

‘The Queen of Versailles’ Takes Comedic Look at Riches-to-Rags Tale

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- [David Siegel](#) [2]
- [HollywoodChicago.com Content](#) [3]
- [Jackie Siegel](#) [4]
- [Lauren Greenfield](#) [5]
- [Magnolia Pictures](#) [6]
- [Matt Fagerholm](#) [7]
- [Movie Review](#) [8]
- [Sundance Film Festival](#) [9]
- [The Queen of Versailles](#) [10]
- [Westgate Resorts](#) [11]



Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Whenever I hear someone complain about the inexplicable popularity of an obscenely rich and distressingly vapid non-celebrity, I’m reminded of the last scene in “Chicago,” when murderess-turned-superstar Roxy Hart blows a kiss to her adoring fans after exclaiming, “Believe us, we could not have done it without you!” No one maintains a celebrity status without a whole lot of help from the general public.

So what is it that attracts us to watching the triumphs and tantrums of “one percenters” as they bask in their exorbitant wealth? Are audiences merely viewing out of envy? Or do they view the cluttered yet empty lives of these people as an empowering cautionary tale? I suspect it’s a combination of both, which is what makes shows like “My Super Sweet 16” and “Bridezillas” register as the guiltiest of exploitative pleasures.

At first, “The Queen of Versailles” appears to be little more than an extended episode of a TLC-style reality TV series in which the rich are mocked for the amusement of the 99 percent. With her blonde hair, Botox injections and tight clothes designed to frame her buxom cleavage, Jackie Siegel comes across like a larger-than-life caricature of a stereotypical trophy wife. Her husband, David, is thirty years her senior, and candidly admits that he finds no strength in their marriage. He sees her as more of a child than a partner, and if there’s one thing the Siegels like to collect, it’s children. Their 26,000 square foot mansion houses a total of eight children, and though their home is indeed spacious, the family is still in need of more room. In 2007, construction began on the family’s 90,000 square foot palace modeled after Versailles, which resembles (in a jaw-dropping helicopter shot) Millionaire Estates in The Game of Life. While touring the house’s unfinished interiors, a friend points at an enormous self-contained space and asks, “Is that your room?” to which Jackie replies, “No, that’s my closet!” The utter lack of irony in Jackie’s voice causes her to sound like a skilled deadpan comedian, but her near-pathological compulsion to consume causes many of the laughs to stick in one’s throat. How can the family afford such an outrageous abode? Because David is the owner of Westgate Resorts, a timeshare company that specializes in selling lower class couples the opportunity to “feel rich” for a weekend. David’s adult son from another marriage, Richard, is the company’s senior executive, and is seen rallying his troops by comparing the vitality of their work with that of doctors and firefighters.



David and Jackie Siegel in *The Queen of Versailles*, a Magnolia Pictures release.

Photo credit: Lauren Greenfield/Magnolia Pictures

Condescending to these people would've been too easy a task, and Greenfield earned her Best Director award at Sundance by approaching the Siegels as characters rather than as targets. This is perhaps the most empathetic portrait that could've possibly been crafted of these people, as the subprime mortgage crisis forces them to cut back dramatically on their spending. David's goal of funding his new Las Vegas resort, the Ph Towers Westgate, now appears to be in jeopardy. The Siegel children are forced to switch from private to public schools while Jackie finds herself Christmas shopping at Walmart. It's not long before Versailles threatens to become little more than a Quixotic dream as the Siegels attempt to sell the hollow shell of the building for a staggering \$75 million. As David gradually awakens to the sobering reality of his predicament, he has difficulty repressing his ornery resentment at his family's routine pattern of carelessness. In one of the film's funniest and saddest sequences, various family members attempt to break David out of his funk, while ignoring their own complicity in his enraged state. He's peeved that the family refuses to live within their newly restricted means, and is beside himself when he realizes the number of lights that are left illuminating empty rooms. After her latest failed attempt at buttering him up, Jackie whispers to the cameraman, "I know it's nothing that I did."

Greenfield and her cinematographer Tom Hurwitz have a deft eye for the absurd, and capture some unforgettable moments of unscripted poignance. In one brilliant shot, the camera is placed on a playground roundabout where a couple of the Siegel girls are seated, as their little brother spins the wheel faster and faster, huffing and puffing into the lens before collapsing onto the ground. Apart from being explosively funny, the scene can also be read as a metaphor for the laborious duties of the family's servants, which often go unacknowledged. In preparation for a holiday party, one of the long-suffering nannies is required to put on a humiliating Rudolph costume complete with a blinking nose. As the Siegel's money troubles cause the majority of their servants to be fired, the house starts to swiftly dismantle. Forgotten pets wind up dead as piles of dog feces litter the floors. The ensuing chaos leads Jackie to deliver one of her most priceless lines: "We need to find those puppies before the python eats them!" There's delicious irony in the fact that the family's fate was sealed largely by George W. Bush, who David helped win the presidency by utilizing methods that "may not have been legal." Talk about poetic justice.



Jackie Siegel in *The Queen of Versailles*, a Magnolia Pictures release.

Photo credit: Lauren Greenfield/Magnolia Pictures

Though David appears to gain some wisdom in the midst of his personal and professional turmoil, his behavior since the film's success suggests the opposite. He claims that Greenfield grossly misrepresented his business's struggles and has threatened to sue the director as well as Magnolia Pictures. The inarguable factuality of the film's footage makes his claims groundless, and though the family's financial woes have allegedly improved since production wrapped, the film's portrait of the economic crisis, and its wide-ranging impact on America's capitalistic appetite, remains no less relevant and provocative. If David didn't want the filmmakers to use the quote, "a riches to rags story," then perhaps he shouldn't have said it on camera. Despite her daffy behavior, Jackie ultimately emerges as a more sympathetic character than her husband (whose wandering eye resulted in a sexual harassment charge for which he was found guilty in 2008). After leaving an abusive marriage, Jackie was attracted to David not only for his financial stability but his supposedly unconditional adoration. She was one of many beauty contestants who caught his eye, and even decades later, Jackie still looks like she's a step away from breaking into a runway pose. Though she laughs off David's claim that once she turns 40, he'll trade her in for two 20-year-olds, it's difficult to tell whether the old man is joking. "The Queen of Versailles" is a hugely entertaining film, but I felt relieved when it was over. 100 minutes is a fine amount of time to spend with these people, but I don't think I could bear their company for the entirety of a TLC series.

'The Queen of Versailles' features Jackie Siegel, David Siegel and Virginia Nebab. It was directed by Lauren Greenfield. It opened August 3rd at the Landmark Century Centre Cinema and the Music Box Theatre. It is rated PG.



[12]

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[4] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/jackie-siegel>

[5] <http://www.hollywoodchicago.com/reviews/lauren-greenfield>

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