

MRS. TELEVISION

Everyone Loves Lucy

BY CLAIR SCHULZ



If a psychiatrist conducting a word-association test with a patient used the terms *tonic*, *grapes*, *footprints*, *chocolate*, *starch*, and *loving cup* and received the

same four-letter response each time, the doctor might mutter, "This patient seems to have a fixation with someone named Lucy."

If having images of Lucille Ball caught in ludicrous situations on the brain is symptomatic of neurosis, most Americans are candidates for the couch because it is difficult to imagine a time when she has not been part of the national consciousness.

Lucille Desiree Ball, who first appeared on life's stage on August 6, 1911 in Jamestown, New York, gave one of her first acting performances as a toddler tied to a metal clothesline by her busy mother, who found the tot trying to con a milkman into releasing her. As Lucy grew older, she enjoyed playing fantasy games with an imaginary pal she called Sassafrassa, en-

gaging in dress-up skits with friends, and watching Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin cavort on the screen.

From performing in impromptu plays in her neighborhood it was only a small step

for Lucille to becoming involved in theater at school where she organized the Dramatics Club. Regarding her work on *Charley's Aunt* she recalled that "I played the lead, directed it, sold the tickets, printed the posters, and hauled furniture to the school for scenery and props." Ball might have added that she also supplied the audience because



Lucille Ball

her mother, DeDe, always a strong supporter of her daughter's career, was out in front laughing louder than anyone else as she would do years later from her choice seat during the filming of *I Love Lucy*.

A sure sign of having acting fever settled upon Lucille every time she watched vaudeville performers and said to herself, "I want to be up there." At the tender age of fifteen, with the financial backing of DeDe, Lucy entered a dramatics school in New York City and, although it was a case of "too much, too soon" and she had to return home a few weeks later, she already

Clair Schulz is a free-lance writer, movie historian and collector from Muskego, Wisconsin.

had the spunk of the title character in *Wild-cat* which she would play many years later who, in her signature song, "Hey, Look Me Over," could have been singing Ball's credo: "When you're down and out, the only way is up."

The "Look out, world, here I come" part followed shortly thereafter when Lucille forsook

Jamestown and returned to the big city, determined to do any kind of work, be it dispensing sodas at a drugstore or modeling clothes, until her big break came along. Because Lucy bore a resemblance to Constance Bennett, she consented to have her hair peroxidized, as if to adopt another motto: "Dye, if you must this young brown head if one day cameras will shoot this fresh white face."

Working as a model for Hattie Carnegie, it was not long before that face, seen in an ad as a Chesterfield cigarette girl, led to an offer to go to Hollywood for a bit part as some of the pulchritude supporting Eddie Cantor in *Roman Scandals*. Ball only spoke two lines as a slave girl in the picture, one of a series of uncredited roles that had Lucy adapting the lyric the Ricardos and Mertzses would sing when they headed West by taking it one step further: "California, Here I Stay."

Lucille, never a talented dancer or singer, grew tired of strutting in showgirl parts or doubling for Constance Bennett at United Artists, found little improvement at Columbia, and finally settled upon a contract near the end of 1934 with RKO where she learned more from watching Irene Dunne and Katharine Hepburn act than she did



Room Service (1938)
Lucille Ball with Harpo, Groucho and Chico Marx

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playing background scenery for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Roberta* and *Top Hat*. By the time she appeared in *I Dream Too Much* in 1935 Ball had earned enough stripes to merit a name in the credits (Gwendolyn Diddley) and a spoken line worth remembering: "Culture is making my feet hurt."

The first film that foreshadowed the manic Lucy Ricardo, *That Girl from Paris*, found her skidding across a slick dance floor on soapy shoes. The painful pratfalls she took probably caused her to wonder, "Where is Constance Bennett when I need her to double for me?" The reviews called her "a find" and, for the first time, used the term that later became her occupational title: comedienne.

As Judy in *Stage Door*, the young lady with the ready quip who chose marriage over a career, Lucille could not be overlooked, but even a boarding-house reach left little to grab after noted scene-stealers Katharine Hepburn, Ginger Rogers, and Eve Arden were through feasting.

She moved up to second billing in *Go Chase Yourself* (1938) as the wife of Joe Penner and in two related films starring Jack Oakie, *The Affairs of Annabel* and *Annabel Takes a Tour*. The publicity stunts

that Oakie, as a zealous press agent, forced plucky Annabel Allison into included assuming the diverse roles of maid, aristocrat, and jailbird.

After appearing in seven films in 1938 including *Room Service*, a movie that wasted the talents of both the Marx Brothers and Lucille, Ball began to wonder if the groove she was in had become a rut. Her suspicion that she had become a tool of the studio was deepened when she was called upon to read for the part of Scarlett O'Hara before producer David Selznick. Knowing that she stood little chance of landing the coveted role in *Gone With the Wind*, Ball arrived wet from a rainstorm and, bolstered by a glass of brandy, delivered her test before Selznick in fine Lucy Ricardo style from her knees.

Lucy got back on her feet and continued to grind them out for RKO. In *Dance, Girl, Dance* (1940) she added some bumping to the grinding by performing an animated but limited striptease while warbling, "Mother, What Do I Do Now?" During the filming of this movie she met Desi Arnaz, a young Cuban who would be in her next picture, *Too Many Girls*, which, given his wandering eye, might have been an appropriate title for his autobiography.

It was not exactly love at first sight because his first glimpse of Lucy came after her catfight on a set with Maureen O'Hara in which she looked beaten and bedraggled, but within weeks the couple became fodder for Hollywood's gossip columnists and by November, 1940 they were married.

While Desi struggled to find an identity so he would not be known as Mr. Ball, Lucille battled for better parts in RKO features. *Look Who's Laughing* served as a showcase for radio's stellar comedy stars Edgar Bergen, Fibber McGee and Molly, and the Great Gildersleeve, but did not advance Ball's career a whit and *Valley of the Sun*, a dull western, almost sank it.

In *The Big Street* (1942) a Damon Runyon tale, she flourished in the emotional role of Gloria Lyons, a canny manipulator who selfishly used her paralysis to suit her own purposes. Ball considered this film, in which she received better reviews than co-star Henry Fonda, one of her favorites, perhaps because it validated her status as an actress.

The size of Lucille's contract with RKO and her dissatisfaction with parts she had been given made a switch to another studio inevitable so she welcomed an offer

from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. For her first feature, *DuBarry Was a Lady*, she became a Technicolor redhead and stayed a technical redhead for the rest of her life. With salary in her pocket, she put some celery in her mouth and wrestled with a headdress not unlike the getup she donned in the "Lucy Gets in Pictures" episode of



Too Many Girls (1940)
Lucille Ball and (see if you can find) Desi Arnaz



I Love Lucy as she romped with Red Skelton, providing the comic highlight of the film.

But *Best Foot Forward*, a revision of the *Annabel* plots, showed anything but Lucille's best and in *Meet the People* audiences met the same Lucy playing another version of another actress whose career needed a boost. By this time Ball began to suspect that she was indeed playing herself.

Even though Lucy was seemingly ignored by the MGM brass who continued to place her in routine fare like *Two Smart People* and *Easy to Wed*, the critics were taking notice, calling her "a superb farceuse" and hailing the byplay of Ball and Keenan Wynn in the latter film as proof "that they are the funniest comic team on the screen just now — and by a wide margin."

By 1946 Lucille realized that MGM would continue to parade her flaming red hair in color musicals while dubbing her singing voice or else pair her in B+ comedies with supporting actors like Wynn and

William Gaxton so she decided to freelance. But lackluster pictures for Universal (*Lover Come Back*), United Artists (*Lured*), and Columbia (*Her Husband's Affairs*) should have convinced Lucy that in that medium she was likely going to be just that, medium: never egregious but never a star of the first magnitude.

A welcome change of pace for Lucy came in the form of an offer from producer Herbert Kenwith to star in the Edgar Rice play *Dream Girl*. In the title role of a day-dreaming bookstore owner whose vivid imagination carried her from one fictitious crises to another, Lucille blossomed in this production, earning praise for her ability to mix pathos and sharp-edged repartee. Her supreme accolade came from Rice himself who declared that, of all the productions he had seen of *Dream Girl*, "the only actress whose performance really delighted me was Lucille Ball."

Although *Dream Girl* played for just a few months on the West Coast, the spontaneity of live performances triggered a special gear in Lucille's mechanism that raised her to another level. In the summer of 1948 a vehicle came rolling up her driveway that provided the very ingredients she thrived on and which motion pictures had not offered: an audience and a role in which all action centered around her.

Ball, who had appeared on radio first in 1938 on Jack Haley's program and had also been heard on *Lux Radio Theatre* and *The Abbott and Costello Show*, accepted an offer to star in a comedy series tentatively titled *Mr. and Mrs. Cugat*, based on a book of the same name by Isabel Scott Rorick. During the growing pains of this situation comedy, three changes were made: Richard Denning replaced Lee Bowman as the male lead, the Cugats became Liz and George Cooper, and the title of the series became *My Favorite Husband*.

A young writing team of Madelyn Pugh

and Bob Carroll, Jr., mentored by radio veteran Jess Oppenheimer, developed a winning game plan that proved to be successful both on *My Favorite Husband* and later when they followed Lucy to television: give it to Ball and let her run with it. By putting Lucille in situations that built in absurdity and letting the gifted actress grow along with kooky Liz and later into loony Lucy, the writers were merely mining the lode of talent that had been untapped.

Liz Cooper, one half of the couple “who live together and like it,” had her heart in the right place, usually on her sleeve, as she meddled in her husband’s affairs. Her attempts to convince Rudolph Atterbury (Gale Gordon) to raise George’s salary through a series of ruses portended the guises Lucy Ricardo would adopt to further her schemes on *I Love Lucy*, just as her hilarious efforts to teach Iris Atterbury (Bea Benaderet) how to drive and corral a runaway car that started out behind them, passed them, and then backed into their front bumper is an audio slapstick gem that works best on radio but which would not have been beyond the machinations of Lucy and Ethel.

Ball’s skill at milking a situation for every possible laugh is apparent even when she could not be seen. On television she could puff out her cheeks and widen her eyes to indicate she had squeezed herself into an old dress that no longer fit her to convince George that she had not gained weight, but on radio she forced the words past her larynx in gasps while holding her breath lest the zipper give way.

In *My Favorite Husband* Ball also demonstrated she was mastering the art of varying her delivery to match her character’s mood. If Liz felt upbeat, her tone glided toward giddy such as when she observed to Iris upon being passed by the Atterbury’s automobile, “You drive much better when you’re not in the car.” When on the defen-



My Favorite Husband (1948-51)
Lucille Ball and Richard Denning

sive, however, after Iris accused her of putting weight on the hips, Ball’s voice assumed a note of dry sarcasm in a retort delivered with an air of finality: “I prefer to think of it as a little *avoirdu pois* in the back of my lap.”

Besides slamming the punch lines home, Lucy was developing her own distinctive bag of tricks. The cry, alligator tears of the first water, sometimes flowed out with a “You don’t love me anymore” feeler, disappearing as soon as Liz/Lucy got her way or saw that the gambit had failed.

The “spider voice,” a term employed to describe Ball’s reaction as Little Miss Muffet after seeing a spider during a commercial, became Lucy’s double take. The sound, which emerged from her lips in a “Yeecooough,” generally followed the extraction of her foot from her mouth, as in the scene at a posh restaurant where the waiter informed Liz that she had just selected from the French menu an order of “Closed on Monday.”

Ball was already working on her curve

ball, a change of direction in mid-sentence executed frequently in the Ricardo apartment, while warming up in the bullpen of the Cooper's living room. After George suspected that a stogie found in an ashtray was planted to make him jealous Liz declared, "It was not a phony cigar. It was a real one and a real man was here and how did you find out it was a fake?"

Despite the moderate success of *My Favorite Husband*, Lucy's escapades in films made during this period, including *Miss Grant Takes Richmond* in which she mishandled everything from typewriters to jackhammers and *The Fuller Brush Girl* who got down and dirty in a smokestack and then came clean while stretched across some clotheslines, indicated that clearly she had to be seen to be fully appreciated.

Desi and Lucy, who had toured the country doing an act centered around her antics with a cello and her interruptions of his musical performances, decided to use their Desilu Productions to package a comedy series based upon the premise that Arnaz would play a Cuban singer and Lucy would be Lucy. William Frawley and Vivian Vance were brought in as neighbors Fred and Ethel Mertz to help stir the plots concocted by Pugh and Carroll.

Whatever the story was Lucy had to have her ham-handed fingers in it. Even if the title of the episode was "Ricky Loses His Temper" and Ricardo released one of his Spanish imprecations like "*Miraquetienecosalamujeresta!*," the cause of his outburst had to be one of Lucy's harebrained schemes.

I Love Lucy was not an immediate success, but within a month of its debut on October 15, 1951 most Americans who had televisions were tuning in their fuzzy sets to CBS on Mondays to find out what Lucy would do next.

For Lucille Ball life truly began at 40 as she adapted quickly to her new playground



Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz

by either refining her old shtick or adding new tricks to her bag of sight gags. She turned her plaintive cry into a laughable wail by crinkling up her face like a sponge and pushed across her spider voice by extruding her lips like a horse that had just eaten a sour apple. Her skills as a pantomimist, lauded most notably in the mirror routine with Harpo Marx performed in 1955, were actually on display almost from the beginning of the series in bits such as her open-mouth reactions to overheard tidbits and struggles with inanimate objects that seemed to have a life of their own like the yeasty loaf of bread which emerged from her oven like a battering ram.

By the end of the first season *I Love Lucy* had become the most popular program on TV. Lucy's pregnancy during the following year, far from hampering the show, was turned into the focal point of a number of memorable episodes.

One of the pleasures of early television comedies also became its chief disadvantage: long seasons of thirty or more episodes provided loads of chuckles but devoured lots of premises. If Lucy became

locked in a freezer in the spring, having her entrapped in handcuffs in the fall was still funny because of Ball's affinity for physical comedy but it may also have seemed a bit like *deja Lu*. Watching Lucy dismantle Fred and Ethel's flat in 1953 might have prompted viewers to ask, "Didn't she do something like that to the Ricardos' apartment last year?" (She did.)

After 100+ episodes of plopping Lucy in fine messes around New York, the writers put the show on the road to Hollywood and Europe during the fourth and fifth seasons. Though some of these programs are amusing, the focus of humor was often misdirected away from the real star to the guest celebrity of the week such as an unexpected witticism coming from John Wayne or the sight of William Holden being splattered with pastries. *I Love Lucy* still rode high atop the ratings, but the plots had shifted the emphasis from "What will Lucy do next?" to "Who will Lucy do it to next?"

It was not until the 1956-57 season, when the Ricardos moved to the country, that domestic dilemmas became the center of attention again. One sequence alone in "Lucy Does the Tango," in which Ricky

crushes Lucy and the eggs she had concealed on her person at the same time, became the visual equivalent of Jack Benny's response to "Your money or your life" in length of audience reaction, and clearly demonstrated that Ball had few rivals in taking physical comedy to its ultimate limit.

The arduous routine of doing a weekly television show took its toll on Lucy and Desi both physically and on their always-fragile marriage. From 1957 to 1960 they cut back to producing three to five one-hour specials per season that usually took them to places like Alaska where they met Red Skelton or to Sun Valley to complicate the life of Fernando Lamas.

By the time the final special aired on March 8, 1960 Lucy, who had tolerated Desi's private and public drunken displays and repetitive philandering for years and had first filed for divorce back in 1944 before reconciling, had been granted a degree ending two decades of rancorous sparring.

Never one to remain inactive long, Lucy quickly entered into projects such as movies with Bob Hope (*The Facts of Life* and *Critic's Choice*) and *Wildcat*. If hard work

and enthusiasm assured success, *Wildcat* would have been a smash because Ball rehearsed exhaustively and threw her body into each performance, but musicals live and die on singing and dancing and no amount of mugging or gyrating could hide her deficiencies in both areas. When she virtually passed out one night on stage due to weight loss and



I Love Lucy (1951-56)
William Frawley, Lucille Ball, Vivian Vance, Desi Arnaz

overexertion, the decision to close the Broadway show after 171 performances proved to be a graceful and merciful end to an embarrassing misuse of her abilities.

In 1962, after a short period of recuperation and a marriage to comedian Gary Morton who later became her producer, Lucy returned to the medium that was her lifeblood in

The Lucy Show. Vivian Vance and Gale Gordon added to the meriment of this series whose episode titles alone (e.g. "Lucy and Viv Put in a Shower," "Lucy and Viv Learn Judo," "Lucy is Kangaroo for a Day") bring back memories of riotous clowning by a woman in her fifties frolicking like a frisky teen. Reward for her antics came in the form of her second and third Emmys presented in 1967 and 1968.

In the fall of 1968 the show became *Here's Lucy*. Gordon changed from scowling Theodore Mooney to glowering Harrison Carter, and Desi Arnaz, Jr. and Lucie Arnaz joined the cast as children of their mother. Guest stars appeared with greater frequency in this version of *Lucy Faces Life*, but the funniest episodes continued to be those showing the havoc created by the red tornado at airports, drive-in movies, hospitals, laundries, ski lodges, etc.

When the end of the run came in March of 1974, *The Lucy Show* and *Here's Lucy*, with the same two main performers and minor changes in names and locales, had left a ratings legacy to be envied: nine consecutive years in the top ten followed by two more in the top fifteen. But when



I Love Lucy (1951-56)
Ethel and Fred Mertz, Ricky and Lucy Ricardo

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Here's Lucy dropped out of the top twenty-five during the twelfth season, the show was not renewed in what may have been the completion of the housecleaning CBS had begun several years before with the cancellation of *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *Green Acres*, and *Petticoat Junction*. Even though Lucy dwelt (or stumbled) in marble urban halls rather than tilled homespun soil, there was the perception in some circles that she belonged to the "wee doggies" school of humor that the network was trying to shed.

Whether Lucy dished out corn is debatable, but she certainly became the one to coax the blues out of the horn when she tackled the role of *Mame* for the screen in 1974 without ever managing to get her arms around the character or bring her down to earth. Ball's attempts to climb into *Mame's* eccentricity seemed as out of focus as the camera work employed to mask the imprints of time on her face. That a performer so innately endowed with charm could flounder in a flop devoid of that quality and which virtually sounded the death knell of movie musicals should have told Lucy that the old magic was gone and what was left was just old. →

Ball ruefully accepted the semi-retirement that the public's rejection seemed to have forced her into, emerging occasionally for a special. She gave TV another shot as a homeless woman in the dramatic telefilm *Stone Pillow* (1985) which disappointed her fans and yet another series with Gale Gordon called *Life With Lucy* that expired in less than two months in 1986. The grim reality facing her at the age of 75 was that the only television in her future would be sitting before a set watching herself in reruns.

There was one last hurrah at the Academy Awards ceremony in March of 1989 when Ball and Bob Hope received a standing ovation. A month later she underwent an open-heart operation and on April 26 died from complications of that surgery.

Although Ball began to wonder during her last years if her public had abandoned her and if she might be forgotten, the obituaries which followed her death and the tributes that continue to this day indicate that her legacy is certain. A dominant force in popular culture and a ratings leader in three different decades, she was a Monday evening tradition in millions of homes. If Milton Berle was Mr. Television, there is little doubt who bears the distaff version of that title.

For those patients suffering from Lucylitis, the remedy is to take a dose of the tonic that has been bracing viewers for fifty years, the cure-all known as Lucylaughaminuteregimin. The best dispenser of that prescription is Lucille Ball herself for, thankfully, that doctor is always in and, somewhere in televisionland, she is always on. ■

NOTE-- May, 2002 has been designated "Lucille Ball Month" on Those Were The Days. Every vintage program during May will feature a radio appearance by Lucille Ball. See pages 23 and 24.

A Two-Week Furlough

BY MICHAEL CAMPO

As a child I attended a Hull House camp called The Bowen Country Club, located in Waukegan, Illinois.

During the summer, groups of mothers and children spent two weeks at this beautiful camp filled with grass, flowers and trees. It was quite a welcome change from the Taylor Street area where we all lived.

Part of the staff of this camp was made up of former campers and, in 1942 or 1943, staff was hard to get. World War II had begun and all the young men were either in the service or doing other essential war work. It had gotten so bad that women were recruited as counselors for the cottages that housed the boys.

At this time, a former camper, Mike Garippo, whose nickname was *Superman*, received a two week furlough before going overseas to the war. Instead of spending his leave with his family or looking for girls in bars, Mike volunteered to come out to Camp Bowen and work as a counselor at the cottage that housed boys ages six to ten.

He felt that a male influence was important for boys at this young age. So he came to Waukegan to spend his furlough.

One of the main requirements for children to move from the "baby" cottage to the "children's" cottages was

Michael Campo is a Nostalgia Digest subscriber from Wheaton, Illinois.
