

Big & Little Edie circa 1975



Little Edie circa 1975



Little Edie circa 1935



LITTLE EDIE AND BIG EDIE, THEN AND NOW THE FAMOUSLY ODD COUPLE IN ARCHIVAL SHOTS AND STILLS FROM THE NEW MOVIE

GREY MATTERS

Secluded, they became stars—if only in fashion heaven. DREW BARRYMORE and JESSICA LANGE are the cult-beloved Beales in HBO’s remake of GREY GARDENS. By JOHANNA LENANDER

For the past 30 years or so, Edie Beale Sr. and Edie Beale Jr. have been the world’s most obscure superstars. The 1975 documentary *Grey Gardens*, created by acclaimed filmmaker brothers Albert and David Maysles, captured the Beales’ kooky and co-dependent existence in a derelict East Hampton mansion, which they shared with countless cats and raccoons. The movie made the former socialites instant icons in the gay and fashion communities, where their status borders on deity-level. However, to the rest of the world, they have remained largely unknown. Until now, that is. A new HBO film, written and directed by Michael Sucsy and starring Jessica Lange and Drew Barrymore as the infamous

mother-and-daughter team, is set to do two things: introduce the ladies to a mainstream audience and fill in the blanks in their riches-to-rags story.

“I told Michael that if he would take a chance on me, I would give my life over to this thing. And I did,” says Barrymore, who fought hard to be cast as Little Edie (how Beale Jr. was known to her family and fans). It’s easy to understand why. The part packs the kind of once-in-a-lifetime juiciness that makes Blanche DuBois seem boring. Over the course of the movie, Little Edie evolves from a celebrated 18-year-old society beauty into a balding, impoverished and isolated 58-year-old eccentric. But through it all, she manages to hold on to her »

PHOTOGRAPHY: 2009 FILM STILLS BY PETER STRANKS/HBO; ARCHIVAL SHOTS: BIG AND LITTLE EDIE SITTING ON BED BY TOM WARGACKI/ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY; LITTLE EDIE IN FRONT OF HOUSE BY HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY; PORTRAIT OF LITTLE EDIE BY ARCHIVE PHOTOS/GETTY



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irrepressible creativity and charm, and her dreams of fame and glory. “It’s a rare opportunity to play someone who is so divinely garish and entertaining but also so damaged and internal,” says Barrymore. “She has the most righteous insecurities. But she will also walk into a room wearing nothing but a bathing suit and a piece of lace and high heels, and dance around in front of a camera. She is a walking contradiction.”

The complexities of Little Edie’s character are mirrored in her odd but appealing appearance. Her heartbreaking determination to make the best of her receding hairline and limited resources—she wrapped sweaters and tablecloths around her head—has become an enduring fashion inspiration. She has been referenced in *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* fashion spreads, Marc Jacobs named a Fall 2007 handbag after her and, that same season, she served as Phillip Lim’s muse for his collection. “I love the fact that Little Edie was so fearless and unpredictable in her dressing,” says Lim. “She was able to imagine ordinary pieces of clothing for extraordinary usage, in terms of styling and functional purpose. Also, her sense of proportion and balance was spot-on.”

Little Edie’s mother is an equally fascinating character. The aristocratic and rebellious “Big Edie” Bouvier Beale hailed from what could be considered American royalty (Big and Little Edie were Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis’s aunt and cousin respectively, and yep, the former First Lady makes an appearance in the HBO film), but her love of singing and disdain for appropriate Park Avenue behaviour made her the black sheep of the family. “I absolutely adore the woman,” says Lange. “She was a unique spirit with tremendous courage who turned her back on everything that was expected of her. She had the strength to say, ‘I don’t want any of it—you can withhold your money or whatever you’re going to do, but I’m not going to live that way.’” What Big Edie did want, however, was the constant companionship of her daughter. The two lived together in their rapidly decaying house for more than 25 years—most of them spent in complete isolation.

The original documentary masterfully portrays the hilarious

and horrifying nuances of the Edies’ co-dependent life, as they banter, quarrel, sing and dance together. But it also raises some extremely nagging questions: “Why do they live in such squalor?” “Where is the family fortune?” “Why didn’t Little Edie get married?” and “How did she lose her hair?” Sucsy found these matters so intriguing that he was compelled to write a screenplay. “Watching the documentary, I realized there was a bigger story behind it. I kept thinking, ‘How did this happen?’” Starting with Little Edie’s death certificate (she died in 2002, and her mother passed away 25 years earlier), Sucsy sought out the executors of her estate and began to meticulously piece together the Beales’ mysterious past. “I tracked down Little Edie’s journals and diaries and poetry,” he says. “I suppose I became obsessed with uncovering as much as I could.”

The story he found is fascinating, sad, inspiring and very human, and in telling it, Barrymore and Lange flex every acting muscle. Besides aging 40 years and plunging the emotional depths of heartbreak and despair, they also had to render pitch-perfect recreations of two beloved cult figures who have an army of vigilant fans. “A major concern for me was the people who were very loyal to the documentary and love Edie,” says Barrymore. “I just wanted to do right by her.”

Finding the connection between the aging eccentrics and their glamorous younger selves was another tricky task. “As an actor, you really have to find a thread that makes it believable that it’s the same character. It’s a huge challenge,” says Lange. Both actresses, who formed a close bond during filming, were moved by the Beales’ intense relationship. “It’s a very unique love story,” says Lange. “There are so many layers, and I don’t think anybody will fully understand the complexity of this relationship, but these women stayed connected to each other all those years. I think they were fascinated with each other.” Barrymore concurs: “These women kept each other entertained—you can’t even say that about a lot of married couples. Hell, they were laughing together for 40 years. I say bravo to them!” □

Grey Gardens airs April 18 at 8 p.m. ET/PT on HBO Canada.