

The Queen of Versailles: American “royalty” seeks to build its own palace

Fred Mazelis
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Directed by Lauren Greenfield

The new documentary, *The Queen of Versailles*, advertised at least in part as a kind of reality show based on the tale of a Florida billionaire and his wife who set out to build a 90,000-square-foot home inspired by Louis XIV’s palace in Versailles, is in fact a good deal more serious than its media coverage might suggest.

Filmmaker Lauren Greenfield, also an artist and documentary photographer, has come up with a movie that to some extent holds up a mirror to twenty-first century America. It would be difficult for any thinking viewer of the film to come away without some serious questions about the state of contemporary society.

David Siegel, 74 years old when the film was begun some four years ago, grew up in Indianapolis. His father was a businessman who apparently gambled away most of his earnings. The younger Siegel was determined to achieve wealth on a grand scale. He got his big chance in 1980, launching what was to become Westgate Resorts, a vast empire based on timeshare vacation homes.

Jackie Siegel, 30 years younger than her husband, comes from a working class background in the upstate New York town of Binghamton. When she met and married Siegel in 1995, it was her second marriage and his third.

Jackie was certainly a trophy wife, as that term has come into use in recent decades. She turned out to be something more, however, bearing seven children with her second husband. The family also includes a teenaged niece of Jackie’s adopted by the Siegels after her own family unravels.

The fabulously wealthy Siegels already own a private jet, employ a house staff of 19 and live in a 26,000-square-foot home near Orlando, Florida, but

this residence, with its 17 bathrooms and other luxuries, is not enough. Siegel tells the filmmaker that he decided to build the country’s largest home “because I could.” The home is designed to resemble Versailles, a preposterous ambition that, if it had actually been completed, would have stood out primarily for vulgarity and ugliness. It was to include 30 bathrooms, 10 kitchens, two tennis courts, a baseball field, an ice-skating rink, a bowling alley and an entire wing for the family’s children.

Before the new house is half completed, however, the Siegels’ dream comes undone with the crash of the real estate market and the subsequent financial collapse. The planned documentary on the largest home in America becomes instead an exploration of the impact of this collapse, primarily on the Siegels and their employees, but raising broader issues as well.

Timeshares were part and parcel of the real estate and subprime mortgage frenzy built up with the crucial assistance of every major financial institution in the United States. Just as working people were induced to purchase homes with little or no regard for their ability to pay, so millions were persuaded to put 10 percent down on mortgages of \$100,000 and more that would supposedly provide them with a dream vacation home for two weeks out of every year.

As Siegel himself puts it in the film, “If they can’t be rich, the next best thing is to feel rich. If they don’t [want to feel rich], they’re probably dead.”

Richard Siegel, Siegel’s son by his first marriage and the vice-president of Westgate Resorts, tells sales staff, by way of job training, “We’re saving lives, we’re saving marriages...make a sale, save a life”—the idea being that the real estate swindlers are actually helping their victims by bringing them some happiness.

With the drying up of credit and the inability of many

customers to make mortgage payments on their timeshares, Siegel embarks on a desperate search for cash. More than half of the film is devoted to this unraveling of his business, and there are more than a few moments when one feels that enough has been said and shown about this family and its fate.

The construction of the new home quickly grinds to a halt. Westgate Resorts shrinks to a shadow of its former size, and Siegel's major "achievement," a 52-story hotel in Las Vegas, is eventually lost. Still, even though they must fly coach and Jackie tells her teenaged children that they may have to go to college and make their own way in the world, the family retains its 26,000-square-foot home and a very wealthy lifestyle.

For the Siegels' personal staff and Westgate Resorts' employees, however, it is a very different story. As in every area of the economy, the super-rich at most have to tighten their belts, while the working class is devastated.

The Siegels' staff is reduced from 19 to 4, with the remaining nannies and assistants doing the work of all the departed employees. Some 7,000 Westgate workers are thrown onto the unemployment lines.

One of the most revealing and moving moments in the movie is an interview with one of the nannies, who has not seen her children in the Philippines in 19 years. "I still have kids, the Siegel kids," she says, but her tears tell us of the emotional and psychological toll the job has taken. A co-worker explains that she must support her children, her brother and sister and her parents back in the Philippines. She promised her father she would build him a concrete home, but he died before she was able to fulfill the pledge.

The film, quite correctly for what it is trying to accomplish, does not comment directly on any of these events, leaving the viewer to draw his or her own conclusion or to ponder their significance.

The portrait of the Siegels is nonetheless an important one. Jackie, whatever her weaknesses, is clearly attached to her family and says she will make do, whatever happens. She announces at one point that she is prepared to live in a "\$300,000, four-bedroom house," which would of course be more than adequate for the vast majority.

David Siegel is the main protagonist here. While the film makes no attempt to demonize him, he is contemptible on many levels. He has always shown

only perfunctory interest in his children, at one point criticizing Jackie as a compulsive shopper and then adding, "She can't have one child, she's got to have seven."

Siegel is a typical representative of the vulgar and ignorant nouveau riche who have multiplied in the last four decades in the U.S. He comes across as a poor imitation of Donald Trump. His idea of great fun is to surround himself, in the style of Silvio Berlusconi, with all 50 contestants in the Miss America contest, invited to his mansion for a reception during the annual pageant.

At one point, Siegel boasts that he got George W. Bush elected in 2000, but refuses to elaborate because "it may not have been legal." It appears that the boast may be somewhat overstated, according to a recent account in *Businessweek* magazine, which reports that Siegel's claim is based on the fact that he polled his employees on their political preferences and helped likely Bush voters get to the polls.

Apparently Siegel, after having collaborated in the production of the film, was not too pleased with the final version. He reportedly sued the filmmaker for "defamation," an action that is still in court. He has also demanded a "clarification" explaining that Westgate Resorts has recovered from its financial woes, and that construction on his 90,000-square-foot home has resumed.

Greenfield's film is timely. More important than the mediocrity or greed of Siegel is the issue of what kind of social and economic system creates the conditions for such an individual to rise to the top and determine the fate of so many thousands of employees and customers.



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