

SOUTHERN FLORIDA

by John Lariiviere

Grey Gardens

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The Rising Action Theatre presents the South Florida premiere of the musical *Grey Gardens*. Featuring a book by Doug Wright, music by Scott Frankel, and lyrics by Michael Korie, *Grey Gardens* is based on the 1975 documentary of the same title by Albert and David Maysles. The musical is set in the East Hamptons, in the 28-room Bouvier family mansion known as Grey Gardens. It tracks the lives of Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale ("Big" Edie) and her daughter Edith Bouvier Beale ("Little" Edie), who were the aunt and first cousin of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis.

The musical takes place in two acts. The first act is set in 1941, during the height of the socially polished and privileged lifestyle of 47-year-old Edith and her 24-year-old daughter. There, the eccentric "Big" Edie (an amateur singer) routinely serenades her wealthy and elite guests as she competes for attention with her lovely, debutante daughter (a model and aspiring performer). The second act takes place in 1973, with the same actress who plays "Big" Edie in the first act playing Little Edie. The two now destitute women live in isolation, and the once beautiful home is falling in around them. It is filled with garbage, fleas, raccoons and some 52 cats. With *Grey Gardens* being cited for repeated health code violations the ladies face possible eviction. Yet through it all they live moments of fantasy at least in song and dance. The musical revolves around the dynamics of their dysfunctional mother/daughter relationship, and the second act mirrors the real lives of Edith Bouvier Beale and Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale with eerie accuracy.

The real life Grey Gardens was designed by Joseph Greenleaf Thorpe in 1897, and purchased in 1923 by Phelan Beale and Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale. The mansion was named for the color of the dunes, the cement garden walls, and the sea mist. After Phelan left his wife, Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale and her daughter Edith Bouvier Beale lived there alone for decades. Following claims of their funds being mismanaged, the 1963 death of their longtime caretaker, and a 1968 burglary, they lived in isolation and near poverty. In the fall of 1971 it was discovered that the once grand Grey Gardens was in such great disrepair that the two women were living without plumbing or heat; the house was filled with garbage, infested by fleas, inhabited by raccoons and overrun with cats. Pursuant to a series of inspections (which the Beales called "raids") by the Suffolk County Health

Department, they faced eviction and the razing of their home. They gained national notoriety as the result of an article in the *National Enquirer* and a cover story in *New York Magazine*. In the summer of 1972 Jacqueline Onassis and her sister Lee Radziwill provided \$32,000 to clean the house, install a new furnace and plumbing system, and cart away a thousand bags of garbage to bring the house up to code. After "Big" Edie died in 1977 "Little" Edie sold the house in 1979 to former *Washington Post* editor Ben Bradlee and his wife Sally Quinn, who completely restored the house and grounds to their former glory. "Little" Edie engaged in an unsuccessful attempt at a career in the entertainment industry and eventually moved to Bal Harbour, Florida, where she passed away at the age of 84 in 2002.

The performance space at the Sunshine Cathedral initially seems rather small, but it allows for an intimate look at the show and provides no lighting or sound issues. The stage is also large enough to accommodate a set of appropriate size and detail. The execution of the drawing room and staircase bears a nice resemblance to pictures of the same space in the real Grey Gardens. The costuming is impeccable. Pictures and videos of the real "Little" Edie from the 1973 documentary film reveal her theatrical flair for fashion, mixed with a little bit of crazy. (She also favored turbans to hide her hair loss as a result of alopecia.) The costuming in the second act contains what appear to be exact replicas of these outfits down to the tiniest of accessories.

There are a couple of good supporting character moments. Jerry Weinberg has a believable grandfatherly quality as "Major" Bouvier in the song "Marry Well." A dapper Larry Buzzeo evokes a few chuckles as Big Edie's gay best friend and pianist George Gould Strong. He portrays the pampered Cole Porter style very well. A young, poised Skylar Voelker honestly does look like she could be a young Jacqueline Bouvier. Lisa Kerstin Braun, who plays "Little" Edie in the first act, captures the character's conflict with her mother in a way that sets up the second act well. She doesn't do as well with all her singing, however, as she warbles under pitch on some held notes, with an uneven vibrato.

Dee Deringer-Piquette is delicious as an often cross and needy second-act Big Edie. She alternately bellows and whines from her bed as she seeks attention and comfort. Having listened to some recordings of the real woman, one can appreciate that she mimics her pretty well. Erin Pittleman is wonderful in the dual roles of mother in the first act and daughter in the second. At the performance attended, some scattered moments had her slipping out of her accent, and she missed standing in her light at the top of act two, but this is a real tour de force. She sings without tiring and never misses a moment to establish her character. The second act belongs to her excellent acting moments as the 56-year-old "Little" Edie fighting for moments of control and sanity.

Grey Gardens originally opened Off-Broadway at Playwrights Horizons on February 10, 2006, and ran through April 30, 2006. It earned five Lucille Lortel Award nominations and twelve Drama Desk Award nominations. After some revisions, the show opened on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theatre on November 2, 2006, and closed on July 29, 2007, after 307 performances and 33 previews. The production was nominated for 10 Tony Awards in 2007, winning three (including Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Musical for Christine Ebersole and Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Musical for Mary Louise Wilson).

The Rising Action Theatre production of *Grey Gardens* will be appearing at the Sunshine Cathedral

through March 27, 2011. The Sunshine Cathedral is located at 1480 SW 9th Ave in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. The Rising Action Theatre, Inc. is a small professional theatre hiring non-Equity performers. The Rising Action Theatre is dedicated to promoting and educating the public in diversity and tolerance for all people through theatre arts. It presents plays with multi-cultural themes, and works of social relevance. For season information and tickets you may reach them by phone at 954-561-2225 or 800-595-4849, or online at <http://www.risingactiontheatre.com/>.

Cast:

Edith Bouvier Beale (1973): Dee Deringer-Piquette
"Little" Edie Beale (1973)/Edith Bouvier Beale (1941): Erin Pittleman
"Little" Edie Beale (1941)/Sister Maria: Lisa Kerstin Braun
Brooks, Sr./Brooks Jr.: Joseph Long
Joseph Patrick Kennedy, Jr./Jerry: Christopher Michaels
George Gould Strong: Larry Buzzeo
J.V. "Major" Bouvier/Norman Vincent Peale: Jerry Weinberg
Jacqueline Bouvier: Skylar Voelker
Lee Bouvier: Katie Harmon

Crew:

Director/Music Director: Kevin Coughlin
Choreography: Dave Campbell
Scenic Design: Tim Webb
Lighting Design: Linda Matrone
Sound Design: David Hart
Costume Design: Dee Deringer-Piquette
Stage Manager: Steven Fuentes

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