



BRIGHTEN YOUR DAY WITH “GREY GARDENS” AT THEATRE JACKSONVILLE

Dick Kerekes & Leisla Sansom November 8, 2017 Dual Critics, Feature, On Stage, San Marco, Theatre, Theatre Reviews 354 Views

A DUAL CRITICS THEATRE JACKSONVILLE REVIEW

Theatre Jacksonville opened its 98th season with a Broadway quality production of the musical “Grey Gardens.” It opened November 3, 2017 and will remain on stage through November 19. The theatre is located at 2032 San Marco Boulevard, in Jacksonville, Florida. For reservations and additional information, call 904-396-4425 or visit theatrejax.com

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GREY GARDENS
 (All Day) Theatre Jacksonville

“Gray Gardens” has a history. It began as a 1975 documentary, filmed by Albert and David Maysles, who were known for their style of “direct cinema” – instead of having their subjects rehearse, the film makers let the story unfold as the camera rolled. The film focused on the lives of Big Edie Beale and Little Edie, her daughter, two reclusive women living in poverty in a deteriorating mansion in East Hampton, Long Island. Their home had been condemned by the local board of health because it was a safety hazard, filled with trash, cats, raccoons, and other undesirable wild life.

But there’s more to the story than poverty; after the National Enquirer published a story about their living conditions, the women received national attention, followed by financial assistance from Big Edie’s niece, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis; they were able to remain at Grey Gardens.

The musical, which opened in New York in 2006, received ten Tony nominations and won three, which included Best Actress, Best Leading Actress, and Best Costume Design. The book is by Doug Wright, music by Scott Frankel, and Lyrics by Michael Korie. In 2009, Jessica Lange and Drew Barrymore starred in an HBO film which garnered critical praise and multiple awards.

We have seen the classic documentary by the Maysles and the HBO film and you can access clips of both on You Tube. You can also find clips of the Broadway musical, featuring the award-winning Christine Ebersole.

The first act is set in 1941 and is an imaginative reconstruction of the Beale's earlier life. Their home is lavishly furnished, and their guests include the Rockefellers, the Kennedys, and other high society folks. Little Edie is young and excited about her pending engagement party to Joe Kennedy, Jr. Kelly Wolfe, a musical theatre student at Jacksonville University, is a superb vocalist who sparkles in this role. Daniel Austin is impressive as Kennedy and has the Boston-Irish accent of the members of this powerful political family.



Actress Amy Allen Farmer has been interested in appearing in this demanding production for some time, and has spent hours studying the documentary in preparation. In the first act, she portrays the mother and we learn that she is divorced and has two grown sons who never visit. Her only companion other than her daughter is George Strong (Justin Reynolds), a middle-aged gay piano player. Edith doesn't want to lose her daughter and derails the engagement. How? We will leave that for you to discover when you see the musical. Major Bouvier, her critical old-school father, is solidly played by Kevin Bodge.

Two visiting cousins add delightful youth to the show. Sixth-grader Cecilia Adkinson appears as Jackie Bouvier. She already has an extensive resume, which includes appearances in *Les Misérables*, *The Sound of Music*, and *Oliver*. Tatum Matthews, who is eight years old, appears as Lee Bouvier. She is making her debut at Theatre

Jacksonville, and previously appeared at the Alhambra Theatre and Dining in “Annie” and ‘Showboat.” The final character in the first act is Jacksonville University student Kevin Turner, a family servant who appears as a butler and later as a gardener.

The second act follows the original documentary closely, and is set in 1973, thirty-two years later. The Beale’s financial sources are gone. They eat canned food, and groceries delivered by Jerry, a friendly neighbor (another fine appearance by Mr. Austin) from time to time. Their house is filthy, littered with cat food cans (they have 52 felines). Big Edie is now portrayed by Laura Adkinson, while her daughter is portrayed by Ms. Farmer. This dynamic duo of the eccentric Edith and the unhinged Little Edie is captivating.

Ms. Adkison has appeared in over forty local productions, mostly in musicals but also in dramatic roles, and was awarded a PBTS Pelican Award for her portrayal of Agnes Gooch in “Auntie Mame.” We recall seeing her in many memorable roles at the Alhambra. As Big Edie, a woman in her 80s, she spends almost all of her time in bed singing wistful songs which include “The Cake I Had” and “Jerry Likes my Corn.”

Ms. Farmer has appeared in a number of musicals on our local stages and has a large fan base which appreciates her marvelous voice. As Little Edie, she dresses in clothing that covers her head and describes her wardrobe choices as revolutionary. She is a complex timid woman, very funny at times and very guarded at others.

Director Michael Lipp has cast a wonderful ensemble for this haunting musical and, as many long-time Jacksonville theatre goers will attest, has been doing extraordinary work as a performer and a director. This is his seventeenth production and they have all been fabulous.





This show marks one year that Tim Watson has been in the position of Technical Director. His set is fantastic; the transformation of the Beale's home from an elegant mansion to an unsafe decayed shelter is astonishing.

Much credit should go to the Running Crew for their work with props and changes; the crew included Henry Allen, Dietrice Carnegia, Liz Geers, MacKenzie Geers, Sam Geers, Kaelan Kindy and Mark Rubens.

At Theatre Jacksonville for the first time was Musical Director Ben Beck, he was also on piano and led the orchestra of Josh Kusmierz (Keyboard), Aaron Jennings (Percussion), and Jade Martin (Guitar/Bass)

Additional Production Team members included Curtis William (Choreographer), Tracy Olin/Curtis Williams (Costumes and Hair/Wig Design), Brady Corum (Assistant Technical Director), Ron Haynes (Stage Manager), Mackenzie Geers (Assistant Stage Manager), and Audie Gibson (Light Board Operator).