

LUCILLE BALL'S Memory is Alive & Swell

by tony reverditto

Lucille Ball is hands-down the most dearly loved and best female comedian of all time! In her later years, few people knew America's madcap sweetheart, Lucille Ball, the way Lee Tannen did. Though distantly related, and 40 years apart in age, Lucy and Lee became the nearest and dearest of friends during the last decade of her life. His world premiere show, *I Loved Lucy* gives an intimate look at the personal side of Lucy's very public persona. Having spent the last of her years by her side, Tannen invites Lucy lovers into the interpersonal experience of what it was like to be her friend, and appreciate how she was so like, yet unlike, her TV alter ego.

The Rage Monthly: *Lucy is still near and dear to my heart and has been my very favorite comedian since I can remember.*

*I was lucky enough to see her in person back in 1982 at Claremont College in a production called *A Conversation with Lucille Ball*. How incredible was it to be a dear friend of hers?*

Lee Tannen: Well, that was the word, it was pretty incredible, an amazing journey. During the last decade of her life I was fortunate enough to be with her a lot of the time. Most of that time was actually spent in Beverly Hills, Palm Springs, New York, and Snow Mass, Colorado; that's where she spent a lot of her life in her last decades.

Rage: *How did you first find out you were related to Lucy's husband, Gary Morton?*

LT: Gary Morton's sister, Helen was married to a man named Bob whose first cousin was my father, Bob—So that how I am related fifth cousins, three times removed or something like that. Then she married in to my family when I was ten years old. Then I actually got to meet Gary's mother while he was dating Lucille Ball and I couldn't believe I was actually talking to Gary Morton's mom while Lucy was dating her son.





...she was a consummate professional WHO LOVED doing her work and MOST IMPORTANTLY she believed "IF YOU THINK POSITIVELY ... YOU CAN DO ANYTHING!"

Rage: What is your first memory of meeting Lucy?

LT: I had a 102 fever accompanied by the flu and was sick in bed and determined to stay home the next day. I was thrilled because I knew I could watch *I Love Lucy* in the morning. Anyway, we got a phone call from Helen, Gary's sister saying that Lucy was in town; very secretive in the Bronx and she wanted to meet me. I willingly drug myself out of bed and remember rehearsing how I was going to greet her. Hi Lucy . . . too familiar. Hello, Mrs. Morton . . . no, too Jewish. Hello, Miss Ball . . . too formal. It really didn't matter, because when that door opened and I saw that shock of red hair and I didn't utter a word for the next 90 minutes.

Rage: When did you see her again?

LT: I met her again 20 years later in 1980 when I was 30 and then out of nervousness I really couldn't shut up. I started saying ridiculous things, in fact she said "Hi, I'm Lucy!" the first time I walked into her Beverly Hills home, and I said "No shit!"—I think she liked how irreverent that was and it was love at first sight.

Rage: You know better than most, how was Lucy most like her character?

LT: Great question. She is most like her character by actions. She wasn't really like her character at all, she wasn't funny. She said by her own admission "I don't think funny." But inadvertently, she would do funny things. One example was she couldn't parallel park and one day in Beverly Hills, she tied up traffic for miles for like 20 minutes; she was very much like Lucy Ricardo at times.

Rage: How was she different from her public persona?

LT: She was a very serious, smart woman! She loved to play games, word games, card games and of course, backgammon became her obsession. If you didn't play with Lucy, you didn't stay with Lucy.

Rage: What was the most outrageous thing she ever did or said?

LT: Well, taking us to the movies to see Shirley MacLaine in *Terms of Endearment* in New York I think was the most outrageous thing we had done, because she hadn't been in a movie theatre for 25 years. It was 15 degrees below zero and she insisted on waiting outside in line with everyone else. She talked all the way through the movie and put on make-up with a hand-lighted mirror during Deborah Winger's death scene. She even signed autographs on napkins with an eyebrow pencil. Most memorable was the sound of people yelling for

her to shut-up from the balcony even after they found out who she was. Needless to say, I never took her to the movies again.

Rage: Was she truly aware of the magnitude of the long-term legacy that she was and would continue to be?

LT: Great question Tony! I don't think she was aware of how famous she was when she was living. We talk about it a little in the play . . . she always seemed to shy away from talking about that. I don't think she thought that there would be a long-term lasting legacy. I am even surprised, I think she is more iconic in death then she was in life.

Rage: In your book, you said that you and Lucy used to watch *I Love Lucy* together; which was her favorite episode?

LT: There was a bunch of favorite episodes; I think her all time favorite episode was Queen of the Gypsies—the operetta that they did. She loved the grape stomping, the chocolate factory, Bill Holden, Vitameatavegamin. She always said, "Watch Viv, she knows comedy." She thought every thing that Viv did was brilliant.

Rage: What compelled you to do this and what is your message?

LT: About 12 years after she died, my partner suggested that I write some of these stories down. Like I am telling you now, so I would remember them. After 100 pages of memories, he said there's a book here. I wrote 300 pages and sent it to an agent I knew and he sold it to Saint Martins Press within three weeks; it went on to be a bestseller. Five years ago a producer picked it up and said that it would be a good character play, we did countless hours of hard work and bringing things to the present, Laguna Playhouse said they would love to world premiere it.

Rage: In your opinion, what do you think was the most important thing that Lucy wanted fans to remember about her?

LT: That she was a consummate professional who loved doing her work and most importantly she believed "if you think positively . . . you can do anything!"



I LOVED LUCY is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to dig deeper into Lucy's bitter-sweet journey, her intimate stories riddled with the shenanigans that Lee Tannen once shared with the comic legend. **Runs: October 5 through 31 at the Laguna Beach Playhouse, 606 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach. Tickets: 949.497.ARTS (2787) or lagunaplayhouse.com.**

