



MEMBER PICKS

Grey Gardens

‘The most incredible documentary of all time.’ (Jenny Newman, BFI Member)

It’s a documentary, but you couldn’t make it up. Imagine if John Waters shot a script by Tennessee Williams and it was broadcast in a TV slot usually reserved for *The Hoarder Next Door* or *How Clean Is Your House?* The Maysles’ best-loved film (co-directed with Ellen Hovde and Muffie Meyer) is a fly-in-a-Harvey-Wallbanger look at the world of Jackie O.’s eccentric cousins, Big Edie and Little Edie (and their interloper, ‘the Marble Faun’). It’s fingernails-down-blackboard wonderful, as the Edies reminisce, sing, dance, yell at each other and watch approvingly as cats and raccoons befoul their rotting Long Island retreat.

Little Edie, still stunningly beautiful at 56, models a series of extraordinary tied-together outfits and turbans. We never do find out what happened to her hair. Big Edie appears to wear very little around her massive girth. The filmmakers look away when one of her breasts falls out. It’s a cult classic, wildly entertaining and camp as Christmas. It’s been made into a stage musical, and dramatised for HBO. But it’s also a film that allows women to speak in their own crazy voices and, despite the backdrop of high society, it captures universal truths about family ties.

Jane Giles, *Sight & Sound*, September 2014

‘I made *Grey Gardens* in order to get some food for my mother’.
(Little Edie Beale)

In early February of 1954, Edith Ewing Bouvier Beale sent a telegram from Easthampton, New York, to her brother, John Vernou Bouvier III, in New York City. It read:

STILL WAITING FOR MY MONTHLY CHECK. SEND IMMEDIATELY.
URGENT. TERRIBLY COLD AND DANGEROUS HERE FOR ME; MUST
ARRANGE TO COME TO CITY... PLEASE ACT IMMEDIATELY; THIS IS MY
SEVENTH WINTER HERE. PLEASE UNDERSTAND. EDITH.

John Bouvier or ‘Black Jack’, as Mrs Beale’s brother was known within the family, was the father of future US first lady Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis and was the trustee for Edith Beale’s inheritance from the Wall Street law firm of Bouvier and Beale. Edith Beale – or ‘Big Eadie’, as she came to be known – had, since her separation from her husband in the early 1930s, relied upon the proceeds of the Bouvier family trust to maintain her household in Easthampton. The urgency of her message – particularly the fact that it was by then her seventh year living in the family’s summer house at Grey Gardens – was probably borne of the fact that she was supporting not only herself but also her unmarried daughter. Her (only) daughter, also named Edith and nicknamed ‘Little Edie’, had lived with her since 1952 after a modelling career in New York had, under circumstances that are still unclear, come to an end, at which point she had returned to live with her mother on Long Island.

Although it remains unknown whether Edith Ewing Beale received any immediate aid from her brother in response to her telegram, what is known is that the situation would not improve for nearly another 20 years. In 1972, the modest financial circumstances to which the two women had become accustomed became known to the Suffolk County Health Department and, in an event that would receive widespread newspaper and television coverage,

their home was deemed uninhabitable; only after their relative, Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, intervened and underwrote the cleaning and partial renovation of the house, were they allowed to remain there. Although the help that Onassis provided allowed the women to stay in the house for several more years, it hardly altered their circumstances beyond the genteel – and extreme – poverty that they had come to know.

The financial conditions that led the Beales to the situation in which they found themselves living for nearly four decades would probably be of little interest to anyone beyond devotees to the life of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis were it not for the fact that they became the subjects of a film that has come to inhabit a special place in the visual culture of the United States in the 1970s and in the history of the documentary film, Albert and David Maysles' *Grey Gardens*. Filmed over the course of six weeks late in the summer of 1973 and released in 1975, the film has achieved a cult status among its audience; further, it has been the sponsoring text for a number of productions, including a subsequent documentary release by Albert Maysles (*The Beales of Grey Gardens*, 2006), an off-Broadway play, a Broadway musical, a 2009 feature fiction film made for the HBO cable channel that featured actresses Jessica Lange and Drew Barrymore, a documentary about the making of the original film, Liliana Greenfield-Sanders' *Ghost of Grey Gardens*, as well as any number of drag performances, fashion designs by such figures as John Bartlett, Marc Jacobs and Todd Oldhan, websites, blogs, fan publications and art. Clearly, the danger that Big Edie telegraphed to her brother so long ago has taken hold within the imaginations of the many audiences for *Grey Gardens*.

What, though, is the appeal of this film? Why does this 95-minute cinematic portrait of a mother and daughter talking, eating, listening to music, discussing family photographs, feeding their many pets and bickering over events that had occurred decades previously fascinate its viewers? Even within the Maysles brothers' substantial oeuvre of documentary, or, as they preferred to call it, 'direct cinema', which includes such canonical titles as *What's Happening! The Beatles in America* (1964), *Salesman* (1968), and *Gimme Shelter* (1970), *Grey Gardens* has come to have a unique status as a film that altered the possibilities of the documentary image. It did so by allowing the non-fiction film to organise its materials through two previously unexamined aspects of everyday life: first, the psychodynamics of the family – in particular, the bond between mother and daughter – and, second, the role of fantasy in femininity and glamour, not least in fashion culture. Further, it introduced a particular relation between filmmaker and photographic subject that can only be called a seduction, whereby the person being photographed – in this case, Little Edie Beale – woos and courts David Maysles, the brother responsible for the film's soundtrack. While other projects in the moving-image culture of the period had also inaugurated the documentary into similar concerns, not least the films of Andy Warhol in the 1960s, the performance films of Shirley Clarke, such as *The Connection* (1962) and *Portrait of Jason* (1967), and the US public television series, *An American Family* (which aired in the year of *Grey Gardens*' production), the images and sound of Big Edie and Little Edie brought these three fascinations together in a way that remains still pertinent to the film's audience after over 30 years.

Extracted from *Grey Gardens* by Matthew Tinkcom (BFI Film Classics, 2011)

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GREY GARDENS

Directors: David Maysles, Albert Maysles, Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer
Production Company: Portrait Films Inc.
Producers: The Maysles Brothers
Associate Producer: Susan Froemke
Filmed by: Albert Maysles, David Maysles
Edited by: Ellen Hovde, Muffie Meyer, Susan Froemke
Colour Negative: EFX Unlimited
Negative Timing: Morris Schlein, Precision/Deluxe
Sound Mixer: Lee Dichter
Sound Mixing: Photo-Mag
Quotes from The Road Not Taken by: Robert Frost
Thanks to: Marianne Barcellona, Peter Beard, Harry Benson, Alan Bomser, Charlie the Projectionist (movielab), Cynthia Castleman, Pamela Degnan, Kathryn Demby, Holly Gill, Bernard Gotfryd, John Jourdan, Dorothy King, Donald George Kloczek, Akiva Kohane, Sarah Legon, Vincent Lombardo, Nöelle Penraat, Vincent Stenerson, TVC Labs, Lois Wright

With

Edith Bouvier Beale
Jerry Torre
Lois Wright
Jack Helmuth
Brooks Hires

USA 1975
95 mins

Grey Gardens by Matthew Tinkcom is available to buy from the BFI Shop:
<https://shop.bfi.org.uk/grey-gardens-bfi-film-classics.html>



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Wed 3 Aug 19:00

Being Blacker + Q&A with Molly Dineen, Blacker Dread and Naptali

Tue 9 Aug 20:30

Preview: My Old School + Q&A with director Jono McLeod and actor Alan Cumming

Fri 12 Aug 18:15

Tony Hancock: Oddities and Rarities

Sat 13 Aug 12:00

TV Preview: Am I Being Unreasonable? + Q&A with writer/actors Daisy May Cooper, Selin Hizli and exec producer Jack Thorne

Wed 31 Aug 18:15

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