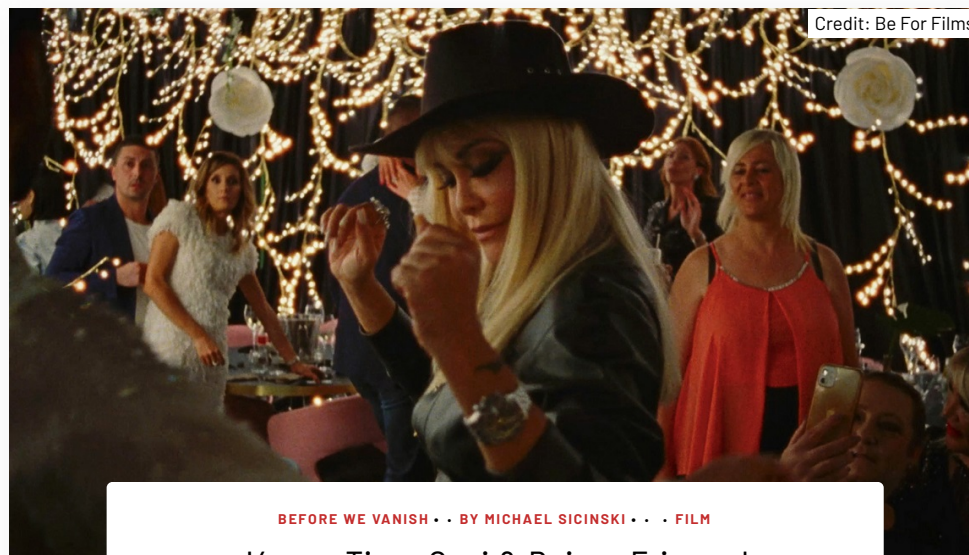



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BEFORE WE VANISH • BY MICHAEL SICINSKI • FILM

Vera – Tizza Covi & Rainer Frimmel

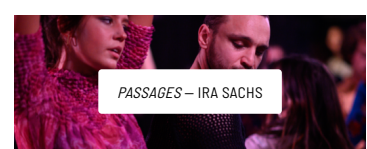
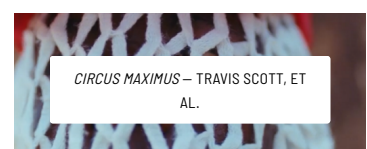
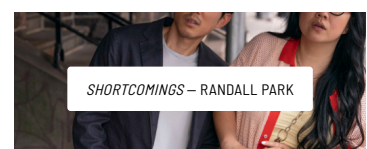
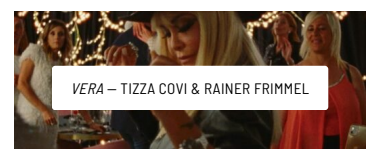
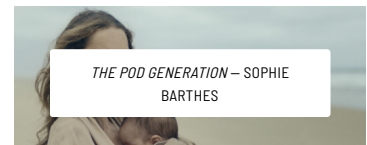
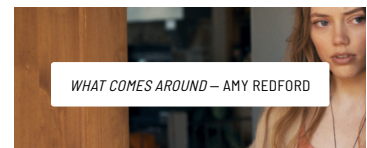
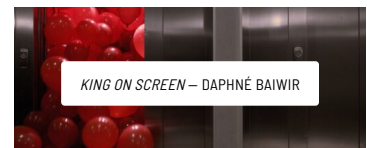
August 7, 2023

The directorial duo of Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel have been regulars on the festival circuit for the better part of twenty years, but they have yet to really break through to a larger audience. They began as documentary filmmakers, but eventually turned to feature filmmaking, building fictional narratives with real individuals who play fictionalized versions of themselves. This type of fiction/nonfiction hybrid is hardly radical in itself; since the '90s, when the Western world became acquainted with the New Iranian Cinema, reality-based fictions have become something of a cottage industry. So an evaluation of Covi and Frimmel's cinema hinges on how they approach this method, and to what apparent purpose.

Films such as *La Pivellina* (2009) and *Mister Universo* (2016) bear a general resemblance to the gritty urban realism of the Dardenne brothers. But where the Belgians tend to spin their character studies into social-problem films, Covi and Frimmel often end up producing muted melodramas, films about folks on the margins of society who are struggling to find a place they belong. The difference could be related to film history. Covi is Italian, and Frimmel Austrian, and all their features thus far have been set in Italy. One can see the influence of de Sica and Fellini in their films, a social realist impulse that becomes the vehicle for broad emotion. At the same time, the pair tamp down those tendencies, presenting a world in which disillusionment is like oxygen – something there's no use trying to avoid.

Vera may be their best work to date, and this has everything to do with their subject. When we first meet Vera Gemma, she is walking the red carpet at a premiere. She obliges the paparazzi with a couple of poses, and then just walks away. Her flashy haute couture and "modern face," as one director puts it (i.e., a lot of very evident plastic surgery), suddenly seem out of place, and we learn that Vera has hit an emotional dead end. In a failed audition with the director mentioned above, we learn that Vera is one of the two daughters of Italian film legend Giuliano Gemma, best known as the star of the *Ringo* series of Spaghetti Westerns. But Vera's own career has stalled, and her inheritance is dwindling away.

Together with Covi and Frimmel, Gemma achieves the seemingly impossible. She offers us a complex portrait of a glamorous film-industry scion that is not only sympathetic, but at times genuinely tragic. We learn that Vera's parents berated her for her average looks, coercing her into cosmetic surgery at a young age. She was taught that her physical appearance was the only thing that mattered, and that it would never measure up to the family standard.

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Vera has a younger boyfriend (Gennaro Lillio), a film director who at first seems distracted and indifferent, and then begins hitting Vera up for production funds and wants her to put him in contact with Monica Bellucci. In short, no one seems to see Vera as her own person. In one amusing yet poignant scene, Vera meets up with her friend Asia Argento, and they discuss the stifled subjectivity that results from having famous artists for parents, standing in a cemetery next to a grave marked “the son of Goethe.”

One can observe the precise point when Vera pivots into fiction. Her driver (Walter Saabel) accidentally hits a man (Daniel de Palma) and his eight-year-old son (Manuel de Palma) on their moped, breaking the boy’s arm. This leads to Vera befriending them, along with Daniel’s mother (Annamaria Ciancamerla), and learning about their personal and financial struggles; in the aftermath, she starts to experience something new. These folks don’t know who her father was, and they seem to just like her for herself. But then, things are not always what they seem.

Covi and Frimmel provide an interesting update to the class politics of films like *Bicycle Thieves* and the woman-centered bildungsroman of *Nights of Cabiria*. Vera is a damaged soul, and her own lack of self-respect leads her to perhaps overestimate the integrity of those whose lives have been harder than hers. While Covi and Frimmel’s film could have easily made a mockery of Vera Gemma, the directors instead explore hard, ineluctable truths about social isolation and personal risk. Vera goes searching for the “real world,” and when she finds it, it only provides a different flavor of disappointment.

Tizza Covi and Rainer Frimmel’s *Vera* plays as part of the [MoMA Presents film series](#) from August 9-15.

DIRECTOR: Tizza Covi & Rainer Frimmel; **CAST:** Vera Gemma, Daniel De Palma, Sebastian Dascalu; **DISTRIBUTOR:** MoMA; **IN THEATERS:** August 9; **RUNTIME:** 1 hr. 55 min.

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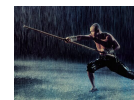


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