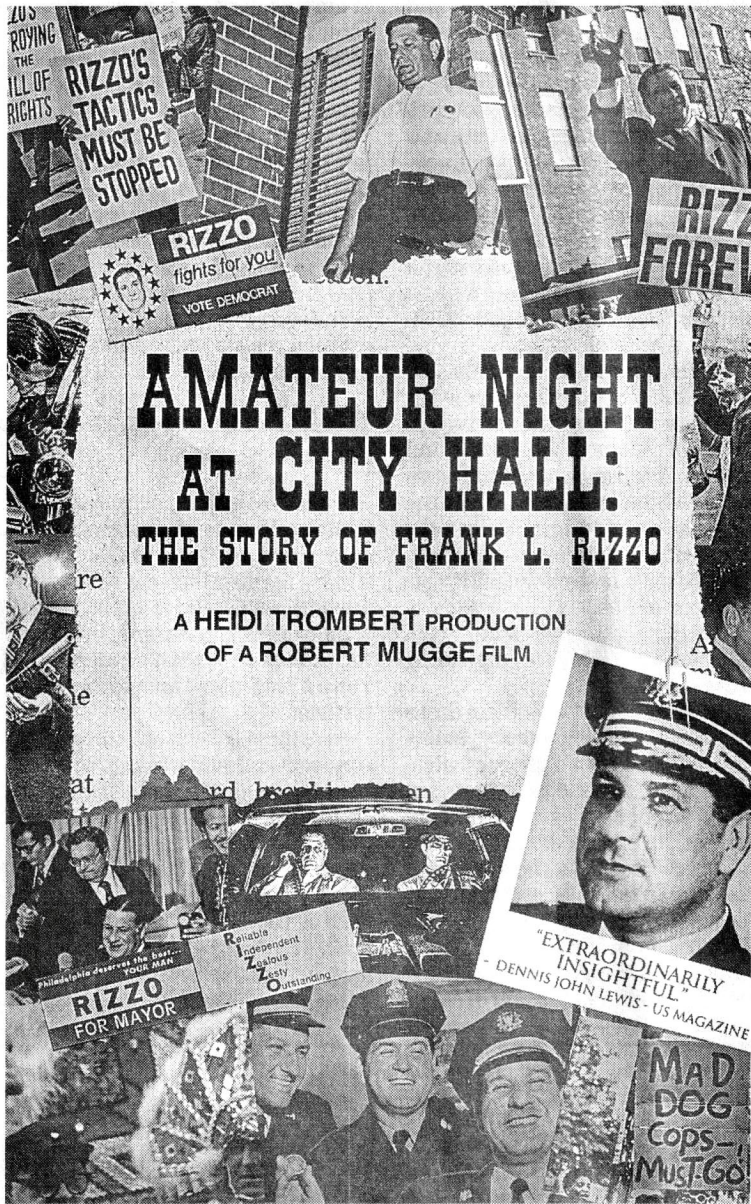
“Rizzo gave the police free reign,” Mugge told *The Inquirer* in an interview this week. “There was a sense, especially among minorities... that they better watch out, because anything could happen. A sense of fear pervaded the city, but not for everyone... white working class ethnic people really felt they had a champion in him, and they did.”

Frank Rizzo left office in 1980, and died in 1991. But the ex-mayor remains, to this day, a figure of great controversy.

In June 2020, shortly after George Floyd’s murder, the statue of Rizzo that had stood in front of City Hall since 1998 was removed, as was the mural of Rizzo in South Philly’s Italian Market.

The 75-minute *Amateur Night at City Hall* was filmed in 1977 by a 20-something Mugge, with no help from Rizzo. In the film, Rizzo holds court in front of crowds, including at the Mummers’ Parade. Philadelphians participated, expressing different opinions, mostly either very positive or very negative, about their then-mayor. They expressed fears about crime. There was then, as there is now, a debate about development on the Eastern end of Market Street.

While the documentary traces Rizzo’s rise from police



Robert Mugge’s film on Frank Rizzo screens Sept. 22 at the Lightbox Film Center. Courtesy of Robert Mugge

commissioner to mayor, *Amateur Night at City Hall* is more about painting a portrait of what the city was like during Rizzo’s reign.

“For me, the key theme of the film was politics as show business,” Mugge said of Rizzo’s style.

The film premiered in 1978, at the now-defunct Walnut Mall Cinema near Penn’s campus. Nearly a year

later, in January 1979, the film was due for a national broadcast on PBS, in a shortened 60-minute form under the title *Rizzo: A Documentary Melodrama*.

That’s the version, Mugge said, “that caused all the controversy... When it suddenly showed up on PBS, Rizzo went kinda nuts.”

Mugge had set up the PBS

broadcast through a public television station in Maryland where he had preexisting relationships, not WHYY, and obtained lots of news footage from the national TV networks, rather than the local broadcast affiliates.

Once he learned of the planned broadcast, Mugge said, Rizzo threatened to retaliate against the PBS-affiliated WHYY by reneging on a deal to give the station the Living History Center as its headquarters.

According to Mugge, WHYY’s then-president and general manager Jim Karayn was ready to cave and cancel the local broadcast, but the filmmaker went public with the dispute, including in an interview with WMMR. The broadcast went ahead, with a disclaimer added in Philadelphia and New Jersey (Mugge doesn’t remember the precise wording, except it amounted to “don’t blame us if you don’t like this film.”) The station got its headquarters.

The filmmaker is not sure if Rizzo ever actually saw the film.

“It was just more an issue that we had the nerve to make this thing, and continued on it despite his lack of cooperation,” Mugge says today. “It was never intended to be a hit job. It was intended to be a reflection of what was going on in Philadelphia at the time.”

On Friday, Sept. 22, *Amateur Night at City Hall* will get a rare local big-screen showing in Philadelphia, at the Lightbox Film Center, with Mugge in attendance for a Q&A. The film got a DVD restoration in 2016, and while PBS stations have shown it occasionally, public screenings have taken place much less often.

Mugge, who lived in Philadelphia for decades but is now based in Indiana, is also promoting his recently published memoir, *Notes from the Road: A Filmmaker’s Journey through American Music*, at the Lightbox event.

*Amateur Night at City Hall: The Story of Frank L. Rizzo*, Sept. 22, 7 p.m., Lightbox Film Center, 401 S. Broad St., Phila., bit.ly/3LURoZx.