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In 'The Queen of Versailles,' Kristin Chenoweth Can't Get Enough

By Laura Collins-Hughes

Material excess can never be too excessive for the central character of this gilded Broadway musical, based on the 2012 film.



Orlando, Fla., already had a Cinderella, over at Disney World. But it got a real-life variation in Jackie Siegel, who went from poor to rich when she said “I do,” then lived insatiably ever after — even when her billionaire husband’s fortune vanished for a while, and even when tragedy struck their family.

Her supersized version of the American dream might seem a tiny bit much, involving as it does a 90,000-square-foot gilded palace, with marble everywhere. The muchness is the point, however, in Stephen Schwartz and Lindsey Ferrentino’s smart and sparkling new musical, “The Queen of Versailles,” which opened on

Sunday at the St. James Theater. A winsome, funny Kristin Chenoweth stars as Jackie, a nonchalantly voracious dynamo for whom material excess is never excessive enough.

“If you can make things bigger — do!” she says, spelling out her credo for the film crew that’s documenting the snail’s-pace construction of her home. (Set and video design are by Dane Laffrey.)

Ostensibly, its vulgar grandeur is modeled on the Palace of Versailles; thus its nickname. But Jackie’s husband, David (F. Murray Abraham), says the inspiration for the Siegels’ Versailles was actually “the top three floors of the Paris Hotel in Vegas.” Either way, the indulgences of French royalty frame the show and fuel Jackie’s fantasies, notwithstanding Marie Antoinette’s violent end when the populace rebelled — a moment that the musical revisits.

Based on Lauren Greenfield’s 2012 documentary of the same name, and on the life stories of the real Jackie and David Siegel, “The Queen of Versailles” is more than an entertaining biomusical with a hummable score. Directed by Michael Arden, it’s also a sociological fairy tale — the kind in which flawed people lose their way, and something terribly sad happens, irreversibly.

The dark shadow in this story is the death of the teenage Victoria (Nina White), Jackie’s cherished firstborn. That might seem a spoiler, but knowing that she died, in 2015, only adds to the musical’s poignancy. In an earlier version, last year in Boston, the creators hadn’t figured out how to balance the loss of Victoria within the larger story, which it threatened to overwhelm. Now, gracefully and persuasively, the relationship between Jackie and Victoria has become the musical’s emotional through line.

With a prologue set at the 17th-century French court of the cosseted nitwit Louis XIV (Pablo David Laucerica), where Schwartz has tailored the music to the period, “The Queen of Versailles” is a luxuriously appointed critique of winner-take-all-and-crush-the-rest capitalism. If that seems surprising coming from the composer-lyricist of the monster hit “Wicked,” it is less so when you remember that one of his early musicals was “Working,” adapted from the oral historian Studs Terkel’s interviews with ordinary Americans about how they make their living.

Chenoweth, Broadway’s original “Wicked” Glinda, is incredibly likable as the young Jackie, a spunky go-getter juggling multiple menial jobs and putting herself through college to earn an engineering degree. She is determined to pull herself farther up the ladder than her salt-of-the-earth parents, Debbie and John (Isabel Keating and Stephen DeRosa, both excellent), have ever managed to climb.

They inhabit a “slice of lower-middle class Americana,” as Jackie puts it in the aspirational song “Caviar Dreams” — the title cribbed from Robin Leach’s tagline on the 1980s TV series “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous,” which Jackie and her parents watch together. “Some folks can live with the lack,” she sings. “I’m on a different track.”

That we follow her along that track so willingly is thanks to her considerable charm, and her being in on the joke. She can laugh at herself, even at getting breast augmentation surgery as a social-survival means to an end. But she has dignity.

When her first husband turns controlling, she plans to fund her escape by winning the Mrs. Florida beauty pageant, whose host croons a deliciously sleazy song: “Even married women can be beautiful, if you take care to keep that figure trim.” And when she recalls for the filmmakers that her soon-to-be ex hit her after her victory, she raises her chin and doesn’t let slip the relentless smile that is her armor.

Jackie is a broke single mother to baby Victoria when she meets David, 30 years her senior. In courtship mode, he is smooth as can be. Only years later, after his timeshare empire implodes in the 2008 economic crash, do we see the personal viciousness lurking beneath. It is a juicy role, and Abraham expertly squeezes every drop. David is faintly terrifying — not least because of his chilly dynamic with his right-hand man, Gary (Greg Hildreth), who pays him tribute in the comic Western number, “The Ballad of the Timeshare King.”

Ferrentino has cleverly streamlined the real Siegels’ story, which involves a half-dozen more children than the musical has room for. “Can you find all my other kids?” Jackie asks Sofia (Melody Butiu), the nanny, and Ray (David Aron Damane), the chauffeur, in a cute acknowledgment. Jonquil, the niece who joins the family, does make the cut here. Like Sofia and Ray, Jonquil (Tatum Grace Hopkins) is an ambassador from the world of people of less than robust means.

When the Siegels’ fortunes temporarily dim with the economy, the show makes a rare tonal misstep, using the death of a pet lizard from neglect — horrifying in the documentary — as an occasion for a lighthearted duet between Jonquil and Victoria. It’s a fun song, but the moral discord mars it.

Still, throughout the show, White gives a beautifully sensitive performance as the awkward, cleareyed Victoria, who loves her mother, does not share her shallowness, yet teases her without a trace of adolescent venom. “You look like you’re from Whoville,” she tells Jackie, accurately, about one Seussian getup. (Costumes are by Christian Cowan.)

White’s solos, angry in “Pretty Wins,” distraught in “The Book of Random,” are high points of the production. “Little Houses,” a multicharacter paeon to the comforts of a simpler life — the kind of existence that Victoria longs for — has been nicely reworked since Boston and now feels not sentimental but warm.

And Chenoweth is a wonder, sounding a little bit country whenever Jackie is most herself, as in “Each and Every Day,” a love song to the infant Victoria; taking her high notes out for a spin in “The Royal We,” a duet with Marie Antoinette (Cassandra James); and convincing us for a moment, in a turn-on-a-dime song called “Grow the Light,” that Jackie has recalibrated her priorities. Not so.

For the central character of this tale, living out her American dream, there is no point of satiation. There is only a vast emptiness that must be filled with more, more, more.

Preferably, of course, dipped in gold.

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