

Coastline Pilot

Theater Preview: You'll love "Lucy" in Laguna

By Tom Titus

Although Lucille Ball stands at or near the top of every list of comedic actresses, and her "I Love Lucy" television shows live on forever in reruns, the last three decades of her life were marked by bitterness and failure. Fortunately, she had Lee Tannen as a buffer.

Tannen, a distant relative of her last husband, Gary Morton, was a rabid Lucy fan from childhood and, when finally accorded a chance to meet the legend, stayed at her side for the better part of those last 30 years. After her death, he compiled his reminiscences into a book entitled "I Loved Lucy."

That book is now a stage play, receiving its world premiere at the Laguna Playhouse where a pair of terrific actors bring the Lucy-Lee relationship back to life under the spirited direction of Todd Weeks. It's a box of theatrical bonbons for Lucy fans, of whom there are legion.

Taking on the tricky task of playing a still-living person while that person is in the audience (as he was opening night) is Jeffrey Denman, who both performs and, alternately, narrates the story. Denman skillfully projects a gay man's adoration while gradually standing his ground against the diva's dominance — which shatters the friendship on at least two occasions.

The even trickier assignment of bringing a beloved figure, about whom most fans have decades of knowledge, to life on stage falls to Diane J. Findlay, and she is a revelation. Findlay captures the late-life Lucy as a tough, sharp-tongued, gravely voiced lady with no illusions about her status — she's the polar opposite of Norma Desmond in "Sunset Boulevard."

These two apparent opposites truly attract, building a relationship off their need for one another — he's a fervent fan; she needs companionship since Morton usually is off playing golf. Never mind that he lives in New York with a partner and she's based in Los Angeles.

Denman has the lion's share of the load in this captivating exercise, both enthusiastically playing Tannen and keeping the audience updated on Lucy's progress and various mood swings as he revels in her orbit. A novice at backgammon, Lucy's favorite pastime, he virtually wills himself to become her equal until she's finally into him for several hundred dollars.

Findlay brings the swagger of a star to the early scenes, but settles into a comfortable mood of companionship and barbed exchanges. Don't look for any Lucyesque laughs here — she reserved those for the camera — but Findlay vibrantly brings out the legend's wounded ego over the failure of such later projects as the movie "Mame" and the TV series "Life with Lucy."

The pair act out those later years against an immaculate backdrop representing Lucy's home and various other venues in her life. It's designed by Bruce Goodrich, who also created the

impressive costumes. Paulie Jenkins' lighting effects and Corinne Carrillo's sound design complete the illustrious picture.

"I Loved Lucy" brings TV's queen of comedy back to life in an affectionate portrait from a devoted fan and friend. This show gets the Laguna Playhouse's 91st season started off with a bang.