



Star Wattage

A Light-Bulb Princess Entertains

A Profile of True Great
Peggy Siegal

By Jeffrey Slonim

Photography by Patrick McMullan & Co.
for PatrickMcMullan.com

at the Vanity Fair Oscar Party, L.A. 2007

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STAR WATTAGE: A LIGHT-BULB PRINCESS ENTERTAINS

A Profile of True Great PEGGY SIEGAL

Personality Snapshots by Jeffrey Slonim

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It is a steamy Thursday with a mild breeze in the Aegean when the legendary New York PR guru Peggy Siegal takes my call from Patmos, a rugged Greek isle near Bodrum, Turkey, pausing momentarily to tip for a facial. The island's stone houses are built into a rugged mountain; a pale blue sky and turquoise water saturate the vista with color. "The island comes alive at night," explains Siegal, who also pens a chichi film diary for *Avenue* magazine and *The Huffington Post*—an insider guide to Cannes, the Oscars, the Golden Globes, and the Venice Film Festival. "Greek cafes surround the town square and everyone has a scooter," she says.

On top of the mountain, points out Siegal, they restore antiquities with a microscope in an ancient monastery. "Everything is so steep, you could die," she says. "It's like climbing a mountain to get to everyone's house."

Turn the clock back a week, and Siegal describes an even breezier lifestyle in St. Tropez. "I was on Denise Rich's yacht with Marjorie Gubelmann. Ivana Trump was in town. Going to Cinq en Cinq for lunch was like being in Southampton." The LeFraks were at one table, Terry Allan Kramer at another. Siegal power-lunched with Stephen and Christine Schwartzman.

A week later, a note from Siegal begins: "On the way to dinner with Mario D'Urso...my host, and Alba Clemente, who was born in the town of Almalfi and has a home here. We are having drinks at her home with Giambattista Valli and his gang and going out to dinner."

This writer is suitably jealous. So how does a spindly gal who began life in Teaneck, New Jersey, end up vacationing in Ari Onassis' ports of call?

"My grandfather Adam was a stowaway on a boat from Warsaw. In 1905, they were drafting Jewish boys into the Russo-Japanese War. He hopped on a boat and ended up making light bulbs with Thomas Edison in New Jersey. When he died, my grandfather left a company called Marvel, the third-largest light bulb manufacturer, behind General Electric and Westinghouse. We moved from Teaneck, New Jersey, to Englewood cliffs and then to Alpine."

Growing up, Siegal was considered artistic. Her elegant mother exhorted her to become a fashion designer. “I went to Syracuse and majored in art history and fashion.” When she graduated, she designed for Applause, her uncle’s fashion company. “I made a good salary,” she says. “I traveled to Europe three or four times a year. My designs were in all the magazines. The hand-tag label read, ‘Peggy Siegal for Applause.’ But I gave it all up to work for [PR legend] Bobby Zarem,” says Siegal. “He knew everybody, and I found that intriguing.”

Siegal worked with Zarem for two and a half years. “I learned how to do events,” she says. “Then I went to work for Lois Smith at Pickwick with Pat Kinsley and Pat Newcomb. Newcomb was Marilyn Monroe’s press agent. She was the last person to see her alive. Lois had Liza Minnelli and Robert Redford. And she discovered Meryl Streep. We worked with Coppola and Spielberg.”

“I was good with the directors, eager to learn,” says Siegal. “We did the publicity for *Diner* with Barry Levinson and *Dressed to Kill*. And my father gave me money to start Smith and Siegal with Lois Smith. She took care of the actors; I took care of the directors. She was my mentor, like my mother. We opened the New York Film Festival in 1982 with *The Big Chill*. Lois taught me everything.”

When Smith later returned to Pickwick, Siegal set out on her own. “Lorne Michaels rented me a space at Broadway Video. On the same floor were the offices of Lorne Michaels, Paul Simon, Martin Scorsese, Paul Schrader (who wrote *Taxi Driver*), William Shawn (the legendary editor of the *New Yorker*). And Richard Price was writing *Clockers*. I’ve known these guys forever,” she says. “And they’d all come to my office for milk and cookies.”

About that time, the film studios shifted their publicity departments from New York to Los Angeles, according to Siegal. They left skeletal staffs in New York. “I didn’t want to move to L.A.,” she says. “So I convinced the studios to do small screenings for 100 of the right people, instead of 1,100 friends and relatives; small specialized screenings. I brought them a business plan. It was unheard of at the time to find sponsorship. I did every De Palma film, all the Barry Levinson films, the original *Wall Street*. I helped Michael Douglas with his Oscar campaign. I have a 30-year relationship with HBO. I’ve been with HBO longer than Jeff Bewkes,” she says.

Then Michael Fuchs, a family friend, came to power at HBO. “I had had a summer share with Fuchs and [the now late] Claudia Cohen,” she says. “When I left Broadway Video, he gave me free office space at HBO to do their events.”

Siegal and Fuchs basically invented the Hamptons screening. The first was *Women and Men: Stories of Seduction*, a film of short stories with James Woods. “We had a red carpet and limos for the stars,” recalls Siegal. “The town was in an uproar.”

Over the decades, Siegal's chic dinners for Manhattan screenings, at Le Cirque, Osteria del Circo, The Monkey Bar, The Oak Room, and the Plaza Athenee have shuttled countless actors, actresses, and films further down the road to Oscar. At these starry events, this writer has been seated beside both Tom Stoppard and Neil Simon. At Le Cirque, Siegal introduced me to the young James Franco, then starring in an HBO film as James Dean. I knew I'd made it when she seated me at Le Cirque between her tall, handsome brother and her delightful mother (who recently passed away) for the debut of the Woody Allen film *Match Point*.

Recent premieres have included *No Country for Old Men*, *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Frost/Nixon*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Revolutionary Road*, *An Education*, and *Black Swan*. There was a lunch for *Juno*'s Ellen Page, and a dinner for *Blood Diamond* hosted by Leonardo DiCaprio. Over time, the venues have changed: Top of the Standard, Mr. H at the Mondrian in Soho, The Vault at the Pfaff's, Don Hill, and Buddakan. But the formula—an intimate meeting between A-list stars and press—has not.

For *Che*, at a small, round table at the Plaza Athenee, Penelope Cruz and Javier Bardem, generally press-shy, were arm-in-arm over ice cream sundaes. Last year during awards season, Siegal's friend Tom Hooper, the director of *The King's Speech*, was like a Siegal appendage. She shuttled him around town to lunch and award dinners. And he practically rode her arm to the podium, where he accepted the Oscar for *The King's Speech*.

During a hip rooftop lunch for *Blue Valentine* at the Kimberly Hotel with Julian Schnabel, Michelle Williams, and Ryan Gosling, Gosling, generally mute, warmed up to the point of being ebullient. Men like Siegal. When she instructed her buddy Gosling to tell me about the blow-up doll in his living room, he opened up with relish. A few days later, thanks to Siegal, I was plunked down next to Kirsten Dunst at Michael's to discuss *All Good Things* moments after Marie Antoinette had accidentally dipped her sleeve in tea.

Siegal's unparalleled connections and gifts as hostess have made her an Oscar rainmaker, and studios seek out her magic. Her social calendar during the first few months of 2011 might have been a lifetime of achievement for a lesser mortal. She hosted a buffet dinner for *The Kids Are All Right* on January 9. The next day, it was lunch at The Lotus Club for *The King's Speech*. On February 9, Ann Bass hosted a Siegal *Black Swan* lunch at 21. On February 24, Siegal spearheaded an Oscar fete for the Mayor of Los Angeles at his private residence. And on March 18, she hosted a *Book of Mormon* lunch at The Four Seasons.

Over the years, Siegal debuted *You've Got Mail* for her buddy Nora Ephron with a feast at 21, and she was recently chosen to spearhead a lunch at The Four Seasons to celebrate Nelson Mandela's 93rd birthday and his 67 years of service.

As glamorous as any of her jollifications, however, was Siegal's recent dinner celebrating Wendi Deng's film [Snow Flower](#) at Kelly Behun and Jay Sugarman's house on bucolic Meadow Lane in Southampton. Days after Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. scandal broke, Deng felt comfortable enough with Siegal to still green-light a breezy dinner at the Sugarmans' endless modernist beach house—think Warhol and Picasso. Murdoch himself had been meant to attend, and Deng was under enormous pressure. After a lifetime of high-pressure entertaining, as usual, Siegal hit that party out of the park.

In the distance, colorful Chinese lanterns bounced on bamboo poles beside a bonfire on the beach. Even glamorous, world-weary guests—designer Tory Burch, Prince Dimitri of Yugoslavia, Martha Stewart, and Jimmy Choo founder Tamara Mellon—mentioned repeatedly that they felt like pinching themselves.

The classic Siegal event became an evening to laugh, take in a breath of sea air, to recharge, bare feet on cool sand, before Deng jetted off to London, a day later, and executed the game-changing volleyball spike, [a YouTube moment viewed round the globe](#).

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When the film studios moved their press offices from Manhattan to Los Angeles in the late 1980s, light bulb heiress Peggy Siegal had the bright idea to invent the intimate screening with just stars and press; she's been an Oscar rainmaker ever since.

LINKS:

[Peggy Siegal Official Site](#)

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Edited by Tyler Malone

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Captions:

Page 1/Cover:

Peggy Siegal, VANITY FAIR Oscar Party, Morton's, Los Angeles, CA, February 25, 2007, Photography by Patrick McMullan.com

Page 2:

Tom Cruise & Peggy Siegal, MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE SALUTES TOM CRUISE, Cipriani 42nd Street, NYC, November 6, 2007, Photography by Patrick McMullan for Patrick McMullan.com

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Peggy Siegal, VANITY FAIR Oscar Party – ARRIVALS, Sunset Tower Hotel, West Hollywood, CA, March 7, 2010, Photography by Patrick McMullan.com

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George Clooney, Peggy Siegal, & Harvey Weinstein, Barbara Walters and Don Hewitt host a dinner in honor of George Clooney, David Strathairn, Frank Langella and Patricia Clarkson, Four Seasons Grill Room, NYC, February 15, 2006, Photography by Nick Hunt for Patrick McMullan.com

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Peggy Siegal & Woody Johnson, WOODY JOHNSON's "Wig Out" 60th Birthday Party, Doubles, NYC, April 12, 2007, Photography by Patrick McMullan.com

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Peggy Siegal, HAVANA- A Fab Night with Fabiola Beracasa and Chris del Gatto, Watermill, NY, September 3, 2005, Photography by Patrick McMullan for Patrick McMullan.com

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Peggy Siegal, CENTRAL PARK CONSERVANCY's 28th Annual Fredrick Law Olmsted Awards Luncheon, Conservatory Garden, NYC, May 5, 2010, Photography by Nick Hunt for Patrick McMullan.com



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with George Clooney & Harvey Weinstein
at the Four Seasons, NYC, 2006



with Woody Johnson, NYC, 2007



in Watermill, NY, 2005



at the Conservatory Garden, NYC, 2010