

The De-throning

A new CBS movie dishes the dirt on real estate

Airs Sunday,
September 23 at
9 pm on Channel 2

YOU'RE A CROOK; you're stealing." This terse summation was then quickly followed by your immediate dismissal from the Queen's employ. It was a scenario that billionaire Leona Helmsley allegedly played out on an almost daily basis on anyone who had the misfortune to cross her path—hotel staff, business associates, friends and even relatives—during the height of her power, wealth and paranoia in the early 1980s. Ironically, this remark was one of the *grande dame* of the Helmsley Palace would never have dreamed of applying to herself. And yet, never was an assessment of character more true.

Just how Leona Helmsley clawed her way to the top of the real-estate profession and into billionaire Harry Helmsley's heart, only to come crashing down in the late 1980s on charges of tax evasion, extortion and fraud, is the focus of the new CBS television movie "Leona Helmsley: The Queen of Mean," which airs Sunday, September 23 at 9 pm on Channel 2. Based on the unauthorized biography of Helmsley by Ransdell Pierson (the *New York Post* reporter who broke the Helmsley tax-evasion scandal) "The Queen of Mean" stars Suzanne Pleshette as the power-hungry Leona and Lloyd Bridges as her beloved husband, hotel king Harry Helmsley.

The drama opens in 1953 and chronicles the Brooklyn-born Leona Rosenthal's life from the divorce of her first husband, Leo Panzier, her second marriage and divorce from attorney Joe Lubin, to her years as a successful but ruthless Manhattan real-estate broker and her wooing wealthy Harry Helmsley away from his wife of 33 years. Becoming Mrs. Harry Helmsley on April 8, 1972,

Leona began to worship two things: money and Harry. Methodically, she began her rise to power within her husband's vast corporate empire, isolating Harry from valued friends and associates so she could better rule his multimillion-dollar businesses with an iron hand. Those who knew her said it was a reign of terror so total and so bizarre that it would become her undoing. In her seemingly insatiable quest for power and prestige, the Queen of the Helmsley Palace made a fatal mistake. To put it in a vein similar to her Helmsley Palace advertising campaign, "I don't pay taxes, why should you?"

Cold-hearted, manipulative, greedy, unscrupulous, demanding, egotistical, arrogant, cruel, paranoid, mad. These are just a few of the adjectives used by former employees, acquaintances and relatives to describe the poor girl who transformed herself into the media goddess known as Mrs. Harry Helmsley. Was she indeed all these horrible things rolled into one? Recalls Lloyd Bridges, who plays Leona's third husband, Helmsley, "We talked to a few of her friends and they all said that she was terrible to her help, too demanding. And unforgiving. And she was certainly a perfectionist about everything, to put it mildly." Bridges acknowledges having met Mrs. Helmsley once when he was staying at the Helmsley Palace. "I was having dinner there and was having my coffee and Leona sat down and talked with me for a little while. . . . It was basically, 'How are you, what are you doing in the city?' We didn't get into any serious conversation. She was just being nice." Joe Regalbuto ("Murphy Brown"), who plays Paul Summerton, one of Leona's few friends from her days as a Manhattan real estate agent, feels "Leona had such a powerful personality. She was poor, but she had such a will. And she obviously had persuasive powers. But," he says, "there's a fine line between being demanding and turning

into this obsessive, crazed creature. . . . I mean, she gets crazed to the point that she says she couldn't sleep all night because there was a crease in her sheet." Regalbuto says he remembers "someone asking me if I thought I would like Leona. And I said, 'Yes, I can just see me and Leona, hangin' out, having a beer.'" He laughs. "But that person pointed out that if Leona wanted you to like her, you probably would. Some of the worst characters in history, Hitler for instance. . . . somehow all managed to charm people." The actor continues, "I don't know if you've noticed, but she's on these PR tours right now. (Case in point: Leona made a point of signing over her 1990 tax check to the IRS on television). This woman is one hell of an actor."

According to Pierson's book, Harry Helmsley was basically a simple man with a great mind for math and making money. He had a reputation as a straight shooter, a conservative man whose first wife, Eve, was a Quaker. Real estate deals were his "passion." Along with his business partner, attorney Lawrence Wien, Helmsley became one of the wealthiest men in America with his acquisitions of the Plaza Hotel, the Empire State Building, his building of the Helmsley Palace and Park Lane hotels and developing the Harley hotel chain. By all accounts, he seemed happily married. So what exactly was it that caused the 60-year-old Helmsley to have his head turned by a 49-year-old real estate broker named Leona Rosenthal?

Bridges theorizes that "the main thing was the sexual attraction and her idolizing him and thinking that he was her king, her prince, that he could do no wrong. That he was handsome and intelligent. That there was no one like Harry. She built up his ego and he went for it." Bridges says, "It still seems amazing that this man who had all the reins before he had any contact with

of a Queen

mogul Leona Helmsley. By Pamela Castellano

her. . . just took a back seat when she came onto the scene. I guess he liked seeing his partner have a ball." It is interesting to note that Bridges and Regalbuto both feel that Leona really does love Harry. "At first, I hadn't made up my mind on this," said Regalbuto. "You know, he was older and you just figure she's an opportunistic woman."

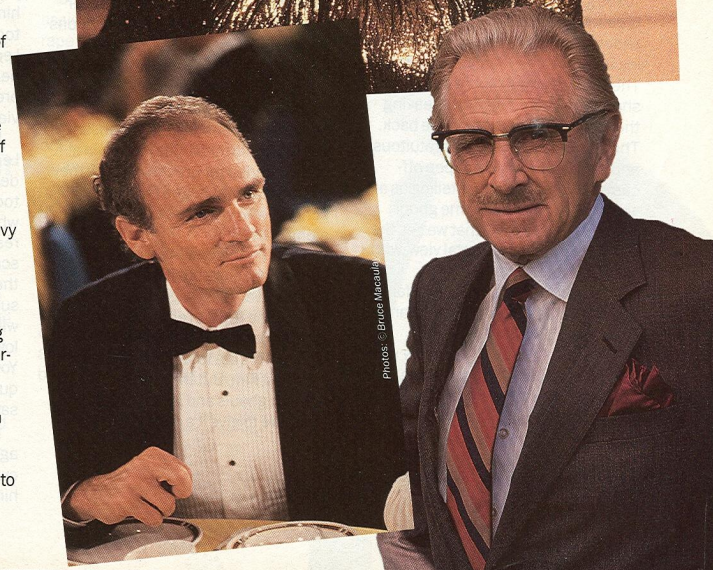
To her co-stars, Suzanne Pleshette's portrayal of Leona is nothing short of astonishing. Says Bridges, "She really did a bang-up job. I think the way that Suzanne plays her is quite (mult) dimensional. She's not just a mean bitch like she's been painted sometimes. I think she'll cause quite a stir with her portrayal of Leona." Regalbuto readily agrees, commenting that "some of the scenes are unbelievable. Suzanne looks so much like her it's eerie. There was a scene where she was dancing because she had just achieved something she wanted and there was a look on her face I swear I'd seen on the news or a magazine cover."

It is strongly suggested at the end of Pierson's book that Leona Helmsley could be a victim of a psychological condition known as narcissistic personality disorder. She displayed all the classic traits: a grandiose sense of self importance, lack of empathy, an unquenchable drive to succeed that cannot be satisfied, a preoccupation with looking youthful and being the envy of others and a tendency toward explosive rage due to severe paranoia. Does the movie draw any conclusions on the riddle named Leona? Bridges thinks "it all harks back to Leona trying to show her mother that she was important and that her mother should have paid more attention to her. Leona was always relegated to the sidelines when she was growing up and that really bothered her. And even when she's on trial, she says, 'Look mother, I'm going to take care of this. I'm important and nobody is going to do me under.'" **T**



Pleshette as Leona along with two of her handsome co-stars: Joe Regalbuto (bottom left) and Lloyd Bridges (bottom right)

"... she'll cause quite a stir with her portrayal of Leona."



Photos: Bruce Macaulay

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