



There's hardly an American of TV viewing age who hasn't seen at least one episode of *I Love Lucy*, but only a comparative few can claim to have known its iconic star Lucille Ball, and of those, even fewer knew her as well as Lee Tannen, author of the affectionate memoir *I Loved Lucy*. Tannen's popular book now makes a smooth and satisfying transition from the printed page to the legitimate stage in his play of the same name, currently in its World Premiere production at the Laguna Playhouse.

A very distant relative of Lucy's second husband Gary Morton, Tannen first met Lucy as a child growing up in New York, but it wasn't till he was thirty (and Lucy approaching seventy) that a second meeting between TV legend and fan blossomed into a friendship that lasted till Lucy's death in 1989.

It's Tannen himself, in the person of Broadway star Jeffrey Denman, who narrates his tale, with stage vet Diane J. Findlay standing in for Lucy, and quite amazingly well indeed.

We are there when the star-struck young man first arrives trembling at Lucy's Beverly Hills home only to be peppered with questions about his personal life. Does he have a wife? Does he have a girlfriend? "I'm gay," he finally confesses, to which Lucy responds matter-of-factly, "Well, why didn't you tell me so in the first place?"

By the time Lee Tannen met Lucille Ball, Lucy was pretty much out of the public eye, her greatest passion having become backgammon, which Lee learns to play so skillfully that he soon has Lucy owing him several hundred dollars.

Little by little, Lee (and the audience) get to know and love this jogging suit-clad septuagenarian, cocktail glass inevitably in hand and cigarette never far from her reach.

There are gossipy tidbits aplenty over the course of *I Loved Lucy*'s intermission-free hour and a half. Lucy recalls how Richard Burton blew his lines and screwed up his blocking when he guested on *Here's Lucy* in 1970, then badmouthed her in his autobiography. She complains about her *Yours, Mine, And Ours* costar Henry Fonda and even more so that the Motion Picture Academy didn't nominate her for an Oscar for her performance in that flick. She confesses to once having told Broadway's Phantom Michael Crawford that he should have done the show mask-free.

Despite her divorce from Desi Arnaz some twenty years earlier, her ex is never far from Lucy's thoughts. She remains bitter at Hollywood that Desi received so little credit for being the genius behind *I Love Lucy* and its production company Desilu. And though she describes him in no uncertain terms as "a drunk and a womanizer," it's clear from what's spoken and what's left unspoken that he remained the love of her life.

Those who remember Lucy's many TV talk show appearances already know that Lucille Ball and Lucy Ricardo were two very different people, but it still comes as a bit of a shock when Lucy casually recalls dismissing her devoted longtime chauffeur/personal assistant, solely because husband Gary Morton wanted him gone. Later in the play, a single ill-advised joke makes Lee himself persona non grata for a year and a half.

Still, despite this warts-and-all depiction of a legend, Tannen's love for Lucy is never in doubt, nor is ours. Lucille Ball may not have been perfect, but perfectly extraordinary she was.

Some may kvetch that *I Loved Lucy* doesn't go far enough in "explaining" Lucy's peccadilloes—why for instance she seemed to have so little to do with her adult children, or what her relationship with second husband Gary was really about. Pish posh. *I Loved Lucy* doesn't pretend to be a deep psychological portrait, nor does it need to be, and if certain questions remain mysteries to us, perhaps they do to Tannen too.

I'd recommend cutting a couple of brief mid-play sequences in which Lucy pops up in the present day to comment on her life, and sticking with Lucy as she was when Lee knew her. Additional fine tuning may well come from audience questions or suggestions. Still, for the most part, what's on stage at the Laguna Playhouse already has very much the feel of a completed work.

As for the performances, Denman is utterly charming and entirely believable as the stage equivalent of the real-life Tannen. Because he is so likable and easy to identify with, it feels almost as if it's us up there spending time with Lucille Ball, getting to know her and to love her in equal measure. Denman even gets to sing a song, a treat from this Broadway

triple-threat, Ovation nominated in 2007 for his Los Angeles performance in *On Your Toes*.

As for Findlay, it takes a minute or two to get used to her as Lucy. Audience members may find themselves thinking: Lucy was taller, Lucy's voice was deeper, Lucy's lips were fuller ... but not for long. In short order, Findlay has us convinced that she is indeed Lucy, and far more in fact than a mere celebrity impersonator would. She's got Lucy's aura, her gestures, her stance, and that single "Ha!" that Lucy would bark out whenever something amused her, which was often. More than that, she seems to be inhabited by Lucy's *soul*, which is saying a good deal indeed.

Director Todd Weeks clearly deserves a great deal of the credit for two such fine performances, and for keeping *I Loved Lucy* so real from start to finish. Bruce Goodrich gets high marks for his multi-locale set design which, aided by Kevin Williams' projected slides and Paulie Jenkins' effective lighting, takes us from Lucy's home to her New York hotel suite, to a movie theater, and even into an elevator (the latter effect achieved entirely by lighting). Goodrich costumes Lucy mostly in her "at home" wear (not far removed from what you'd see in any retirement community), though we do get an elegant gown or two, and Lee's outfits are what any reasonably fashionable 30something gay man would likely have picked for himself. Kudos go also to sound designer Corinne Carrillo, stage managers Jennifer Ellen Butler, and assistant stage manager John Lowe.

I loved *I Loved Lucy*. It touched my funny bone. It touched my heart. And that, come to think of it, was what Lucille Ball herself did, year after year after year.

The Laguna Playhouse, 606 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach. Through October 31. Tuesdays through Saturdays at 8:00. Saturdays and Sundays at 2:00. Thursday matinee October 7 21 at 2:00. Reservations: 949 497-2787 www.LagunaPlayhouse.com

--Steven Stanley
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