

OFFICIAL SELECTION

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TORONTO INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL 2016



Festival del film Locarno
Concorso internazionale

MISTER UNIVERSO

A Film
by Tizza Covi
and
Rainer Frimmel

with
Tairo Caroli
Wendy Weber
Arthur Robin

*Ricordo di
Mister Universo*

Arthur Robin

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**THE NEW FILM BY TIZZA COVI & RAINER FRIMMEL ENTERS THE FORCE FIELD
BETWEEN A LION TAMER AND A FORMER MR UNIVERSE. MISTER UNIVERSO IS
A FILMIC JOURNEY GUIDED BY IRON MUSCLES AND LUCKY CHARMS.**





SYNOPSIS

The young lion tamer Tairo is unhappy with his life. He uses the loss of his good luck charm as an excuse to travel across Italy looking for Arthur Robin, a former Mr Universe, who gave it to him a long time ago. A movie about rational and irrational forces.





DIRECTORS' BIO



Tizza Covi was born in Bolzano, Italy, in 1971. She lived in Paris and Berlin before studying photography in Vienna. Rainer Frimmel was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1971. He studied photography in Vienna. Since 1996 Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel are working together in photography, theatre, movie projects. In 2002 they founded their own film

production company Vento Film to produce their films independently. They won several awards for their documentaries, including the Wolfgang Staudte Award at the Berlinale for Babooska. La Pivellina, their first feature, was awarded the Europa Cinemas Label at the Quinzaine des Réalisateurs in Cannes and was Austria's official entry for the Oscars 2011. Their second feature film The Shine of Day premiered in the international competition in Locarno 2012 and won the Silver Leopard for Best Actor.



INTERVIEW

We have encountered Tairo Caroli before, in *La Pivellina* (2009). At the time you expressed the desire to film a story with him. What was it that Tairo conveyed to you at the age of 14 which made you want to make a film with him? How had he developed when you re-established contact with him?

TIZZA COVI: Even then it was apparent that Tairo had the talent to do the wrong thing at the right time. That has a great deal of comic potential but also embodies sadness and secures him a particular kind of sympathy. He unites within himself a number of facets that make him a very ambivalent character.

RAINER FRIMMEL: We haven't lost track of Tairo since filming *La Pivellina*, and we talked to him frequently about working on a new film project together. In a sense he had been expecting it. So it wasn't that we saw him again after a long break.

In *La Pivellina* it's a child alone in a playground, in *The Shine of Day* an unknown uncle who

suddenly bursts into the life of a busy actor. Now it's a talisman that is mislaid. How do you find the impulses which trigger the filmic journeys?

TIZZA COVI: Our stories always come across as very simple, but there is a great deal of mental work behind them. In retrospect it seems quite logical that we have written this story for Tairo and Arthur Robin. Arthur Robin is a former Mr Universe we met 18 years ago, and we have wanted to work with him for a very long time. In the early days he had lots of film offers, but he turned them all down because he had commitments in the circus. Working on a film like ours also meant leaving his protected space. So he thought about it for a long time before deciding he wanted to try it, at the age of 88.

RAINER FRIMMEL: One of the challenges we always set ourselves is to link fundamentally different people in a story that is as simple as possible. Different characters we want to feature in the film have to be brought into a relationship by plausible sequences of events that really could take place.

An animal trainer and a bodybuilder – both require quite particular strengths – Tairo as a lion tamer, physical as well as mental. The theme of strength, physical and mental, rational and irrational forces, appears to be central for you. When did you become aware of that?

TIZZA COVI: I became aware of that during the writing process, when we explored the subject of superstition as an irrational force more and more. Wendy Weber, our female protagonist, plays an important role, since she is herself very superstitious. Thanks to Wendy, a lot of things became intertwined there.

RAINER FRIMMEL: The bending of the iron bar enabled us to represent in a very concrete manner the multi-faceted subject of strength in all its forms. But a lot of things that seem to be absolutely key might well have simply come up during the work by the force of chance.



What's the story about the curious place where it appears that the force of gravity is reversed?

TIZZA COVI: That place is to the south of Rome, not far from Castel Gandolfo, where the Pope has his summer residence. One element that was particularly important to us in this film is counter movement, swimming against the stream, being different. The road where everything rolls uphill instead of downhill provides a very fine illustration of this.

RAINER FRIMMEL: Many people claim that supernatural forces are at work here. It's a matter of subjective perceptions that could be explained very simply, but then the magic would be lost.

The title, *Mister Universo*, represents Arthur and the man who was celebrated in his youth as the strongest man in the world because of his muscle power. Doesn't that also involve the question of who or what determines our fate?

TIZZA COVI: Arthur took his fate into its own hands even as a young man. He only had one aim in life, and that was to become Mr Universe. And he succeeded by means of hard work. Today Arthur is a happy person. But it's easier to believe that his fate is determined by other forces, such as a talisman.

RAINER FRIMMEL: And that's exactly what Tairo believes; he's got it into his head that Arthur will bend a new iron bar for him, a lucky charm, and then he'll be able to get his life back on track. That's why he sets off in search of Arthur, without knowing whether he'll find him or what will happen then. It was lovely to see that the encounter with "Mister Universo" really was significant for Tairo. Not because Arthur taught him how to bend an iron bar or how to increase his strength, but because something happened on a mental level. And Arthur in turn also benefited from this encounter. He's a very dignified person who lives very much according to rituals; everything always has to be ordered. And suddenly Tairo bursts into his life and turns his world upside down. It could have gone terribly wrong. But he liked him a lot.

This is the first time we have encountered Arthur in one of your films. How did you meet him?

TIZZA COVI: We met him in the late 1990s. At that time he was still working in the circus, and we went there to watch his show. He bent an iron bar for us and gave it to us as a present. We still have it 18 years later; it means a great deal to us. We found out about his life story and also met his wife, Lilly. The enthusiasm the two of them have for each other, and the way they take charge of their lives, has always fascinated us. Today Arthur and Lilly live in a safari park. Lilly takes care of the sound of a daily circus show. Arthur checks the tickets, but he also does that with dignity and precision. And I thought it was very beautiful that he emphasizes on camera what good fortune it was for him to have met Lilly. That's what makes Arthur Robin the man he is.

Your narratives are always stories that are as close as possible to life as reality. The travelling professions of circus people are by definition connected with movement, transience, volatility. By virtue of the fact that you have now depicted this environment in four works, your narratives are also about the transience of life. As if the same starting point had gained momentum, transformed your work into something different.

TIZZA COVI: Our work preserves many things that will not exist in the same form in future. It won't be long before there are no more lion and tiger trainers – and in principle that's a good thing. They are professions that are dying out. Professions that you can criticize a lot, but they have a great deal to do with human nature, not only for the people who do those jobs but also for the people who want to see them. It's very important for us to preserve that without judging.

In *Babooska* and also *La Pivellina* we mainly saw circus artists

training, and the action in the circus ring was excluded. Now in *Mister Universo* it's different. We see both Tairo and Wendy putting on their performances. Why is it important this time to show them appearing in the circus ring as well?

TIZZA COVI: We definitely didn't want perfect footage of Tairo as a lion tamer. We limited ourselves to casual shots of the circus ring. The act is intended to be part of the story without being blown up in the film to



something spectacular. This view from behind the scenes is a counterpoint to the excitement a circus offers from the perspective of the audience.

RAINER FRIMMEL: It was important for us to show the audience right from the start that Tairo is a real lion tamer who walks into the cages with the animals and works with them without fear. We show Wendy putting on her performance because it fascinates us to see how she can contort her body the way Arthur bends an iron bar. We wanted to close the film with that association.

***Mister Universo* is dedicated to all the people who have lost their jobs due to the digitalization of film. The demise of a declining craft. How have production conditions changed for you, since you still work with analogue film stock? The chimpanzee in the film is a witness to a different world of cinema.**

TIZZA COVI: The old female chimpanzee Lola, who worked with great directors like Fellini, really is a witness to a lost world of cinema that will never exist in that form again. We use a copying facility in Rome where great Italian films were created decades ago, and

we were shown the room where the negative cutters used to sit. There are at least 40 workplaces, and all of them are empty now. It's hard to imagine what has been lost in terms of qualification and passion.

RAINER FRIMMEL: Huge numbers of copying facilities all around the world have closed down over the last few years because of the digitalization of the cinema. That doesn't just mean the jobs have been lost, but that knowledge you can only obtain by experience has been lost forever. A few analogue copying facilities will survive. Maybe one or two in Italy will survive. Maybe one in Germany. And archive copies will still be created on celluloid for a long time.

TIZZA COVI: But the days of the great celluloid cinema are definitely over.

What consequences do you see from this development?

RAINER FRIMMEL: We still intend to film our next projects on analogue stock. *Mister Universo* was the fifth analogue film we made; we bought up a lot of old film stock from Fuji. But now Fuji doesn't make any film stock. Our next film will be on Kodak. Analogue film is simply the medium which corresponds best to our mode of working.

So will you stick to the same medium and the same environment for your next project?

TIZZA COVI: It seems to us that with *Babooska*, *La Pivellina*, *The Shine of Day* and *Mister Universo* we've portrayed this world enough.

RAINER FRIMMEL: The fact that the search in *Mister Universo* ends up being successful perhaps mirrors our own artistic searching and finding. Now we can concentrate on something different.

TIZZA COVI: After all, there are plenty of universes.



CAST

Tairo CAROLI (Tairo)

Wendy WEBER (Wendy)

Arthur ROBIN (Arthur Robin)

TECHNICAL CREW

Director: **Tizza Covi, Rainer Frimmel**

Screenplay: **Tizza Covi**

Director of Photography: **Rainer Frimmel**

Sound: **Tizza Covi**

Editor: **Tizza Covi**

Producer: **Rainer Frimmel / Vento Film**

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TECHNICAL DETAILS

Sound Format: **5.1**

Ratio: **1.85**

Running time: **90 minutes**

Original version: **Italian**

Subtitles: **English**

Countries of production : **Austria / Italy**

Year of production: **2016**

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