

BWW Reviews: Laguna Playhouse's I LOVED LUCY Shows Idol Worship

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by Michael L. Quintos



There was one memorably poignant line uttered towards the end of the new play *I LOVED LUCY*—now playing at the [Laguna Playhouse](#) through October 31—that sticks with you: "Make someone laugh enough, and you will be loved forever." Perhaps the line best explains why the opening night audience in attendance at the play's world premiere presentation was a bit more forgiving with this rather flawed production: the play's subject, [Lucille Ball](#), truly *was loved* by many. Even two decades after her passing, this gigantic icon in the entertainment world remains a [National Treasure](#), thanks to the eponymous sitcom that showcased her unmistakable comic talents. Unfortunately, this well-meaning but ultimately one-note tribute to a shining star lacks a bit of polish.



Based on the best-selling memoir by [Lee Tannen](#)—who took bows during the finale of the play's opening night performance—this new two-person, intermission-less adaptation recounts quite haphazardly Tannen's close but sometimes tumultuous friendship with the comedy icon during the last decade of her life. It so happens that Tannen is shakily related to Ms. Ball by way of [Gary Morton](#), her second husband. Armed with this connection, Tannen (played by the fairly likable [Jeffrey Denman](#)) first recalls meeting his idol (here recreated adequately by [Diane J. Findlay](#)) as a young child, unable to utter anything substantial because he was just so star-struck with awe. Tannen, we learn, is a Lucy super-fan, able to quote lines verbatim from the actor's famous sitcoms and filmography

like a walking *Lucy-pedia*.

Fast forward to Tannen in his 30's, and he is once again at Lucille's doorstep—this time in [Beverly Hills](#), years after her heyday in the business—aching to right his awkward first meeting. Perpetuating the relatively harmless stereotype of gay men having a magnetic idolization towards bawdy, outspoken, talented women, Tannen (openly out and with an unseen boyfriend back home in New York) desperately strikes up a dramatically rushed, immediate friendship with Lucille—here presented with the vision of Ball that has become synonymous with her latter years: a perfectly-coiffed helmet of her signature red hair, the oversized glasses, and the leisurely retirement-appropriate track suits. He lobs weak, awkward one-liners at her; she demands he make her another drink.

A rabid fan for years, Tannen is adoringly fascinated by her. She, on the other hand, seemingly just wants someone to play backgammon with to alleviate her daily boredom and, perhaps, her terrible loneliness. The two have relatively cute, if not particularly interesting exchanges, but for the most part, neither of the on-stage personalities presented here really give much backbone to their inexplicable, almost random affection for one

another. Is there more to this story than what little surfaces here? Does he merely revel in the idea of hanging out with a celebrity? Does she like Tannen only because she adores the shower of attention and adulation from her much younger, platonic "friend"—a stand-in for her often absent husband and family? For economy or focus' sake, people in either Tannen's or Ball's lives are only spoken of in the periphery, never seen or heard first-hand.

What transpires is a 90-minute reconstruction of certain events between the pair that spans Lucille's final years, highlighting what Tannen deems as what made their friendship satisfyingly quirky, unconventional, and affectionate—marked by wit-trading conversations filled with plenty of not-so-very-juicy inside information. Directed by Todd Weeks from Tannen's own choppy adapted script, the play feels like a haphazardly-put-together work-in-progress. Some scenes feel unexplained or rushed, while others feel like they have simply been stretched out or have overstayed their welcome. Though there are a sprinkling of genuinely funny moments—much like a standard, unfiltered grandmother type who speaks her mind, Lucille tells Michael Crawford at the after-party for *Phantom of the Opera* that his performance would have been much better seen had he not had that mask at all—some lines that are played desperately for laughs sadly fall awkwardly flat.

Denman aptly, if stereotypically, produces a rapid-fire delivery of Tannen's words, but this only serves to highlight the unflattering nature of his wannabe-svengali characterization, one who hopes that his "advice" would be followed by one of Hollywood's most revered figures. In one audaciously inferred vignette, Tannen reunites with Lucille—following an 18-month period of no communication caused by a rather heated argument between them—and displays "guilt" over not being around to sway this legend not to make a couple of ill-fitting career-hurting choices. To insinuate that this spitfire of a woman—so often heard with an amusingly defiant "Ha!!!!"—would even heed the warnings of a man who today would surely just be the dude running her official website... sounds a little farfetched.

Occasionally, though, Lucille herself—according to Tannen's recollection—lets loose expository lines that places some validity to Tannen's advice giving: in several points of the play, Lucille reveals herself to be a celebrity hungry to escape the notoriety of her single most iconic contribution to pop culture: the original *I Love Lucy* program. It's that awful syndrome that plagues those longing for a continuously successful career... they often ask themselves "How can I ever top what I did before?" But, on the other hand, other dramatized recollections reveal Lucille loving the attention that her past notoriety gives her during visits as an audience member (escorted by Tannen, of course) to the latest Broadway shows. Tannen explains that sometimes Lucille herself gets a bigger ovation than the actual performers on stage, simply by just sitting in the audience.

Judging solely on the basis of the play as it stands now, there's lots more work that's needed to be fleshed out here—particularly in the very one-note characterizations of the two sole orators on stage. Though she does an admirable job with her role aping Ms. Ball, Findlay really has little more to do here besides acting out Tannen's standard issue cantankerous dialogue—the kind of adorable, old-people-saying-awkwardly-outspoken things persona Betty White does effortlessly in her sleep. To hear Ms. Ball orating Tannen's self-congratulatory asides like "you look like you know more about me than I do" feels, frankly, a bit like a cop-out. However, the touching, heartbreaking coda of Ball's celebrated funeral (not seen but only heard on stage) shows that this half-realized production has some further potential.

Photos of Jeffry Denman & Diane J. Findlay in *I LOVED LUCY* by Ed Krieger.