



PHOTOGRAPHED BY JONATHAN FOLDS IN LOS ANGELES

## MICHAEL SUCSY

BY DEVORAH ROSE

**I**nspired by Albert and David Maysles' 1975 documentary – a film that allowed a glimpse into the lives of a quirky mother and daughter duo, who shared the same name, Edith Bouvier Beale – Michael Sucsy began a journey that resulted in the creation of HBO's hit film, "Grey Gardens." The title is derived from the crumbling East Hampton estate that was once a sybarite's ideal abode but became the cat-filled nest captured by the Maysles' lens. While the documentary compels in the same way an odd circus exhibit captures an audience's imagination – two eccentric women offer recollections and preen for the cameras as a bearded woman might unassumingly blink at gawkers – Sucsy's painful yet charming narrative is oddly hopeful. His vision breathes life into the free-spirited women. From the beginning to the end of this film, there is a delicate beauty and innocent hope that can be found in the unraveling of the Edies' lives. *Social Life* caught up with the first-time filmmaker in order to discuss details of "Grey Gardens."

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*Your film is based on the Maysles' documentary, "Grey Gardens." What was it about this project that captured your imagination?*

I was taken by how the Albert and David Maysles not only chronicled the Beales' lives, but also how they were able to capture their spirit, their inner world, their indomitable personalities – that really grabbed me. The Edies never gave up on their dreams, and they never gave into the "Establishment" as Little Edie like to call it. While I can see why the story might strike some people as sad or even flat-out depressing, I found it oddly inspiring.

*In addition to the documentary, you were also inspired by your access to Little Edie's journals, poetry, and letters. Describe how her writing influenced your*

*creation of the film's narrative. Describe the process of creating a narrative crafted from these letters and the documentary?*

Well, little Edie's private papers were an even more intimate look into two enigmatic women than just the documentary footage. The letters she had saved and parts of her diaries helped connect some of the factual dots of what happened during the parts of their lives (however, there were large gaps in the journals, so it took a lot of investigative work to piece things together) but, Edie's poetry was, perhaps, the key to understanding her mindset, what she valued, how she felt about things. Poetry is often best used to express a private thought, so her poems felt like an emotional Rosetta Stone in many ways. Just about everything in the movie came from somewhere – a poem, a letter, a diary entry, an interview. Whenever possible, we relied on true events as we understood them – not made-up "Hollywood moments." For example, Edie really did run out on her debutante ball, and she really did throw the entire bouquet of roses over the balcony of the Paris theater at the "GG" premiere.

*Did you share any of her writing with Drew Barrymore?*

I did. I made Drew a five-inch binder of my research. Anything I had, I shared with her because I wasn't sure if something I had overlooked might inspire her performance. I give Drew credit for being able to read the journals, though. It took me awhile before I could make sense of Edie's handwriting because it's both manic and controlled, not unlike the woman, I guess. There were times when she'd write so tightly that the bottoms of the g's and y's would dip down and blend with the letters on the next line. It was like trying to read the words through a mass of vines. I remember in the beginning how I used to get headaches from the eyestrain.

*You were able to access Little Edie's writing by contacting her relative, Pamela Beale. Did Pamela share any interesting anecdotes that didn't make it into the movie?*

Oh wow. Yeah. I interviewed over a dozen friends and family all of whom had wonderful stories. Pam recounted to me how at her wedding to Edie's nephew, Chris, Edie spontaneously stood up and belted out a song, "Toujours L'Amour Toujours," at their reception. In the photos, I noticed that Edie was wearing a navy cape and a matching headwrap! The other anecdote that was touching was how Big and Little Edie, during the "lean years," would wrap up an expensive silver platter or other valuable family heirloom and send it off as a wedding or Christmas present. They didn't have much, but what they did have they shared, and they never lost their sense of etiquette. They were very thoughtful ladies.

*The camera work in this film is very distinctive. What were you trying to convey?*

In the 1930s, the camerawork is pretty controlled and classic – smooth dolly shots, rich colors, well balanced light. But for the 1970s sections, the light contrast is very high (the source light being almost exclusively coming from the windows at least until after the cleanup occurs), handheld, and less stable – rougher, if you will, to both reflect the filmmaking of that era but also to echo the deterioration of their lives and of their surroundings. The middle section, the 1950s, uses a hybrid of these styles. Just like with the deterioration of the house, it's a slow transition.

*There are moments that we are aware of Little Edie and Big Edie being viewed through the documentarians' lens – how did you intend for that to serve the narrative?*

The inter-spliced shots of the docu footage are meant to be moments from the "upstairs hall screening" where the Maysles first previewed the documentary for the Beales (the scene that starts off the film and that reprises later on). The documentary was such an important event in their lives and in the structure of the narrative. It's the vehicle through which the Edies gain perspective on themselves, albeit, entirely different conclusions.

*During the casting process, did you have certain actors in mind?*

Jessica Lange became attached to the project first, and she was the only actress whom I met with for the part. Casting Little Edie was a little bit more difficult. It's been well documented at this point, so I can say that Drew Barrymore was not, initially, my first choice for Little Edie, but she came after the role with a ton of passion and determination, so I agreed to meet with her. Drew won me over in that first meeting because I could tell how dedicated she would be to the role and how well she understood Edie. That was the key – her deep understanding of the inherent contradictions that were Little Edie Beale. After Drew came on board, it was still another year and a

half before we began shooting. I would have been devastated if she had dropped out. I was blessed to have these amazing women playing these roles.

*What was it like to direct Drew Barrymore in this role? Her performance was pitch-perfect – were there challenges to playing so far against type? As a director were there challenges for you?*

In our first meeting, Drew addressed all of the "pink elephants," as I like to call them, about her playing this role, which allowed us to conquer them one by one. If Drew had felt at the time that she was the "premiere dialect actress in Hollywood," we would have been "sunk" (as Edie would say), but because Drew knew exactly where her potential shortcomings were vis-a-vis this project, we were able to address them head-on. Directing Drew was a dream because she not only trusted me one hundred percent, she also pushed herself to be better than she'd ever been and better than anyone else could have been in the role. When you have trust and dedication like that, a director and an actor can achieve anything, I believe.

*Were there any particularly amusing incidents during filming with Drew?*

Edie had a very distinctive "gummy" smile, so we created prosthetic set of teeth and gums for Drew to wear throughout the film. When we were doing some pickup shots for the Pierre Hotel debutante ball dressing room scene, Jessica made Drew laugh and her prosthetic teeth went shooting across the set and landed at the foot of the cameraman. I couldn't stop laughing. We had a lot of fun on this movie.

*What unexpected discoveries did you make during the making of this film?*

Jessica Lange told me that she often doesn't watch the finished version of her films because it's about the process for her, not the finished product. That taught me to slow down and let the actors have their moments on set. It's really the key to getting the best performances.

*Did you make any unexpected discoveries while researching the Edies?*

Uncovering that Edie had had an affair with the Secretary of the Interior under President Truman was quite a discovery. Also, finally figuring out what happened to Edie's hair was important. There had been so much speculation. It turns out she had a condition called alopecia areata.

*Were there expectations that were or weren't met during your work on the film?*

This sounds trite, but no. My expectations were always met and often exceeded. I hold the bar high for myself and, in turn, for those I work with, because I find that if people are challenged, they rise to the occasion. The cast and the crew all poured a lot of themselves into this film. There was a lot of love for the Edies and respect for what we were trying to accomplish with the movie.



PHOTO CREDIT: PETER STRANKS / HBO

DREW BARRYMORE AND JESSICA LANGE, ON THE "GREY GARDENS" SET

*The relationship between the two Edies is so uncomfortably intimate. What was the relationship like between Drew and Jessica during filming?*

I don't think there could have been a better pair of actresses to play the Edies. They worked very well together. They got on like cackling hens. Just like the real Edies, they were friends. I think you also saw this on the red carpet at the Golden Globes

*Can you tell us an anecdote about working with Jessica Lange?*

During one of documentary scenes, Jessica was in Big Edie's bed surrounded by cats, and this one cat kept sticking its butt up in air. Jessica, of course, couldn't concentrate, and I called, "Cut!" at which point Jessica said to her co-star cat, "Jeez, can't you keep your ass down? Things are hard enough!" I lost it. There's actually a photo of me, uncontrollably giggling right after this incident. The other anecdote, was when Jessica kept mixing up the character names of David and Al [Maysles] because she was wearing colored contact lenses, a heavy cataract lens on one eye, and thick old-lady glasses. "I can't tell who's who!" she cried out.

*You know the Hamptons well. Did your own experiences in the Hamptons and knowledge of Hamptons culture somehow color your vision of this film?*

Yeah, absolutely. On a story level, I knew how enchanting the Hamptons are – especially one's childhood summers spent there. I can totally see how and why someone could spend forever living there. And visually, the Hamptons is famous for its light – it's why so many artists are drawn to the area. Getting that light right, I felt, was key to transporting the audience, and since we shot in Toronto, we had to recreate it ourselves through Hollywood magic. Mike Eley was our Director of Photography. He's both an amazing guy and an amazing artist.

*Do you see yourself revisiting the Hamptons thematically for another project?*

I wouldn't rule it out, but I like to address new challenges whenever possible. I could do another film set in the Hamptons, but it would have to cover very different material.

*What can we look forward to seeing from you in the near future?*

I have about six projects that I am working on and, honestly, I'm not sure which one will pull into the lead quite just yet. Luckily, "Grey Gardens" covered so much ground and combined both drama and comedy, so the range of future projects is, luckily, quite broad. I think "horror" is just about the only genre I'm not considering at the moment. There's a big visual effects movie that I'm interested in because, like "GG," it would require me to create a unique world but to root the story in emotion, in a relationship. That interests me.

GREY GARDENS DVD WILL BE AVAILABLE ON JULY 14TH  
FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT  
[WWW.HBO.COM/FILMS/GREYGARDENS](http://WWW.HBO.COM/FILMS/GREYGARDENS)

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