

FilmAffair and Epsifilm present

# sqizo

A film by Duccio Fabbri

- PRESS KIT -

*FilmAffair*



**Rai Cinema**



MIBAC  
Direzione  
Generale  
CINEMA



*Cinephil*

## SYNOPSIS

*SQIZO* presents the story of Louis Wolfson, a Bronx-born writer whose extraordinary trajectory challenges all accepted definitions of mental health, language, and literature. Diagnosed schizophrenic as a teenager, he rejected his native English language and became an avid self-taught linguist in order to invent a new, personal idiom. While his first book instantly became a cult classic in 1970s Paris, he remained relatively unknown in the US, and ended up becoming homeless. The filmmaker discovered him in Puerto Rico where his luck had finally turned. Now 89 years old, Louis Wolfson still lives a solitary existence between the world of silence and the world of words.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I chose Wolfson because he is arguably one of the most disadvantaged and marginalized figures imaginable. Born and raised in the Bronx, Wolfson decided to shut himself off from the English language, his mother tongue: he wrote his autobiography in French and expresses himself through a mosaic of foreign languages. The writing style of his books doesn't flow easily. The effect is raw and physical, sometimes profane or abrupt, yet his writing is also singularly elegant and self-ironic. The reader is split between laughter and anguish, surprise and melancholy. For Wolfson those linguistic experiments are not an esthetic problem, but a question of life and death: from a young age being exposed to the English language has been associated for him with acute suffering. Wolfson has found a variety of coping mechanisms, including actively reclaiming the condition with which he was diagnosed – “schizo” – in order to turn it into a “badge of honor”, in the words of Sylvère Lotringer. He is thus inviting us to consider his life as a work of art, a coherent coming together of thought and action. The persistent, incredibly inventive way in which Wolfson inhabits the reality of the written word turns him into a mysterious, elusive entity, akin to the legendary ‘Flying Dutchman’: a figure visible rarely and only by a few, perpetually dancing on the edge of failure and disappearance.

When I discovered that he was still alive, I felt the need to record a testimony of his life of resistance and unimaginable struggles by means of a documentary film. Our relationship did not necessarily begin on the right foot - he was convinced that I worked for the Italian secret service – but it progressively developed into a full-blown friendship, over more than ten years of working together. Wolfson has decided to inhabit one of the remotest corners of our universe, and the film is an attempt to launch ourselves into the solar system to reach planet Wolfson, a mysterious place where science, art, and language take on entirely new meanings. I think that Wolfson's work and life trajectory are both radical and exemplary. His actions, such as the rejection of his mother tongue, his deep-seated hatred for psychiatric institutions, and his absolute refusal to abide by the most elementary social conventions, can also be interpreted as political acts. They constitute new strategies of resistance and of survival that also amount to incredibly sophisticated attempts at self-therapy. His extreme experiences

and life choices can offer glimpses of a whole new perspective on the world.

*Sqizo* can be seen as the latest iteration of Louis Wolfson's artistic endeavor. He was and remains actively involved in the development and production of the film, which is part and parcel of his personal creative process. It is the product of a dialogue, a long and sometimes arduous negotiation, just like his published work. By agreeing to participate in a film that is also produced in English, he seems to gesture towards an eventual reconciliation with his mother tongue. In choosing to finally appear on camera, Wolfson seems to express a desire to be finally seen, to make himself visible. This is not a movie *about* Wolfson but a movie *with* Wolfson, where he shows us his relentless need to keep communicating with the world in his uniquely ironic, reluctant way.

#### LOUIS WOLFSON BIO

Louis Wolfson was born in the Bronx in 1931 to parents of Belarusian Jewish origin. He was an excellent student, and obtained a scholarship to enter medical school. He was committed to several psychiatric institutions as a teenager. After being treated with numerous electroshock and insulin therapies, he was declared legally unfit to work or study. Living with his mother and stepfather, he taught himself several languages, including French, Russian, Hebrew, German, and Russian. He wrote an autobiography in French and sent the typescript to the leading French publishing house Gallimard in 1963. The following year, an excerpt of the book was featured by Jean-Paul Sartre in his journal *Les Temps Modernes*. It was eventually published under the title *The Schizo and the Languages* by Gallimard in 1971 with a preface by Gilles Deleuze. His work received relatively little attention in the US, however, with the notable exception of the 1975 "Schizo-Culture" conference in New York, organized by Sylvère Lotringer for the journal *Semiotext(e)*, where Wolfson briefly brushed shoulders with Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and R.D. Laing. After this brief episode however, Wolfson spent the following 20 years of his life homeless in Montréal and at the Chicago O'Hare Airport, and continued to pursue his dual passions of writing and gambling. During this period, he wrote a second book "My Musician Mother Is Dead", which was published in 1984 by the publishing house Navarin in France and in 1987 by SE in Italy. He also wrote a third book about the erratic wanderings of an American emigrant, however the manuscript, which was kept in a student locker of the University of Montreal, was thrown out by a campus janitor by accident.

Wanting to live in close proximity to what was then the world's largest radio telescope, he moved to Puerto Rico in 1994 where he still currently resides.

#### LOUIS WOLFSON WORKS

*The Schizo and the Languages*, Gallimard, 1970

*My Musician Mother is Dead...*, Navarin, 1984

## QUOTES FROM THE FILM ON LOUIS WOLFSON

PAUL AUSTER, novelist

It's not possible for anyone to be allergic to a language. It is simply not possible. Especially the language that one grows up in and that he lived his first twenty one or two years of his life in, one assumes reasonably contentedly and successfully. Now there is some deep psychological break that goes on here. And I think.. the... the thing that is so amazing about it is the way he finds a way to solve his problem.

[...]

Every great book is born out of a moment of rage. And the only books that we really care about are the ones that one feels the writer was compelled to write the book, that the book was an act of necessity. If this were a novel, one would find this a deliriously comic invention of great brilliance, and uhm, and yet it's not an invention, it's his life. But he is able to tell it with a certain humor... I suppose what I'm saying is, the book transcends self-pity. And because he doesn't feel sorry for himself but he's actually engaging the reader in a true account of his situation, you feel him as another human being talking to you. And that's why there is this dialogue between reader and writer happening in this book that happens in all great books. I guess it's a manual of survival.

SYLVERE LOTRINGER, French and Comparative Literature Emeritus Professor – Columbia University

Wolfson, who was being judged by his own society had a certain way of being very normal because he used language not as something that is a given but as something that is a creation, something that is an instrument. If I live in a world that's full of languages, I'm going to use languages against a judgement that is born into me, I'm going to become bigger than an individual, I'm going to be a real American. I'm going to become a real American because I'm going to be a polyglot. I'm going to use all the language, not respecting them, by trying to use them as tool in order to erase, you know, the illegitimacy of English.

RICHARD SIEBURTH, Comparative Literature Emeritus Professor – New York University

What is he doing with language? He is trying to take all of what linguists call, the arbitrary nature of the sign. The fact that a word's sound only has a sort of chance, arbitrary relationship to its meaning, and he's trying to transform that through his sort of schizophrenic science of linguistic into a more motivated relationship between sound and meaning.

## CREDITS

A Film by Duccio Fabbri

Written by Duccio Fabbri & Dejana Pupovac

Editing Jacopo Quadri

Photography Bartosz Nalazek

Music Alessandro Cortini

Sound Editing and mix Daniela Bassani, Stefano Grosso and Giancarlo Rutigliano

With Louis Wolfson and with Paul Auster, Sylvère Lotringer, Richard Sieburth, Angelica & Benjamin Van Der Dyst, Esteban Santiago.

Interpreted by Emily Fleischer, Marcia Haufrecht e Joshua Wills.

Produced by Valeria Adilardi, Duccio Fabbri, Luca Ricciardi and Laura Romano

Post Producer: Mauro Vicentini

Co-Producer Charlotte Uzu

Executive Producers Fabio Nesi, Michael Sherman and Richard Sieburth

A FilmAffair & Epsifilm production in collaboration with Rai Cinema and Les Films d'Ici

International Distributor Cinephil

Directed by Duccio Fabbri

## TECHNICAL SPECS

Format 2K DCI @24

Aspect Ratio 1.89 : 1

Runtime 70 minutes

## PARTICIPATION TO MARKETS AND AWARDS

SQIZO was the Best Italian project at BioToBe (Biografilm Festival, Bologna) in 2017, in 2018 was selected at DokLeipzig co-production meetings, HotDocs co-production meetings, Agora Works in Progress at Thessaloniki FF.

## DIRECTOR'S BIO

SQIZO is Duccio Fabbri's first feature film. Duccio works as assistant director and director in Italy and the USA. He has collaborated with Marco Bechis, Sara Colangelo, Paul Dano, Andrew Dosunmu, Rashid Johnson, Ken Loach, Salvatore Mereu, Crystal Moselle and Josh & Benny Safdie, among others.

## FILMAFFAIR PROFILE

FilmAffair is an Italian independent production company, born in 2018. Its founders, Valeria Adilardi, Luca Ricciardi, Laura Romano, Mauro Vicentini, are a long experienced team in documentary development, production, post-production and distribution, managing for years a documentary Film Festival in Italy: Visioni Fuori Raccordo FF.

FilmAffair's aim is to focus on high impact documentaries of strong artistic value for theatrical release and to explore new frontiers of storytelling. The first documentary produced is *NORMAL* by Adele Tulli, winner of Eurimages Lab in Karlovy Vary in 2018, that premiered in 2019 at Berlinale Panorama and participated to numerous national and international FF, winning several prizes (CPH:DOX, Thessaloniki FF, Sarajevo FF, Lovers FF, Torino; Festival des Libertés, Belgium among others). It has been distributed in Italy, Germany, UK, Greece, Lithuania.

*SQIZO*, by Duccio Fabbri, a coproduction with Epsifilm, USA, with Rai Cinema and the Italian Ministry of Heritage and Cultural Activities, distributed by Cinephil, is FilmAffair's new film.

## CONTACTS

Production  
FilmAffair  
[info@filmaffair.it](mailto:info@filmaffair.it)

International Distribution  
CINEPHIL  
[info@cinephil.com](mailto:info@cinephil.com)

For interviews with the director  
[ducciofabbri@mac.com](mailto:ducciofabbri@mac.com)