

## Queen of Versailles

If you want an eccentric version of America's Great Recession made palpable, you just can't get weirder than "Queen of Versailles," a probing documentary film that depicts the spectacular rise and, especially, the even more astounding fall of the Siegels, David and Jackie. He is the workaholic septuagenarian who is a billionaire from his business of time-share resorts; she is the buxom blonde ex-beauty queen in her 40's who is as prolific in her breeding (eight kids) as her hubbie is in making money. Director Lauren Greenfield's examination of their life is an eye-opener on the American capacity for excess

Greenfield, a photographer as well as a filmmaker, originally became involved with the Siegels on a photographic assignment, shooting the family that was known to be constructing the "largest private residence in the United States." The early part of the film documents, in photos and film, both the lavish residence the Siegels already own on Seagull Island, Florida, as well as their plans for another grandiose mansion (90,000 sq. ft., 30 bathrooms) inspired, they say, by Versailles (and Vegas).

As the film evolves, however, it records the steady demise of the family business, Westgate Resorts, as the real estate market implodes. We see Jackie change from a preening, expensively-gowned Mom-Model to a woman with a face red from botox and a down-scale wardrobe (though she never stops shopping). We see David, at first evincing a proud gruffness about his booming business and mildly embarrassed by placating his wife, then turning into a cranky sourpuss, disgruntled with his oldest son (in the business), his wife—and with the whole financial world that has turned against him.

Can you feel any sympathy for these almost pathological characters, whose decorating taste runs to covering their walls with gushy portraits of themselves? Well, director Greenfield does by letting them state their own case and straightforwardly describe their dreams and foibles. She does get the couple (along with other family members) to talk candidly about their state throughout, though Jackie usually strives to present a positive outlook while David opts for blacker moods (his mood has further blackened as he has since sued the filmmaker) .

As the film proceeds, and we see the business collapse coming and testiness arise within the family, some sympathetic strings are plucked. Some (more than others) might feel some pangs for the Siegels when Jackie has to resort to Wal-Mart for shopping and David seems to retreat even further into his murky den to contemplate his mistakes.

What mitigates this reviewer's sympathy for the Siegel's plight, however, is what the "Queen of Versailles" traces only gingerly: the nature of how they made their dough. Siegel's enterprise appears to be a supreme capitalist hustle, preying on the gullible and the uninformed in a time of easy money. The vaunted time share business lures credulous vacationers into visiting Westgate's "luxury" accommodations, impressing them with facile extras, then gets them to sign contracts—with a big down payment up front—to "acquire" their own condo for a few days a year. This is a ploy to convince the non-rich that they can be just like the nouveau riche.

This particular time share empire was based on getting unsophisticated people to cough up for what they could not afford, one of the lovelier aspects of a once booming economy, and a cash cow that would die quickly as strapped buyers realized they didn't really need those luxury suites. Die quickly it does, as David Siegel readily admits, while he struggles to maintain any or all of his properties (he is especially possessive about his Las Vegas outpost) and his own Versailles sits half-done.

Greenfield is attempting to humanize, not satirize, these minor league Masters of the Universe and, to some degree, she succeeds. Still, any American with even a minor bent for prudence and discretion will wonder aloud how has our society evolved to reward such narcissistic creatures and will, in their evident demise, find plenty of *Schadenfreude*.

*(The film is unrated and runs 100 minutes.)*

(August 2012)