

In Laguna, 'I Loved Lucy' reveals a conflicted star

By PAUL HODGINS / OC Register / 2010-10-10



Who didn't love Lucy?

As Lee Tannen's affectionate new play makes abundantly clear, Lucille Ball was universally adored. If she went to the theater, she'd get bigger ovations than the poor performers. Tannen, who was a boy when he met the '50s comedy icon, was as star-struck as many of her admirers: he couldn't even bring himself to speak.

Tannen makes up for that awkward silence (boy, does he ever) later in "I Loved Lucy," a two-person play based on his bestselling 2001 memoir of his decade-long relationship with Lucy from 1980 until her death in 1989. A world-premiere production at the Laguna Playhouse reveals an often funny but flawed script that's still in the process of being perfected. But with source material this good, Saturday's audience was in a mood to forgive the play's shortcomings.

Tannen, a distant relative of Lucy's second husband, Gary Morton, becomes reacquainted with her two decades after their first meeting, and the two hit it off. It's an odd pairing: she's a moody and somewhat inscrutable superstar whose glory days are long gone; he's a motor-mouthed gay Jewish man from New Jersey who's 40 years her junior.

Tannen reveals his sexual orientation to Lucy, but only after some coy hemming and hawing. "You're gay. Well why didn't you say so in the first place?" is her breezy response.

This play's central mystery, never satisfactorily answered by Tannen, is the reason for the friendship. It's easy to understand why he (or anyone who's similarly obsessed with Hollywood and Broadway) would be thrilled to share Lucy's orbit. But what did she see in him?

Perhaps it was nothing more complicated than camaraderie and conversation with an intelligent and creative mind. Lucy's relationship with her second husband, Tannen makes clear, was distant. Her children and grandkids, too, are minor players in her restless life. Lucy admits freely to Tannen that she's still in love with Desi but couldn't bear the public humiliation of his constant peccadilloes. "He was a genius," she says of Desi. "He was also a drunk and a womanizer."

At first, the old superstar and her young pal get along famously. Lucy travels frequently to New York, where Tannen lives, and enjoys her status as American showbiz royalty – to a point. Laconic, down-to-earth and unsentimental, she fills her days with backgammon, whiskey and endless cigarettes.

We get delicious peeks behind the curtain. Lucy and Richard Burton had a long-standing feud. Lucy reveals her take-charge professional side when she re-enacts a scene from her sitcom in which Burton blew his lines and blocking – the source of their enmity.

Other tidbits are tossed out. Henry Fonda held a torch for Lucy. She was bitter about never being nominated for an Oscar. As a young, starving wannabe she stole tips at the automat to buy tea. Her Broadway career was brief and unsatisfying.

Lucy was prone to gaffes and embarrassing moments. Meeting Michael Crawford after a performance of "The Phantom of the Opera," she tells him that his performance as the Phantom would be more expressive if he took off the mask.

She could also be cruel. A dedicated chauffeur and personal assistant was let go abruptly for no justifiable reason. And after Tannen unwisely lets loose with some criticism about Lucy's personal life, she orders him out of the house. The rift lasts for 18 months. When he returns, Tannen finds that Lucy has made a pair of bad comeback decisions, egged on by her husband: a movie and a sitcom that failed miserably.

Tannen feels guilty. If he'd been around, he confides to us, perhaps he could have talked Lucy out of those choices.

If the Lucy Tannen presents is true to life, I'm not so sure he could have changed her mind. As Lucy aged she seemed increasingly unsatisfied with her legacy – and herself. "Oh God, I'm so tired of being me," she says in the play's saddest and most revealing moment. It hints of a woman who felt trapped by the persona she had created.

"I Loved Lucy" has some structural problems. Tannen implies that the Lucy we see is a ghost or chimera brought forth by his memory, yet at times we seem to be in her world. The play juggles two realities: a tale that unfolds chronologically over Lucy's last decade of life, and a remembrance in which she is conscious of being dead. Confusion often results.

There's a deeper, darker side to Lucy uncovered during her tiff with Lee. That's a fascinating scene, asking some questions that Tannen never answers: Why was Lucy so distant from her family? Why did she feel so unsatisfied with what she had accomplished?

On the level of pure entertainment, however, "I Loved Lucy" delivers what the audience expects. We feel like flies on the wall in Lucy's Beverly Hills home, rendered economically but effectively by scenic designer Bruce Goodrich. Tannen has a good ear for comedy, and he captures Lucy's curt syntax perfectly.

So does actress Diane J. Findlay. Her portrayal leans toward homage rather than imitation, but it's convincing because she gets the star's essence right. One of Lucy's great strengths as a comedian was her readability – you could always see what was on her character's mind. Findlay captures that quality.

Denman struggles a bit with the generic gay-man traits that Tannen has written into his character, but when things get serious he's adept at conveying Tannen's frustration and puzzlement. To Tannen (and here I'm talking about both character and author), Lucy remained an enigma until the end of her life. Some parts of her were unknowable, a trait that many great entertainers share.

Director Todd Weeks has worked hard on the latter parts of the play, when Lucy's demons and doubts are revealed. If it gets a second chance – and given the interest from other theaters, I'm sure it will – I hope his involvement continues. "I Loved Lucy" is still a rewrite or two from

completion. But if Saturday's healthy ovation was an accurate metric, Tannen and Weeks have a potential crowd pleaser on their hands.