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"Grey Gardens" is a must see!

Posted on 11 March 2011



By *MICHAEL FRENCH*

Erin Pittleman stars in "Grey Gardens: The Musical".

Photo: Courtesy, Rising Action Theatre

Ft. Lauderdale's very own Rising Action Theatre's production of the Grey Gardens: The Musical at the Sunshine Cathedral, offers a comically disturbing portrait of a mother and daughter's relationship fraught with a paradox of emotions.

It is a "MUST SEE!"

Mother, Big Edie and daughter, Little Edie are iconic women — in an eccentric, precarious fashion — as the subjects of Albert and David Maysles' documentary Grey Gardens. The Edies were the aunt and first cousin, respectively, of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy. In the early 1970s, they lived in squalor and self-delusion at their dilapidated, family estate, Grey Gardens in East Hampton.

Some believe most women become like their mothers. The stage musical Grey Gardens emphasizes this transformation with that of "Little Edie" Bouvier Beale by casting the same actress, Erin Pittleman as both Little Edie and her mother at the zenith and collapse of their family fortunes. Mother and daughter share a love of music. The women, breaking into song emphasizes their tenuous, fragile grasp on reality.

It's July 1941. Grey Gardens is a social landmark in East Hampton, Long Island, and home to quipping, sarcastic personalities. "We didn't have a black sheep of our own, so we had to import one," one of the Beales remarks of George Gould Strong, (Larry Buzzeo) Big Edie's opportunistic, live-in piano player.

The play opens with Little Edie (Lisa Kerstin Braun) announcing her engagement to Joe Kennedy Jr. (Christopher Michaels), older brother of JFK. Big Edie's plans to sing nine songs at the party indicates only one of the family fractures that makes Little Edie eager to marry and escape Grey Gardens.

Jerry Weinberg, as Big Edie's father J.V. "Major" Bouvier, gives the song, "Marry Well" a real punch. Erin Pittleman makes Big Edie a larger than life figure prone to warbling in classic operatic style, or singing politically incorrect tunes such as "Hominy Grits." She proves so innately likable she softens Big Edie's hard edges and doesn't seem to deserve the contempt of her daughter and father.

Even if you're don't know the story of Grey Gardens , you can feel their future is ominous, and anticipating the decline of the women's lives in Act Two.

Lisa Kerstin Braun's sweet voice conveys young Little Edie's desperation. Her performance contains virtually no shared traits with the Little Edie at middle age. Her transformation is so bizarre, they're like two completely different women. In many ways they are.

Act Two fast forwards to 1973 and becomes the tale of two charmingly, some what daft ladies vicariously living their lives in the shortening shadow of days gone by. Erin Pittleman plays Little Edie, while Dee Deringer-Piquette takes over as the now "Mrs. Haversham like, Big Edie. The ghostly song "Entering Grey Gardens" indicates the house's filth: "The crumbling walls, the broken clocks/It's like a 28-room litter box." Big Edie's teenage friend Jerry even wears flea collars on his pants to keep off the vermin! Neither Edie attempts to keep up appearances, further reflecting their decline.

Ms. Deringer- Piquette gives Big Edie enormous charisma, even though she is bedridden for much of her time on stage. Big Edie's number "Jerry Likes My Corn" is both sweet , but hauntingly insane. At one point, the Edies aggressively volley their decades-long grievances at each other. Their simultaneous complaints to the audience have such yapping musicality, it could be a song.

Meanwhile, Erin Pittleman's poignant, touching song "Around the World" reaches emotional heights, tugging at one's heart strings. Songs connect audiences to the roles' feelings, but Grey Gardens' songs also express the Edies' eccentric detachment from the world. Little Edie's "The House We Live In," is rousing, pitiful and comical. The ladies' mental states, like their once regal home, Grey Gardens, have run riot and become, an unweeded garden that grows to seed.

For anyone who has been a caregiver to an aging parent, whom at times tests the limits of their child's love, who has put their own dreams on the back burner, this tantalizing play will echo a prickly, familiar, rotating, conflicting melange of anger, guilt, resentment, and sadness which at the same time battles with love, compassion, and commitment.

"Grey Garden: The Musical" presented through April 3rd at Rising Action Theatre at Sunshine Cathedral, 1480 SW 9th Ave., Fort Lauderdale, 954-561-2225

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3 Responses to "'Grey Gardens' is a must see!"

1.  Herbert Gould, MD says:

March 13, 2011 at 12:01 am

The intimacy of the venue made the production more profound and personal. As in any work of the performing arts the audience shares the emotional angst of the protagonists and is deeply moved by the drama. I was transported by this brilliant production as the actors, costumes, scenic design blended to deliver a superb theatrical moment. However the featured actor, Erin Pittleman displayed a range of talent from first to second act that is memorable. This production is worthy of an off-Broadway venture.

2.  mark says:

March 16, 2011 at 5:04 am

This review is a mess. How this person had the permission to represent the play I have no idea. This person needs to learn how to write. The little Edie from the original play and documentary looks and acts nothing like the woman in this production. Why they picked this woman I have no idea. The director has a obligation (within SOME artistic licence) to follow what is known. She was not suited to play this role given how much they planned on charging for this production. This role derives it's attention not just from the singing but from the acting in the parts (big edie aside). The boredom from the audience is understood given how the show was represented.



3. *Cameron Huff* says:

March 23, 2011 at 1:16 am

Charming, though flawed show (but the flaws are with the author),and blown away by Dee Piquette's Big Edie. Great that Rising Action took the creative risk to present it to South Florida. This is what regional theatre's should be about, not presenting us with warmed over ancient musicals as so many venues do. Thank you Rising Action.

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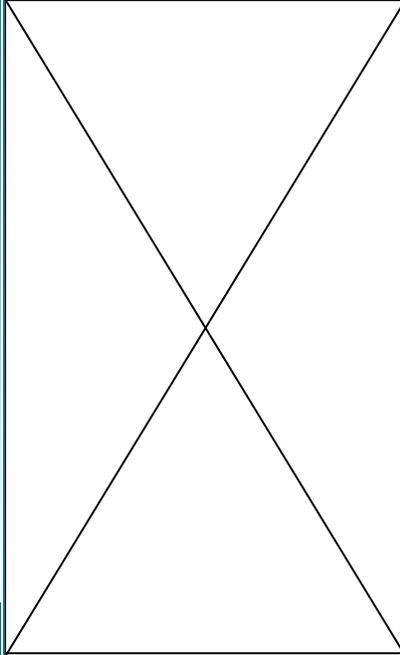
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