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'Unscripted' Review: Sex, Lies and Viacom

The chaotic life of Sumner Redstone, who parlayed his parents' two drive-in movie theaters into a vast American media empire.



Sumner Redstone with his daughter and business deputy, Shari. PHOTO: WIREIMAGE

By Edward Kosner Feb. 13, 2023 at 6:42 pm ET

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Sumner Redstone, who died in 2020 at the age of 97, was one of the killer whales thriving in the swirling currents of the modern media. A hulking old man with dyed red hair and a maimed right hand, he was a mega-billionaire with a ravenous appetite for power, riches—and sex. At his peak at the turn of the century, he controlled Viacom, Paramount Pictures; the National Amusements movie-theater chain; the CBS network, MTV, Comedy Central and Nickelodeon; and the Simon & Schuster publishing house. Then the end came in a crescendo of recrimination, litigation and family turmoil.

Now, Redstone has found his Ishmael in James B. Stewart, who has ventured once more into the corporate depths and returned, he writes, with "an astonishing saga of sex, lies, and betrayal." His new book, "Unscripted: The Epic Battle for a Media Empire and the Redstone Family Legacy," written with New York Times media reporter Rachel Abrams, joins his earlier probing work on the Walt Disney Co., insider trading, corporate lawyers and the posh netherworld of American business. Imagine a mash-up of "King Lear" and "Weekend at Bernie's," the 1989 movie comedy about two scamps who prop up a cadaver so they can enjoy a weekend at his beach house, with Redstone starring in both title roles.

Sumner Redstone was a brilliant man. The son of a Boston linoleum salesman who changed the family name from Rothstein, young Sumner finished at the top of his class at the renowned Boston Latin School, winning a scholarship to Harvard and later excelling at Harvard Law. An accomplished linguist, he helped crack Japanese codes during World War II. His father had prospered enough to buy two outdoor movie theaters. After the war, Sumner joined the business and turned the drive-ins into multiplex movie houses—a term he coined—the genesis of National Amusements, the holding company at the heart of his empire.

He could be a monster of hubris. He had maimed his hand in 1979 while hanging from a window ledge at Boston's Copley Plaza hotel as a hallway fire engulfed his room, an unlikely survival that Mr. Stewart and Ms. Abrams claim triggered in him a "sense of invincibility." Nearing 86, he proclaimed at a moguls' retreat: "I have the vital statistics of a twenty-year-old!" Also the social maturity: When asked why he treated people so badly, he replied: "I don't care. I'm going to hell anyway."

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In his 80s and 90s, he was living in a mansion in gated Beverly Park with two women, Sydney Hellen and Manuela Herzer, who'd graduated from romantic partners to minders. They tended to his every need—including scheduling other women for the daily sex sessions he demanded—and walled him off from old friends and family, especially his daughter, Shari, his business deputy and principal heir. Born in 1954, Shari was known as "Sumner in a Skirt" although her father delighted in berating her, even calling her the "c-word."

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As he built his fortune, Redstone was married twice to appropriate spouses. But he was an insatiable hound. The older he got, the younger his lovers. He lavished Viacom stock and \$18 million on a 20-something Hollywood "party girl." An ex-Ford model and Houston Oilers cheerleader got a \$2.5 million house, a stable of show horses and \$7 million in cash for services rendered. And that was just the preliminaries.

The first half of "Unscripted" documents the bizarre hi- and low-jinks chez Sumner as the old man dodders toward senility and Shari tries to oust the two women who have essentially imprisoned her father. Once a commanding figure, Redstone can no longer swallow food and has to be fed through a tube. He drifts in and out of focus and can't easily be understood, so one of his male nurses interprets his grunts and sighs.

The authors write that Ms. Holland, who has an ex-con boyfriend on the side, and Ms. Herzer, nicknamed "Pitbull," block Shari's phone calls and efforts to visit, then tell the sobbing Redstone that his family no longer loves him. If the pair abandon him, they warn, he will die alone. Redstone responds by bestowing \$150 million on them. But the house staff remains loyal, tattling to Shari and reporting elder abuse to the authorities.

Redstone's soap opera drains on, but eventually he boots the women. Back in charge, Shari embarks on a dual crusade—to claw back the \$150 million from Ms. Holland and Ms. Herzer and to take effective control of CBS, which was prospering under the golden touch of CEO Les Moonves, and Viacom, which was losing ground in the new era of streaming programming.

As Redstone fades, Mr. Moonves takes center stage in "Unscripted." A charismatic millionaire, onetime actor and TV producer, he too turns out to be a womanizer. Through National Amusements, Shari and Sumner are the majority stockholders in both Viacom and CBS. Although Mr. Moonves hints that he'd support Shari's plan to merge the two, the maverick CBS board adamantly opposes the plan. They come up with a scheme to award stock dividends that would dilute Redstone control, triggering an epic legal battle.

Enter Ronan Farrow, the muckraker who exposed Harvey Weinstein in the New Yorker as a sexual predator, turbocharging the #MeToo movement. Word spreads that Mr. Farrow has lined up a half-dozen women who accuse Mr. Moonves of sexual harassment, mostly in the days before he joined CBS. Mr. Moonves reassures his board allies that there's nothing to worry about—"I was never a predator, I was a player," he says—even as he conspires with the manager of one of the women to barter acting jobs for her silence. Mr. Farrow soon delivers not just one bombshell in the magazine, but two—and Mr. Moonves is finished.

Shari prevails. She gets her Viacom-CBS merger and recovers a fraction of the \$150 million from Ms. Holland and Ms. Herzer. In 2019, the compilers of the Forbes "100 Most Powerful Women" list name her No. 24, ahead of Queen Elizabeth. Sadly it's unclear, according to "Unscripted," to what extent the infirm Sumner "understood or was able to savor his daughter's success." In August 2020, he dies with Shari cooing to him on the phone. As the coffin is lowered into the family plot, she serenades him with her own rendition of "My Way."

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Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News. Appeared in the February 14, 2023, print edition as 'Sex, Lies And Viacom'.

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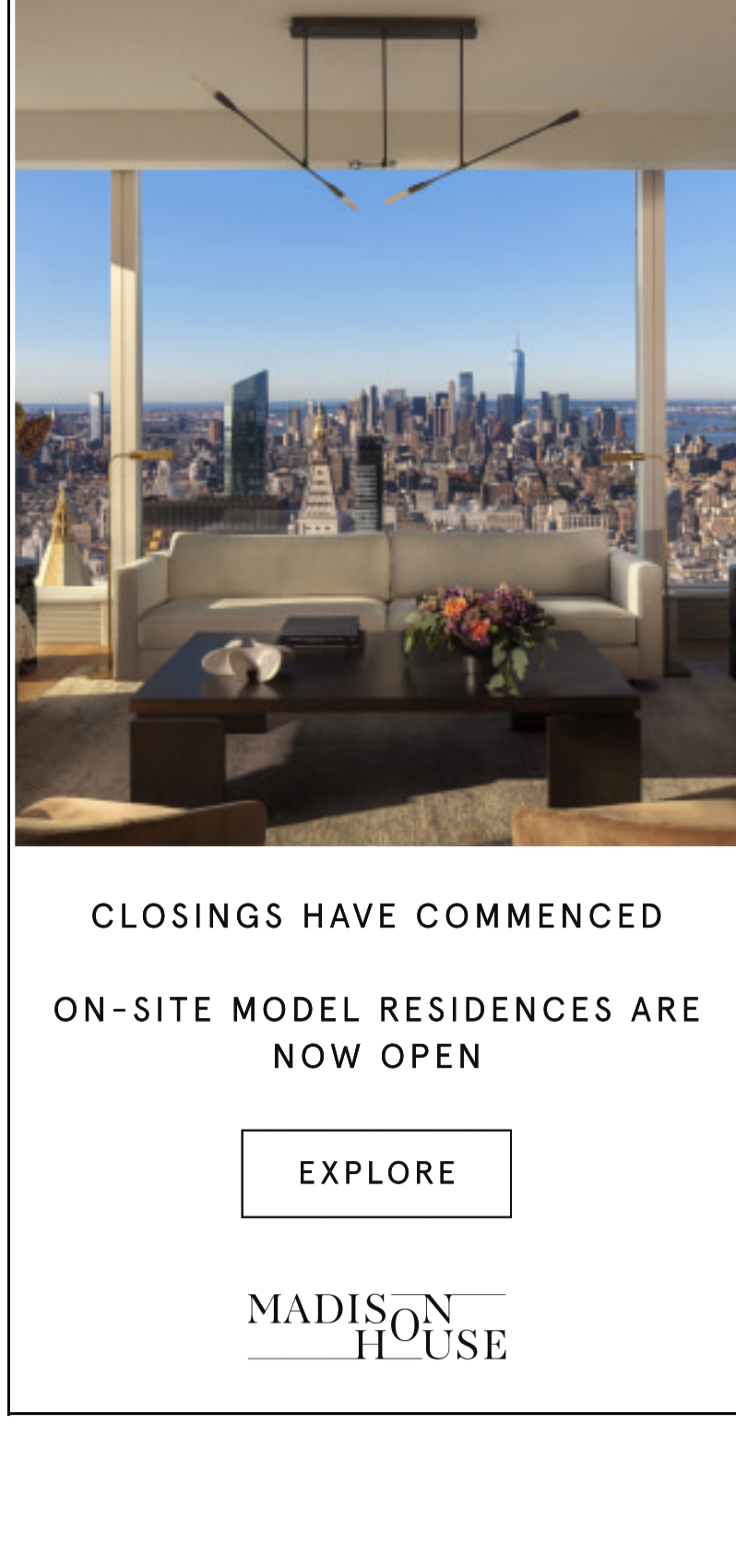
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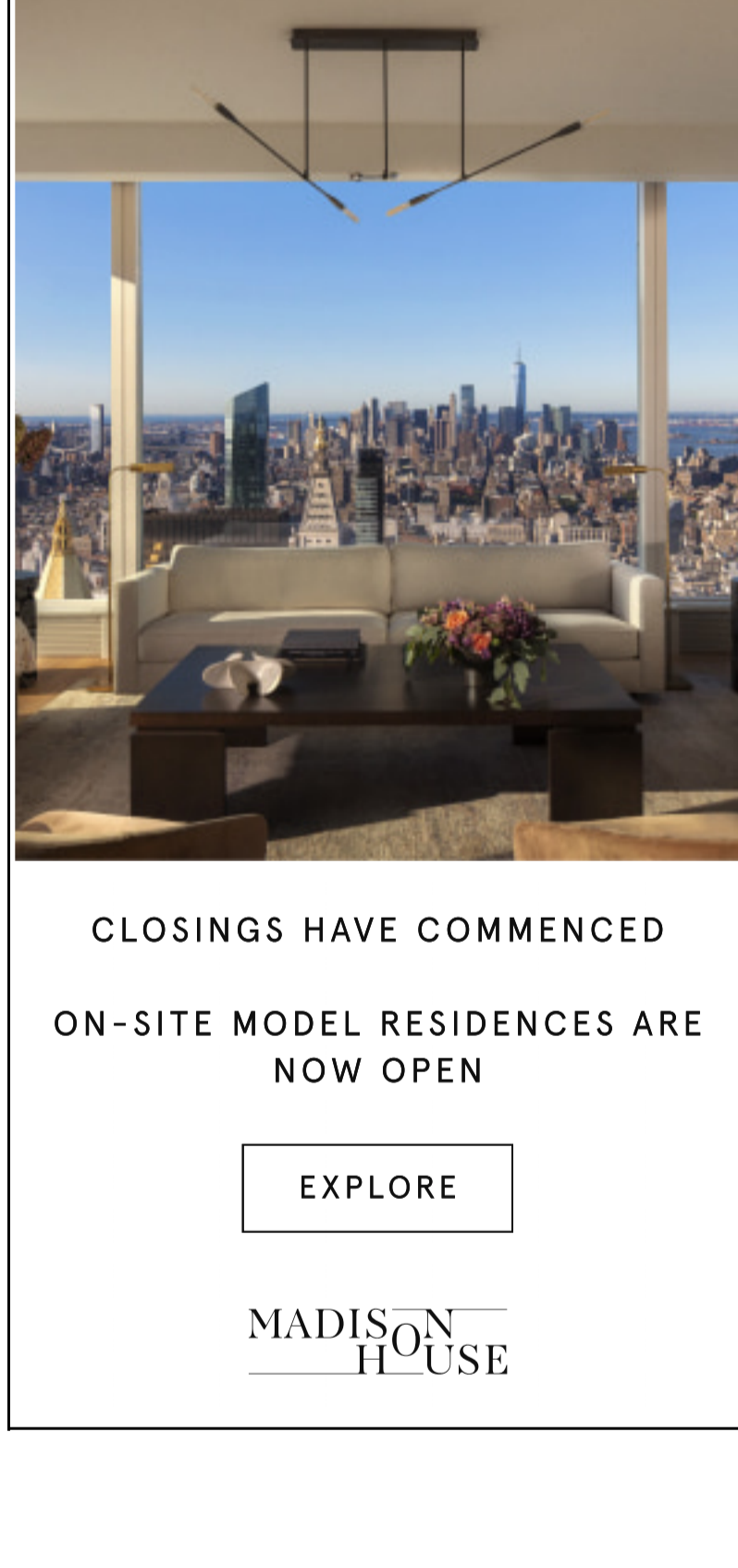
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