

## "Grey Gardens: The Musical" at Rising Action Theatre Resurrects Cult Kin With Ramshackle Charm

AAA Comments (1) By [John Thomason](#) Thursday, Mar 10 2011

At first glance, the 1975 documentary *Grey Gardens* is among the films you would have least expected to be adapted into a Broadway musical, up there with *My Dinner With Andre* and *Nanook of the North*. It's a nonnarrative account of the bizarre reflections, philosophies, and battles of former debutantes [Edith Beale](#) and her daughter Edie, the aunt and first cousin of [Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis](#). The fly-on-the-wall story follows them along as they languish in a decrepit 14-room mansion in [East Hampton](#). There is no beginning, no end, no story, no plot. There is some singing amid the flea-infested squalor, but surely, there's not enough *there* there to warrant a full-fledged, song-and-dance spectacle.



Tee Jay

*Grey Gardens* plays out like a conventional period musical.

## Details

*Grey Gardens: The Musical*, presented through April 3 at Rising Action Theatre at the Sunshine Cathedral, 1480 SW Ninth Ave., Fort Lauderdale. Call 954-561-2225, or [click here](#).

This is evidence that first glances can be deceptive. Edith and Edie now exist as pop-culture bellwethers separate from the documentary by Albert and [David Maysles](#) that first gave them their extended 15 minutes, and an [HBO](#) movie starring [Drew Barrymore](#) solidified their roles as touchstones of trashy kitsch.

One of the manifestations of this late-blooming notoriety is the stage musical that premiered off Broadway in 2006 and eventually scored ten [Tony nominations](#). *Grey Gardens: The Musical* is currently enjoying its [South Florida](#) premiere at Fort Lauderdale's Rising Action Theatre, and considering that the LGBT-centric playhouse is notorious for its creaky, ramshackle production values, it seems an appropriate venue to re-create the dilapidated Grey Gardens mansion.

The musical's first act is set, unwisely, in 1941, where it dramatizes young [Edie Beale's](#) ([Lisa Kerstin Braun](#)) engagement party to [John F. Kennedy's](#) older brother, Joseph ([Christopher Michaels](#)). The festive occasion is broken by Edith Beale ([Erin Pittleman](#)), who tries to sabotage her daughter's big day by turning it into a concert for herself. An ensemble of supporting characters, including Edith's gay companion and pianist [George Gould Strong](#) ([Larry Buzzeo](#)), conservative Bouvier patriarch J.V. ([Jerry Weinberg](#)), and a prepubescent Jackie O ([Skylar Voelker](#)), add a few more voices to this entirely superfluous act. For one thing, the Beales in these early stages are not consistent with the mentally ill, endearingly eccentric women of 1975; the story plays out more or less like a straight, conventional period musical, which has the effect of neutering exactly what made the Beales interesting in the first place. And so the story of the Beales in 1941 is not what followers of the *Grey Gardens* legacy are paying to see.

Act one also contains the production's most glaring deficiencies. As the young Edie, the shrill Braun has trouble hitting high notes and can't sustain that Kennedyesque accent. Christopher Michaels, as her well-bred beau Joseph, proves equally lacking in acting chops. The choreography is sufficient throughout, though no one is given anything particularly difficult to do, and the costumes are appropriate though sometimes unkempt: The pink dress Edie dons for her party is badly in need of an iron.

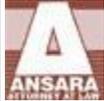
Act two shows a marked improvement, owing greatly to the fact that we finally get to spend time with the Beales as we know them, in 1973: shrewish, fleshy Edith (now played by [Dee Deringer-Piquette](#)), half-naked and lounging like a beached whale, and schizotypal chatterbox Edie (Pittleman, who portrayed the elder Edith in act one), gallivanting around the decaying mansion with an American flag and her signature head covering.

The ladies' idiosyncratic musings and conversations from the Maysles documentary are repeated, remixed, and repurposed here as familiar dialogue nuggets for Beales devotees. But given that the *Grey Gardens* film offers only a modicum of information, most of the songs are a stretch. Thus, a movie scene in which Edith tells Edie that she "had her cake and ate it too" as a younger woman becomes the upbeat tune "The Cake I

Had." Another movie moment in which Grey Gardens visitor and handyman Jerry enjoys one of Edith's grody corn-on-the-cobs becomes the song "Jerry Likes My Corn." Whether you listen to such a number with knee-slapping abandon or blank confusion will dictate how much you enjoy this musical. Either way, it's hard to deny Pittleman's strength in her dual Edith/Edie roles, the same part that won [Christine Ebersole](#) praise on Broadway. Her accent and mannerisms spot-on and her voice reaching angelic highs, she's a pillar of messy radiance, standing a pedestal above her supporting players. In an imperfect production of an imperfect show, Pittleman transcends the material, becoming the talented stage diva Edie Beale always *thought* she was.

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