

USA, 1975. 94 min

Cast: Edith Bouvier Beale, Edie Beale;
Cinematographer: Albert & David Maysles; **Producers:** Susan Frömke, Albert & David Maysles; **Directors:** Ellen Hovde, Albert Maysles, David Maysles, Muffie Meyer

Despite the current ubiquity of tabloid and reality-based television, if you're viewing *Grey Gardens* for the first time, you really haven't seen anything quite like it. Even if you're familiar with the Maysles Brothers' other "direct cinema" (cinema verite) documentaries, arguably none of their subjects are as memorably eccentric as 79 year-old Edith Bouvier Beale and her fiftysomething daughter, Edie.

Otherwise known as "Big Edie" and "Little Edie", they were, respectively, the aunt and cousin of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Big Edie was once a talented soprano vocalist whose husband left her decades before. Little Edie was once a New York socialite and aspiring actress/model whom, never married, eventually returned home to care for her aging mother (or is that the other way around?). In the early 1970s, the Long Island town of East Hampton threatened to evict the Beales from their dilapidated, squalor-infested 28-room mansion (its name gives the film its title), where they lived as virtual shut-ins with many cats and a few stray raccoons. Their story caught the attention of Albert and David Maysles, and the Beales gave them permission to film them.

The Maysles then whittled down over fifty hours of footage of Big and Little Edie into a 94-minute

feature. *Grey Gardens* is a creepily fascinating, weirdly entertaining and oddly poignant look at two women gleefully out of step of the high society they once thrived in. Big Edie is generally a beatific but blunt old soul, unfazed at the Maysles filming her aged figure in a revealing sun dress and unforgettable when singing marvelously to a recording of the song "Tea For Two". Little Edie, on the other hand, is a playful, brash, self-described STAUNCH character with an inimitable accent, creative fashion sense and a feverish desire to leave Grey Gardens and return to her former charmed life. Big and Little



Edie spend much of the film reminiscing about the past, and even more time quarrelling with each other. Throughout, the Maysles' camera often wanders over to vintage portraits and photographs of Beales found in scrapbooks or hanging on walls, all of them bittersweet reminders of another time.

The film stirred up a fair amount of controversy when it was first released in 1976. Many critics thought it pushed the envelope too far, deeming it an exploitative freak

show. Albert Maysles denied such charges, stating, "I like to describe the goal of 'direct cinema' as life as it is -- no better, no worse. For this kind of filmmaking, the biggest challenge is getting access. With *Grey Gardens*, we had it from the beginning. They trusted us, we trusted them. It's something that my brother David and I learned growing up, to be accepting of all kinds of people." In 1998, a world less daunted by such intimacy (not to mention voyeurism), courtesy of *The Real World* and *Jerry Springer*, gave the film's theatrical re-release a much warmer reception, and in 2001, it received a lush DVD release as part of the Criterion Collection.

Sadly, Big Edie passed away one year after the film's initial release. It was widely rumored that, while on her deathbed, she told her daughter that she had nothing more to say because everything she wanted to tell the world was said in the film. Little Edie took advantage of her newly acquired fame. She soon left *Grey Gardens* and eventually ended up living in Florida, but not before briefly appearing in New York City in a one-woman cabaret show (needless to say, critics liked it less than the film). Over the years, the Beales have blossomed into camp cult icons. They've inspired an off-off Broadway play (*Clear/Cut Catastrophe*, which mixed their lives in with Chekhov's *Three Sisters*!), a song by Rufus Wainwright (from his 2001 album *Poses*), and, most audaciously, an *Italian Vogue* fashion shoot by Steven Meisel (photographer of Madonna's *Sex*) which paid tribute to Little Edie's distinctive, scarf-heavy "costumes". Little Edie passed away in January 2002, somewhere between the age of 84 and 86.

- Written by Chris Kriofske