

# Sundance and Squalor

*'Grey Gardens' cultivates a kindred musical collaboration.*

**"I**t was not like the usual actors' experience at all," enthuses Mary Louise Wilson, describing the two weeks she and fellow actor Christine Ebersole spent at the Sundance Institute Theatre Lab in Yulee, Fla., working on *Grey Gardens*, a new musical that opened Off-Broadway March 7 at Playwrights Horizons. "Quite the opposite, in fact," she says. "This was very glamorous."

"Most people dream about this but never get it in real life," adds Ebersole, who isn't just referring to the luxury treatment the artists received at the White Oak Plantation, a 7,500-acre property in northern Florida. She and Wilson became vital contributors to *Grey Gardens* as the musical moved from the page to the stage. Working on it on and off for over a year, they developed a personal bond that enriches their performances. "I would say it was an ideal experience," Wilson says.

The work of composer Scott Frankel, lyricist Michael Korie, and book writer Doug Wright, who won the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in drama for his play *I Am My Own Wife*, the musical is based on the 1975 documentary *Grey Gardens*, depicting the daily lives of Edith Bouvier Beale and her middle-aged daughter, known as Little Edie, in their decrepit mansion in East Hampton, N.Y. The squalor in which they lived is startling because Big Edie, as Beale was called, was Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis' aunt. Both women once enjoyed the same privileged, glamorous lifestyle associated with the former first lady. Famed documentarians Albert and David Maysles filmed the Beales, warts and all.

Ebersole says she first encountered the documentary long before she heard it was going to become a musical; a friend recommended it to her when she was in L.A. working on a TV show. "I became obsessed with it," she recalls. "I had such a strong identification with these characters, it was endlessly compelling to me. I don't really understand why. I would watch it first thing in the morning and the last thing at night while I was languishing in Los Angeles." It had quite the opposite effect on Wilson: "I was horrified by the film," she says. "I think there's not

a woman in New York City who doesn't live in fear that she might become a bag lady. I just thought, 'There but for the grace of God go I.' They were living in all that trash and it seemed so depressing to me." But as Wilson got to know the film better, she began to see it in a different light: "There is such a connection between the mother and daughter—the support and competition. There's so much humanity there."

It was Frankel's idea to turn *Grey Gardens* into a musical. He and his collaborators agreed that merely translating the film, which lacks a plot and shows the women only in decline, was not enough for a full-scale tuner. So they wrote an entire first act, set in 1941, to provide a backstory for the Beales, depicting them in their heyday. In the film we get a few glimpses of that life through the photograph albums and



Christine Ebersole and Mary Louise Wilson in *Grey Gardens*.

ALL PHOTOS BY JOAN MARCUS

scrapbooks the women show the filmmakers. At the time of the Sundance workshop, in December 2004, the writers had completed a draft of Act I, but only had a few songs for Act II, which is set in 1973, the timeframe of the documentary. Only after Ebersole and Wilson came on board did the show crystallize, says Frankel.

"We really lucked out that those ladies were interested and were available to go with us to Sundance," he says. "A lot of the numbers were, in a sense, written specifically for them. The fantastic thing about Sundance is the almost immediate turnaround time from inspiration to execution. We would rehearse during the day, and then if I wanted to write a new number for Christine to sing, I would do so in this spectacular [studio] down there, and then I would hand it over to her the next morning."

At White Oak, a sanctuary for the conservation of threatened and endangered species, it's not unusual for the daily routine to include horseback riding or even feeding camels or giraffes. "It's like being in a high-end resort," Wilson says. "We were fed magnificently—three huge meals a day. We were so completely outside of civilization that we all developed a craving to be very trashy and took a bus trip one day to Wal-Mart." Being in a pampered environment—and especially being in close proximity to the creative team, including director Michael Grief—"lends itself to the creative process," Ebersole says. "They say power comes from giving it away. Everyone there was open to contributing thoughts and ideas."

## Turning 'Grey'

In *Grey Gardens*, Ebersole plays two roles. Not only is she Little Edie in Act II, but in Act I she plays Big Edie as a young woman (Wilson plays Big Edie in Act II). "My God, it's my Lear!" Ebersole jokes. "It's interesting, because Act I is not based on anything that you actually see in the film except through photographs, so you really use your imagination. It's fun to inhabit that world of upper-crust American royalty. A

few years back I played Millicent Jordan in *Dinner at Eight*, so I'm familiar with that kind of world." Commenting on the dual role, Frankel says, "I like what it says about the synergy between mothers and daughters. Maybe they're not so dissimilar as sometimes they would like us to think."

"Christine has so many different voices and styles," Frankel says. Ebersole won the 2001 Tony Award for best actress in a musical for the revival of *42nd Street* and more recently starred on Broadway in *Steel Magnolias*. "She belts, she has soprano, she does comedy, she does emotional—and she is such an expert vocal mimic. It really freed me to write in all sorts of styles knowing that she is so fluid in her abilities. That's the biggest gift and opportunity a writer can have—knowing that someone is not only game to do whatever you throw at them, but is also so technically adept that you don't have to worry about any kind of vocal production or if the key were out of their range."

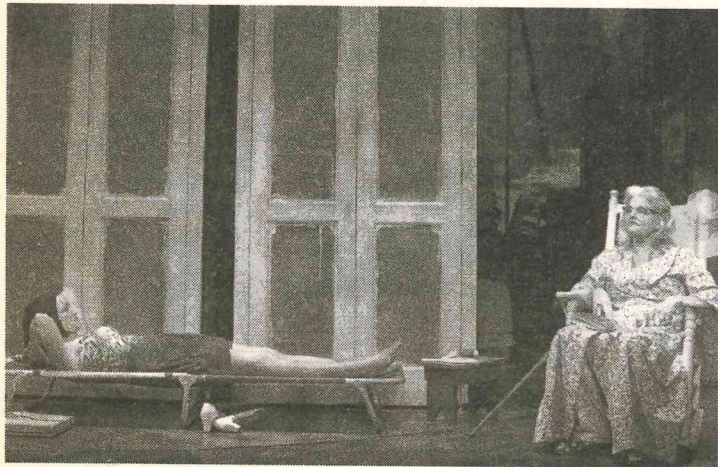
A song called "Around the World," for example, was written specifically for Ebersole at the Sundance lab. It taps into Little Edie's frustration at being stuck at Grey Gardens, the family's mansion, with her mother and not being able to realize her ambitions of becoming a dancer and traveling overseas. "It has a very aggressive energetic verse, kind of spitfire, with lots of words, and then a very lyrical, music box-like chorus," Frankel explains. "I knew that even though she has a spectacular voice, she would be able to play against it in a way. She speaks it in a kind of near pitch and to rhythm. That delays the bittersweet, beautiful qualities of the chorus, on which of course she also sounds fantastic." Ebersole says she is better able to meet the challenges of playing the role because the material was written with her range in mind: "It really helps access the story in a way, because you're not struggling with the notes."

Wilson, who earned a 1996 Drama Desk Award for *Full Gallop*, the solo play about Diana Vreeland she wrote with

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**"There is such a connection between the mother and daughter—the support and competition. There's so much humanity there."**

—Mary Louise Wilson



Wilson



Ebersole

> Robert Towne

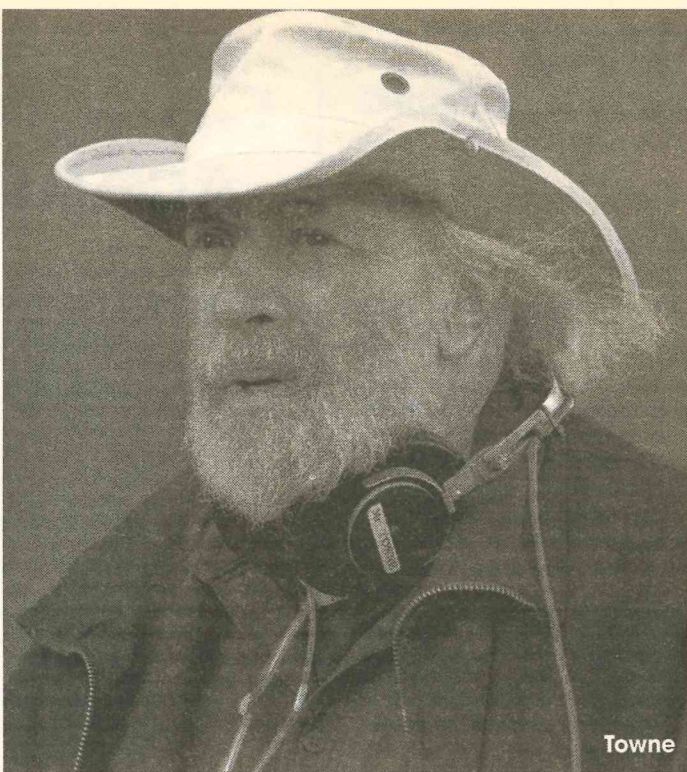
# A Dream Realized

Although it sounds more dramatic—and thus triumphant—to say screenwriter-director Robert Towne spent more than three decades trying to make *Ask the Dust*, a film inspired by John Fante's 1939 novel of the same name, Towne didn't start writing the script until 1993. Still, it

*Shampoo*, *The Last Detail*, and the first two *Mission: Impossible* films, as well as writing and directing such films as *Tequila Sunrise* and *Personal Best*.

But *Ask the Dust* is different, says Towne, a 71-year-old Los Angeles native. "It's a period piece, politically incorrect, and the characters aren't

DAVID BLOOMER/PARAMOUNT



Towne

career took off, his friendship with and admiration for Fante grew. It angered him that Fante never received broad-based recognition. Interestingly, Towne and Francis Ford Coppola were instrumental in getting one of Fante's later novels, *Brotherhood of the Grape*, published in 1977. Further, Towne never gave up on the idea of turning *Ask the Dust* into a movie, especially in the wake of Fante's death in 1983. Towne wrote the screenplay on spec, which is virtually unheard of for a writer of his stature.

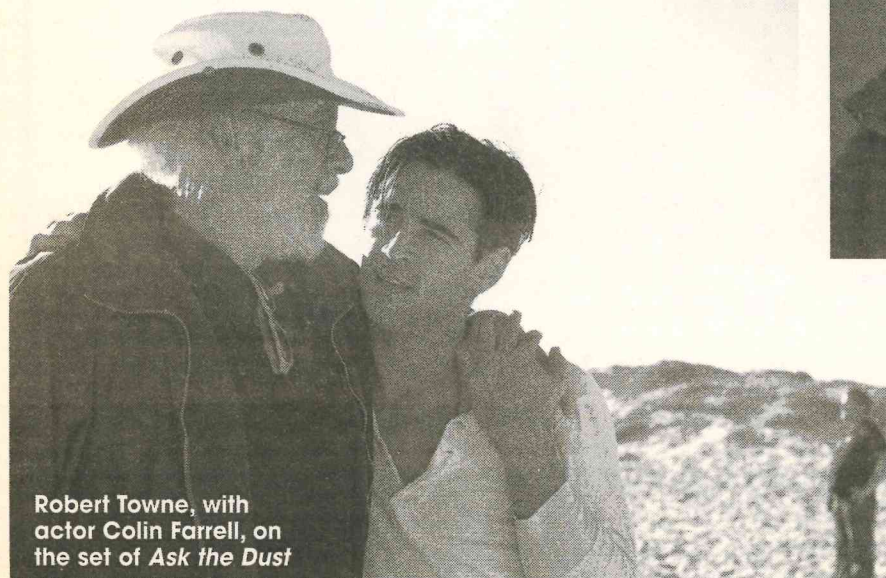
## Sharing a Vision

Towne had no particular ambitions growing up and came to screenwriting almost serendipitously. At Pomona College he majored in philosophy, "mostly because I liked the philosophy professor with whom I took a class, read the works of [James] Agee, and decided I wanted to be a screenwriter," he says, "I didn't care that screenwriting was not reputable [in those days]."

He joined an acting class taught by the late Jeff Corey that included such future notables as Irving Kushner, producer Roger Corman, Sally Kellerman, Richard Chamberlain, and Jack Nicholson—all of whom shared a common sensibility, enhanced by their feelings for Corey, an actor who was blacklisted at the time. "That had an effect on us," Towne says. "We loved him and felt he was being treated unfairly." The class was also committed to a new artistic vision that arguably grew out of its politics. "We wanted to bring a level of realism to the screen," Towne says.

For starters, by the mid-1960s, the studios were loosening the production—also known as the Hays—code. Secondly, and equally relevant, the film world was feeling the encroaching impact of television and understood it had to elevate the quality of what it was producing on the large screen, "to

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Robert Towne, with actor Colin Farrell, on the set of *Ask the Dust*

movie star between the time he said he was interested and the time the movie was made, he and Salma took very low salaries, and we shot the movie in South Africa," Towne explains off-handedly. "So, why shouldn't we be accommodated?"

That said, *Ask the Dust* represents an almost unprecedented commitment on Towne's part. There were any number of films he could have tackled, but Fante's story haunted him for 30 years: the obsessive sadomasochistic love affair between Italian-American writer Arturo Bandini (Farrell) and doomed Mexican-American waitress Camilla Lopez (Hayek) played out on

the outskirts of Depression-era Los Angeles. In some ways, *Ask the Dust* is "a companion piece to *Chinatown*," says Towne. "Both films were born at the same moment. I found the novel when I was researching *Chinatown*, looking for materials that evoked the ambiance of the era and the way people spoke. The snappy dialogue of the 1930s movies did not convince me.

"When I found the novel I fell in love with it," he continues. "It jogged my own memories of my youth in Los Angeles. I had walked down these streets and knew what the air felt like, all the dust and so little foliage. It was a story I wanted to tell, and I believed it would work as a film."

Towne met with the novelist, and the two clicked immediately; their respective experiences as unknowns was a bond. But even after Towne's

took the writer-director 12 years to generate the necessary financial backing. He insists it's not all that hard to fathom, despite his impressive track record that includes writing the iconic and Academy Award-winning *Chinatown*, which earned him an Oscar for best original screenplay in 1974. His other eclectic scripting credits include

very nice to each other," he observes. "The moneymen—it's not the producers, it's the moneymen—were afraid no one would like these characters." Whatever the perceived stumbling blocks, *Ask the Dust* is slated for nationwide release March 10 and stars Colin Farrell and Salma Hayek. "What changed is that Colin became a

## Grey Gardens

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Mark Hampton, and a 1998 Tony nomination for the Broadway revival of *Cabaret*, also works against her vocal talents as Big Edie. "She has a fantastic singing voice, and I ask her in some instances not to sing as well as she does," says Frankel. In real life, Big Edie aspired to be a singer, and in the documentary she sings along with recordings she made 30 years earlier of "Tea for Two" and other popular songs. "I'm really interested in seeing the tension between what someone's voice sounded like when they were young and how as we age and decay sets in, you have less range, less power, and your pitch isn't as secure," says Frankel.

"Some of the songs are in my head, and then there are songs that I sing in another voice," Wilson says, adding that what was more difficult was impersonating an old lady who, though ailing, is the dominant presence in the film. "I didn't want to do it so closely to the film so that it seems like I'm just imitating her. Her very strong quality is something very far away from me, and I like that." Big Edie's positive outlook, she notes, reminds her of Vreeland's pragmatism: "I think Big Edie is basically not an unhappy woman. Since she was young, she had this sense of mission, which was to sing and make herself happy. She just wouldn't look at the things that were not pleasant—like her husband not being around, for instance. You could call it denial, but when she's sitting in her bed covered

with clutter and cats and she says, 'I've had everything I have ever wanted,' she absolutely means it."

The second act of *Grey Gardens* began coming together at Sundance when Wilson and Ebersole started playing off each other as mother and daughter. "We mainly worked on the interplay between the two women, and I must say that was very easy," Wilson recalls. "I think they cast it well, and instinctively we're both right for the roles. We were just actresses with good timing and were able to work off the other person, which isn't always the case. We could fall easily into the rhythm of overlapping answer-and-response."

The actors also worked with a transcript of the film, according to Frankel: "It was divorced from the performances in the film, because when you're cre-

ating or adapting something for a new medium, being faithful to the essence sometimes means having less fidelity to the actual replication of a deed or a moment. After inhabiting those roles for a while, they invariably had opinions as to what felt organic and right for how they thought the characters should behave or act. Sometimes there were things we didn't agree with, but more often than not they were able to bring a perspective to the creative process as performers that we as writers didn't have."

Or, as Wilson puts it, "We took the lines and ran with it."

## Going 'Grey'

"One discussion would spark something else," recalls Ebersole of the sessions at White Oak. "Nothing was etched in stone. Subsequently I feel like I've been able to contribute a lot to the shape and the telling of the story. I'm very grateful for that because, although I never met her, I feel this responsibility towards Edie. What would she feel? I guess it's an obligation to tell their story with all of the colors that made them tick." And the three writers "were amazing," Wilson adds. "If you said, 'Could I say this instead of that?,' or if some line stuck in your head from the film and you said it would be great to have that in here,

they would accommodate. They were very generous in that way." Frankel is equally complimentary. "We thought they were the cat's meow!" he says. "It was just a very happy confluence of events that allowed us to be working on the same thing. As soon as we started working with them, it became clear that they were very special."

The work at Sundance also seems to have forged a strong personal connection between the women, who slip into playful, affectionate banter paralleling that of the Edies. When asked if they knew they were going to continue with the show after the lab, their dialogue went like this:

**WILSON:** No. I was not sure...

**EBERSOLE:** Oh, yes! There was no one else, mother darling, there was no one else. It wasn't a case of we're not sure if Mary Louise is the right person—no, no, no, no!

**WILSON:** Well, I said, 'Not unless Christine is going to do it.'

**EBERSOLE:** I wasn't going to do it without her, either.

**WILSON:** I have to say, I think Christine is a genius, and it makes me feel proud that I'm working with her.

**EBERSOLE:** Well, I feel the same.

**WILSON:** It doesn't happen every day.  
**EBERSOLE:** It's such a great game of pingpong.

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