

# TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

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## EPISODE 3: HOLLYWOOD

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy arrived in Hollywood in July of 1933. Her 22nd birthday was just a few weeks away. She took the train with some of the other new Goldwyn girls. Here's Lucy from an interview sometime in the 1960s. It was published in a digital scrapbook.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I don't remember leaving New York, I remember that arriving in California was marvelous. There were a couple of mothers along and all of these girls I had never met before, and they were gay and beautiful. I was quite in awe. We were all going into the Wonderland together.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** California did seem like a wonderland to Lucy. She couldn't believe how much cleaner the air was compared to New York. There were orange trees. And exotic flowers she'd never seen before.

**LUCILLE BALL:** But the sunshine, the warmth, the easy living and the casual clothes impressed me right away. And the beautiful mornings, the beautiful evenings, of course, plus the being in the business, being around show people impressed me very much.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy rented a one-room apartment on Formosa Street in Hollywood. It had one of those murphy beds that pops out of the wall.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I lived just three blocks from the Goldwyn studio, and I couldn't afford a car when I first got out there and other girls in my group were worrying about having cars to drive.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** She bought a second-hand bike for 10 dollars and rode it to the studio every day.

**LUCILLE BALL:** And it never bothered me... I was delighted to ride a bicycle. It was great exercise, but I was a little tired at night to ride it back. So, I'd hire a cab to take the bicycle and I rode in the cab. Of course, the driver thought I was nuts, but that didn't matter.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** All that mattered now was Lucy was finally working in show business. And this time, she wasn't going to blow her chance. She quickly figured out.... the way to get noticed in a beautiful town with beautiful people.... was to make them laugh. I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz. You're listening to season three of *The Plot Thickens*, a podcast from Turner Classic Movies. This season we're telling the story of how Lucille Ball became the funniest, most recognizable woman in America. This is episode three: Hollywood. Lucille Ball's first break in Hollywood was as a Goldwyn Girl in the movie *Roman Scandals*.

**ROMAN SCANDALS:** Keep young and beautiful.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** "Goldwyn" was producer Sam Goldwyn. He was making big budget musicals in the 1930s. Ones that had elaborate sets and dance numbers. The Goldwyn girls were the beautiful young women who lined up behind the stars. Usually wearing gowns, feathers, or swimsuits. Whatever showed off their figures. *Roman Scandals* was a gigantic production. United Artist's biggest musical of 1933. The star was a very short vaudeville performer with eyes like saucers. In fact, his nickname was Banjo Eyes. His real name was Eddie Cantor. In the movie, Eddie Cantor plays a grocery boy who travels through time to ancient Rome and becomes a food tester for the emperor.

**ROMAN SCANDALS:** How'd you like to be the official food taster? You mean all I must do is eat? Exactly you eat the same food I eat. Only you eat it first.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The first glimpse you get of Lucy in the movie is a doozy. She's chained to a rock and seems to have no clothes on.

**LUCILLE BALL:** This particular scene, we were slave girls, and we were put around a rotunda around the slave area, supposedly high up on the set, it was and we were chained in the nude, supposedly with these wigs.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Those wigs were long and platinum - made from hemp. All the slave girls looked like they were naked. Of course, they weren't. They were wearing flesh-colored body suits. Shooting was not easy. The women were chained to a rock for hours as the director shot different angles. It was hot under all the lights. At one point, Lucy fainted and fell more than 20 feet - right into the arms of one of the other actors.

**LUCILLE BALL:** Dewey Robinson saved me. He was a big, bulky, wonderful man. And he was one of the slave drivers and he was underneath me, he caught me. But it was no fun.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy arrived at the studio at 6am for costume and make-up and worked late - sometimes until 3 in the morning. She was making \$125 dollars a week, plus overtime. The good news was she and the other Goldwyn girls got to eat all the food brought in for the Roman emperor's banquet - whole roasted pig, sides of beef, tons of fruit and pastries.

To the men making these musicals the women in them were...eye candy. But every once in a while, a director would ask for a volunteer - a young woman willing to step out and do something more. She was usually asked to be the butt of a joke. But that was NOT how most of the Goldwyn Girls wanted to make their mark. Lucille Ball was different. She talked about it on Merv Griffin's talk show in 1973.

**LUCILLE BALL:** No one ever said make her a star. Someone said she doesn't care if her face gets all dirty and she makes faces and screams and yells a lot and the other girls are very busy being beautiful. She isn't too beautiful, and she isn't to, you know, she doesn't care what she does too much. So go ahead. Let her do the screaming. Let her do the running. Let her take the mud pack. And that's how I got started. Seriously, I'm not kidding, because the rest of the girls were really beautiful girls, and they didn't have to do that. All they had to do was just walk around and be beautiful. Well, I kind of hid in the background, but when there was something to scream about or wear a mud pack or or do something physical, I was available, and they weren't.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucille Ball never did see herself as a great beauty. But what she did see.... was her chance. Her chance to set herself apart from the other women.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** But she was hardworking, enthusiastic, and determined to get ahead.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Kathleen Brady. She wrote an in-depth biography of Lucille Ball.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** She was determined not to have the same thing happen to her in Hollywood that had happened at the drama school where she was afraid to speak.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy was older now, less self-conscious. On the first day of shooting - she decided to take matters into her own hands. So, when she and the other Goldwyn girls were given skimpy bathing suits to wear and told to line up, she had a plan. She remembered a prank she saw another woman do back in New York. She tore up small pieces of red crepe paper and stuck them on her arms and her face - as though she had the measles. When Eddie Cantor walked down the line to get a closer look at each of the women, he saw Lucy and cracked up. That dame's a riot, he said. Lucy was in heaven.

There's another version of this story - one told not by Lucy but by an old friend of hers. In it, instead of red dots on her body, Lucy blacked out her two front teeth to get a laugh. All these years later, it's hard to know which version is true. But what we do know - without a doubt - that Lucy was the one daring enough to step out of the line of Goldwyn Girls...the one willing to step out and get a laugh.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Whenever a volunteer was needed, she volunteered, including when a girl was needed to take a mud pack in the face. She said she'd do it and the other girls said "they won't see you under the mud pack. They won't know who you are." And Lucille Ball said, "well, they don't know who I am now!"

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But that was about to change.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** So very soon after she got to Goldwyn studios, Lucille was outside telling a friend of hers some story, using all the gestures and expressions of what had happened to her.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** As Lucy told the story, a director named Ed Sedgwick caught sight of her. Sedgwick had directed silent films at MGM.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** And he saw this young woman. With all the gestures and the expressions and the mannerisms that stars of the silent tried so hard to do in their comedies.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Sedgwick walked up to Lucy. He was a Texan. Thick southern accent. An even thicker waist. He interrupted her and said.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Young lady, if you play your cards right, you could become the greatest comedian in America.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy thought Ed Sedgwick was hitting on her. She gave him a look of disgust and walked away. But for the first time since trying to break into show biz, Lucy wasn't being told she'd never make it. Someone was finally telling her she could be good at something - really really good at something. Now the hard part...Lucy had to believe it. Lucy made a good living in Hollywood, even during the Depression. She started putting \$25 out of every paycheck into the bank.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** She had several things to save her money for. One was to bring her family out to California. The other was to get her teeth fixed because she had terribly crooked teeth.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** When Lucy's brother Fred finished high school, she persuaded him to come out to Hollywood. She borrowed a car to pick him up. Fred Ball told PBS about it in 2000.

**FRED BALL:** She was driving I think it was a 31 Buick convertible and she picked me up at the bus station in downtown Los Angeles and she drove me to Hollywood. And it was probably the wildest rough ride I have ever had had in my life.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Fred said Lucy approached driving like she did everything else, with gusto...and no brakes. Fred soon got a job at a nightclub called The Trocadero. He lived with Lucy in her apartment on Formosa.

**FRED BALL:** And right away we decided that, you know, if I've got enough money, we go rent a house and bring the family together again, which I did have enough money and we did do that.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Lucy found a three-bedroom house near the studio, it looked like a miniature mansion from New England. So, she got a friend of hers, the actress Ann Southern, to help her fix it up, along with her brother So they scrubbed the floors and they put down linoleum and painted the rooms in pastels. Fred told me that she knew just what she wanted done and she had lots of ideas for the work. And I guess he had to do the heavy stuff.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy went to a lot of trouble to make it a home - with one goal in mind: to bring her mother Dede and her grandfather out to California. Eventually, her cousin Cleo would join them too.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** She desperately wanted to reunite them after they had been forced to go in different directions in Jamestown.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It'd been years since the shooting happened in Celeron and the family was forced to breakup. Ever since, they'd struggled to find a home together. Lucy signed a seven-year contract with Columbia Pictures, so she was guaranteed a paycheck. Between her and Fred, they could support the rest of the family.

When Lucy finished decorating, she and Fred called Dede and told her to make reservations on the Super Chief, the cross-country passenger train. It was time for them to come out to California. As Lucy remembers it, she hung up the phone and 10 minutes later someone from Columbia called to say she'd been fired!

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** She was a contract player at Columbia, but all the contract players were fired.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Columbia had decided to give up its stock company, - those were the actors who worked full time for the studio and got regular paychecks.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** And she told me that she wired her family. Don't take the train, take the bus!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Later that night, Lucy had a date. Here she is with talk show host David Frost in 1971

**LUCILLE BALL:** And I was crying, and he said, what's the matter? I said, I lost my job and my family's coming out. And he said, well, there's another job down the street. They're having an audition tonight for showgirls. And I said, I don't want to be a showgirl again. I just got through being a showgirl. So, he said, well, you want to work, don't you? I said, yeah, come on, let's go.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy went to the showgirl audition at RKO Pictures, one of the other five big studios in Hollywood. It was for a movie with Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire. Two dancers who were becoming a sensation. Lucy got the job. And Dede and Grandpa Hunt were back on the super chief. A friend of Lucy's - an actor named George Raft - heard her family was coming to live with her. He gave her sixty-five dollars and lent her his chauffeured limousine.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** She picked up her mom at the train station in George Raft's limousine, so it was all done in great style, and I know she was thrilled.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** When Dede saw their new house on Ogden Drive, she burst into tears. Lucy told her she'd never have to work again. Later, Lucy recalled: "That night was one of the most marvelous evenings of our lives." But not everyone in the family took to California like Lucy...

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Well, her dear grandfather, whom she loves so much and who really was a father to her. Did not really want to go to California, although he wanted to be with his family.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy thought the sunshine would add 10 years to her grandfather's life. But Lucy's cousin Cleo says it was hard on him.

**CLEO SMITH:** I mean, he missed home. He missed everything about Celeron, Jamestown. His heritage, his family, his roots, everything. And he just was an old man who sat in the garage with a card table and a chair out there, his pipe, and he played solitaire.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Grandpa Hunt became friends with the milkman, the trash collector and all the retirees nearby. They'd gather in the garage, drink coffee, and talk politics.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** He was very politically involved. He always had been. Life had been hard for him and and he knew that it had been hard for a lot of people.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Grandpa Hunt was a socialist through and through. When he had extra money, he'd give it to the local sex workers on the corner of Sunset Boulevard and Fairfax. And then he'd tell them to take the night off. He subscribed to The Daily Worker, a communist newspaper. And he attended Communist party meetings. He even hosted some of those meetings at the house on Ogden Drive.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** There would be gatherings of new members, receptions of new members, and he would have them at the house that Lucille Ball provided for her family. It was her house, and he would host these parties and he would he would give credit to Lucy for her help in bringing these gatherings about.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy wasn't much interested in politics. But eventually she registered to vote for the first time because Grandpa Hunt asked her to.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** He told Lucy to register to vote as a communist and to make him happy, she did that.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Grandpa Hunt convinced Dede and Fred to register too. Cousin Cleo was too young. Lucy voted in the primary that year - but not the general election. She was busy and couldn't be bothered. It's a small detail, something that might have gone by as a blip in an ordinary life. But Lucy's life was becoming anything but ordinary. And there would be a point - not that far off - when Grandpa Hunt's politics would be much harder to ignore. Lucy loved being at RKO. She learned a lot working as a showgirl on a musical called Roberta. It starred Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

**LUCILLE BALL:** Sitting on the sidelines, watching, you learn an awful lot, not how to dance like they do, but how to conduct yourself and how the people react to the director and how the director reacts to this and what you're supposed to do with a unit manager and the assistant director. And now you have to learn how to take direction and how you have to learn how to be on time and how you have to learn to always be ready in case they need you and you learn the value of all these things so that they will remember that you are to be depended on. They say, get that girl, she's always ready.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** In 1935, Lucy signed a seven-year contract with the RKO. That meant she'd have a regular paycheck again. Lucy soaked up this new life, which was so different from her life in New York. It still required hustle, but the orange trees and sunshine made it seem less grueling. Every day she got up and went to a movie set...for her job. The job she'd always wanted. And she knew being a contract player at a studio was a lucky break.

**LUCILLE BALL:** They had publicity departments who made us, whether we wanted it or not. They dressed us. They trained us. They gave us a chance to perform. We could fall on our faces if we weren't any good. But we had a chance. I knew I was getting a well-paid apprenticeship.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** After the musical with Rogers and Astaire, she got more roles in their pictures. She played a flower shop clerk in *Top Hat*, which became a runaway hit for RKO. And she got a slightly bigger role in *Follow the Fleet*. She played a wisecracking showgirl. She even got a few zingers, like this line she tossed at a sailor.

**FOLLOW THE FLEET:** "Tell me little boy, did you get a whistle or a baseball bat with that suit?"

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** As they worked together, Lucy and Ginger Rogers became friends. And she grew close to Ginger's mother, Lela Rogers.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** When Lucy was at RKO, she always considered that her great break came when she met Lela Rogers.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's TCM host Robert Osborne in a PBS interview from 1999.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** Ginger could be nice because Lela wasn't so nice. Lela was the ambitious one that did all she could for her daughter.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lela Rogers was a force. She was in her mid-forties with bleached blonde hair like her daughter's. She'd been a marine in World War I. One of only a handful of women to serve. She was a devout Christian Scientist and conservative Republican. And Lela was pushy. With her daughter, with the bosses at RKO, with Fred Astaire.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** And she used to get in Fred Astaire's way like crazy on the sets. She would go on the sets when they were dancing and she'd say, I don't like that dress. I don't like that. I like that. And so, Fred Astaire finally said to the bosses at RKO, you got to get Lela Rogers off the set.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lela gave all the young actors advice on their performances and careers. The studio bosses knew that.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** So, they said, Lela, come and train our actors. We'll build a theater for you there and you can train our actors.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy became one of her students. Lela advised her on everything - how to get more roles, what to wear, who to date. Lela was taking formal acting classes herself. Here's Lucy talking about her in a BBC documentary.

**THE RKO STORY:** That was a wonderful thing what Lela Rogers was doing, Ginger's mother, besides taking very good care of Ginger, she found time to help the younger people on the lot and invited us to a workshop that she was conducting. And we were in her workshop on the lot three or four times a week.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The bosses gave Lela a barn to work out of - it became known as the Little Theater on the Lot. She would cast and produce plays.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** And every Friday night at five o'clock before a producer could check off the lot for the weekend, she would put on one hour of skits or plays all the contract players. And it was a way for the producers to see the young people under contract to think, hmm, I could use her in the movie and so and so I could use him and such.

**FRED BALL:** Lela Rogers at RKO is absolutely a big influence on Lucille's life.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy's brother Fred Ball.

**FRED BALL:** And Lela was like, you know, another mother to her. Lucille became part of the family.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** In 1935, Lucy was quoted in the Buffalo Evening News. She told the reporter that Lela Rogers had helped her more in three weeks than anyone else ever had in Hollywood. It was great to have an ally like Lela Rogers in her corner. But Lela couldn't perform miracles. The reality was the chances of making it in Hollywood were so slim, so small. Lucy had a long way to go. Lucy was dating a lot in Hollywood. But she eventually fell for a guy she met at the studio.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Pandro Berman was a producer at RKO. He was about 30...few years older than Lucy when they met, and he was also married.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Berman had dark hair, thick eyebrows, and full round cheeks. He was handsome, pudgy, and powerful.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** He was the head of the studio. And it was very clear to everyone that they had a relationship.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** He really was in love with her so that gave her a certain clout, at least it protected her in many instances, including the time where without meaning to. She hit Katharine Hepburn with a cup of coffee.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Kathrine Hepburn was the prestige star at RKO. Lucy was just a bit player. She told the story to talk show host David Frost in 1971.

**LUCILLE BALL:** It's one of the few times I ever lost my temper when I was a starlet. But I used to have a hole in my teeth. That's how the whole thing started.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Remember, Lucy had crooked teeth and she was apparently missing a tooth.

**LUCILLE BALL:** And so I had to save my money and buy a cap, but I couldn't get a permanent cap. I couldn't afford that. So, I got a temporary. And on top of that, he fixed some other little places so that I had like nine or ten little, tiny pieces of porcelain or whatever it was.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy kept those little pieces of porcelain in a box. She brought them to the studio that day because she was trying to get some portraits taken to help her career. She couldn't afford a professional photographer, so she waited until one was at RKO shooting someone else.

**LUCILLE BALL:** When you're a starlet, you have to go and you say, could I could I have some pictures taken, you know? And they said, well, we'll try to work you in. Then you could sneak in because the photographer was there. And in between as she was dressing, or he was dressing. You could pose and get a couple of pictures, you see. But the teeth were very important. I had never had any pictures taken when I could really smile.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** So, the day arrives when she can squeeze into a professional shoot happening at the studio. She came in early for hair and makeup.

**LUCILLE BALL:** And I was supposed to have my makeup put on by the head of the makeup department, who was a very nice man and was condescending a little about it. But still he was doing it for me. I was very flattered that he was going to do my makeup and he put me down in the chair and he said, I don't have very long. I said, yes, sir, I know, if you could just get my base on just tell me how to fix my eyes, I'd be very happy. Thank you very much. And he said, OK, well, when Miss Hepburn comes, I'll have to. I said, that's all right. Go right ahead. I put my face back and he was spraying me with this stuff, and he got halfway through it, and he said, Oh Miss. Hepburn's, coming, get out. So, I got up and I ran, and I was fine. I expected all that. And I ran so fast. Good morning, Miss. Hepburn and she says Hello (does voice) And I went in, you know, I didn't know her. She didn't know me that well. She'd met me, but we weren't friends at all. Anyway, I got outside and the man locked the door, and it was a tiny little room adjacent to the makeup room. And he locked the door and Miss Hepburn got into the chair and started to get her very important makeup on for a very big picture. And I at least I'd gotten that far. And I had my little powder puff and whatnot, and I was able to finish, and I said, my my teeth, my teeth, my caps! I left them back up there. So, I thought, well, I'll just have to ask him to hand them to me. So, I rapped on the door, and he said, what is it? and I told him, I said, I left my caps. Go away. I said I can't go away, sir. I left my caps in there. They're right there by your hand, please, sir. And I begged for this, and he would not listen to me. So now I went into the makeup or to the hairdresser and I told this lady who was very nice to me, and I said, Jeannie, he won't give me my caps. And that's the whole reason I'm doing all this today, having these pictures made because I have my caps. There's no reason to have any pictures made if I don't have my caps, and she said, well, just as she went over to the window and she said, I won't use the name, she used his name. And he said, will you stop bothering us Ms. Hepburn is getting her makeup done. So now we're in panic. He wouldn't even do it for her. So I went to the little window, the little, tiny window like this, and there was, you know how it is in some work areas, they have coffee and cups and sugar and cream and things. And I was leaning over, and I said, please, please, just give me the little box of caps, please. And he said, GET AWAY. And I picked up a cold half cup of coffee and I threw it through the window, and it hit Miss Hepburn. Oh. Oh, wow. Oh, my God, it went all over her. And, yeah, she got up and she went home. She went home. She went out of the studio and went home. Oh, she didn't even wait. She just said what happened? And they said Lucille Ball threw a cup of coffee at you, you know. Oh, she went home and now the whole studio was on my neck.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Well, obviously, she could have gotten fired. I mean, I think in the normal chain of events, a contract player who threw coffee and spilled coffee all over a major star who was making a film, the star goes off in a huff. It was pretty big.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But Lucy kept her job - likely because of her relationship with Pandro Berman. He was considered the boy wonder at RKO - he produced the Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire Films- and he was the one making Katherine Hepburn a star. Pandro wanted to leave his family and marry Lucy. Her friends told her to say I do. That it would help her career. It was tempting. After all, Lucy was ambitious. But in the end, she turned him down. She didn't see herself as the home-wrecking type.

Not long after, she found a new boyfriend. His name was Al Hall. He was older - in his 40s - and divorced. He was a director at Columbia Pictures. He wasn't a hotshot like Pandro - but he was competent. If he was known for anything, it was directing comedies. Lucy wasn't in love with Al but that didn't stop the gossip columnists from speculating - when was he going to pop the big question?

Lucy was in her mid-twenties now - and showing no signs she wanted to settle down and get married. Which back then - in the 1930's was kind of a big deal. Instead, Lucy focused on working - all the time. In 1937 Lucy was cast in Stage Door. Her old boyfriend Pandro Berman was the producer. It was about a group of young women living in a boarding house called the Footlights Club. They were all trying to break into theater. It had an extraordinary cast of young actresses. Including Ginger Rogers, who was then the biggest star at RKO.

**STAGE DOOR:** Imagine that Judy, a taxi. I bet you drink champagne out of slippers and everything.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** And Katherine Hepburn. Presumably now over the coffee business

**STAGE DOOR:** The Calla lilies are in bloom again. Such a strange flower.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Eve Arden was in it, and so was a 14-year-old tap dancing sensation named Ann Miller. And of course... Lucille Ball. She played Judy Canfield - a young, world-weary actress from Seattle trying to make it in show biz.

**STAGE DOOR:** You know, there's nothing like a cheerful letter from home, Pa got laid off, my sister's husband has left her, one of my brothers slugged a railroad detector, I guess that's all, lots of love can you spare 50 bucks.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy had spent her New York days as a struggling actress living in boarding houses, so the subject matter was familiar. Lucy even wore her own clothes in the movie. At this point, she had a reputation for dressing well. Her character wore lots of jackets cinched at the waist, wide-leg pants, and pencil skirts. Her hair was light auburn when they filmed this movie. She wore it longer and curled at the ends, similar to Katherine Hepburn. The director of Stage Door was Gregory La Cava. He was 45 years old and at the height of his career directing screwball comedies. La Cava liked to experiment.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** And he had the idea of doing what is called Cuff shooting, which is making it up as you go along.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** La Cava would have secretaries walk among the actresses during breaks in the shooting. They would record what the women said, how they talked, and what they cared about. The secretaries would then report this back to La Cava.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** And then he would in the evening, he would write it up and make a script. And this is, the dialog that they would shoot by day.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** La Cava based each character in Stage Door on the actress playing her. The cast was given new scripts every day and La Cava encouraged them to improvise. This approach drove some of the actresses crazy. Katherine Hepburn complained more than once. But La Cava's idea worked - the result was overlapping dialogue that felt fresh and natural.

**STAGE DOOR:** Heaven's no, at the Footlight's Club nothing exciting ever happens here.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Judy from Seattle was every bit Lucy - or at least the Lucy that Gregory La Cava pieced together from all the bits of conversation overheard by his secretaries.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** She was wise, and she always managed to have enough to eat, although she did not ever get cast in anything, but there were always young men coming in from her native Seattle to take her out to dinner, much as had been the case with Lucille Ball in New York. So, what's amazing is LaCava picked her as the girl who would give up show business and go home.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** At the end of the movie, Lucy's character goes home to get married and have kids.

**STAGE DOOR:** Well goodbye, thanks for everything, the shower and all.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The young women throw her a goodbye party. The characters played by Ginger Rogers and Katherine Hepburn wonder why they're staying in New York, trying to make it when they could leave like Judy.

**GINGER ROGERS:** Well at least she'll have a couple of kids to keep her company in her old age. What'll we have? Some broken down memories and an old scrapbook nobody will look at.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But La Cava got Lucy all wrong.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Lucille Ball was a very practical character herself, and he did he did see that in her, but he clearly misjudged her if he was I mean she inspired him to believe that Lucille Ball would give up show business and go back where she came from and raise a family, and that's not exactly how things worked out.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** No, it definitely wasn't how things worked out. Stage Door was released six months later and went on to get four Academy Award nominations. Lucy started getting a reputation. As RKO's Queen of the B's...as in B-movies. These were movies with smaller budgets, fewer stars, and predictable plots. Studios made them to fill double feature slots in theaters around the country. Lucy made so many of these B movies, the RKO wardrobe department was often working on three different dresses for her, for three different movies, at the same time. She even got an audition to play the lead in Gone with the Wind - one of the most popular films of all time. She didn't get the part, but the studio believed in her so much they gave her a dialect coach to master Scarlett O'Hara's southern accent.

So, Lucy renegotiated her contract with RKO - she asked for more money. And she got it. Now she had enough cash to get her own apartment - the house on Ogden Drive was pretty crowded and Lucy wanted her own place. Things were changing for her. Lucy was clearly not going back to her hometown, like her character in Stage Door. Lucille Ball was sticking around, hoping to be one of the lucky ones. And boy, was she about to get lucky. In early 1940, Lucy got a role in the movie Dance Girl Dance.

**DANCE GIRL DANCE:** And I got ambition too. But I don't have to crack my joints to get where I'm going. I got brains.

**JUDITH MAYNE:** Dance Girl Dance is the story of two young women who are trying to make their way in the dance world.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Judith Mayne. She's retired now, but she used to teach feminist film studies. In the movie, Lucy plays Bubbles, an ambitious showgirl type who becomes a famous burlesque queen named Tiger Lily White.

**DANCE GIRL DANCE:** We are proud and fortunate to present to you in her daring novel specialty, Manhattan's Tiger Lily White.

**JUDITH MAYNE:** I mean, Lucille Ball is just so boisterous, but in a positive way. She's brassy, she's loud, and she knows how to bump and grind.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy's co-star is Maureen O'Hara, who was considered the new face of RKO. O'Hara was striking, an Irish-born redhead with green eyes. She plays Judy, a dancer who dreams of becoming a famous ballerina.

**JUDITH MAYNE:** And so the film traces the relationship between these two friends as Bubbles, played by Lucille Ball becomes very famous and well known as a vaudevillian performer, whereas Judy really wants to become a serious dancer.

**DANCE GIRL DANCE:** I could hear the music and my feet kept making up the steps.

**JUDITH MAYNE:** And to me, they are absolute costars of this film, Lucille Ball and Maureen O'Hara. And so, I think this was an important step in in Lucille Ball's career to take on a role like this, which really highlighted what she was good at.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Once Bubbles makes it big as Tiger Lily, she does a striptease number. It's mild by today's standards, but back then it was racy. Lucy actually went to burlesque houses and studied how to do a striptease. She also does a sexy Hula in front of a leering businessman.

**DANCE GIRL DANCE:** I ain't got an ounce of class sugar, promise. Guy: Can you dance? Lucy: it's been called that.

**JUDITH MAYNE:** And you see this guy in close up and the alternation between him and the and the young women dancing, chomping on his cigar and getting very, you know, turned on as Lucille Ball, you know thrusts her hips around and moves and is completely there to create sex appeal. [00:41:10] I grew up with I Love Lucy and so seeing her as a Hollywood actress is, you know, she was so sexy. I mean, she really had a sexual presence in those films.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** Lucy, of course, playing the Tootsie, and she's terrific in it. It's one of her it's one of her best film performances because it really fit her. She was perfectly cast.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Robert Osborne again, who was close friends with Lucy.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** It was also cast very much to type at that time Maureen O'Hara was very much a lady and is just a classy lady. Lucy was never classy. She had great class to her and was a thoroughbred. But she was not the image of being a classy lady. And Lucy, I know that felt very much in awe of Maureen O'Hara, and she said, you know, everybody pal around with me and joke and light my cigarette and everything. And then she said Maureen O'Hara would come in and then they would all treat her like a great lady. They never treated me that way and it bothered her.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The tension between Bubbles and Judy builds and builds in Dance Girl Dance. Until it finally explodes. They get in a fight on stage at one of Bubbles' shows. Like a physical, pulling hair, wrestling fight. There's even a slap.

**DANCE GIRL DANCE:** Not in my act you jealous little pig.

**JUDITH MAYNE:** People say, you know, the catfight is such a horrible resolution to the conflict between them. I think it's great. I love cat fights. You know, there's so much that comes out, you know, and finally they just get down and dirty and physical about, you know, how frustrated they are with each other.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** This fight wasn't not just important in the movie. It was a prelude to one of the most important moments in Lucille Ball's life. On a day they were shooting the fight scene, Lucy and Maureen O'Hara broke for lunch and went down to the RKO commissary to grab a bite to eat.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** Well, Lucy was wearing a gold lamé dress with a slit that was now torn up and she had a black eye courtesy of the makeup department, and her hair was askew.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It wasn't just askew. Her blonde hair was a mess. And there was a bandage on her forehead. As they moved through the lunch line, Lucy saw the director of her next movie sitting at one of the tables. The movie was called Too Many Girls. The director was George Abbott. She went over to say hello. Abbott was not alone. He was sitting with a handsome young man. He had a boyish face. Jet black hair. Dark eyes. And a thick accent. Maureen O'Hara would later say it was like fireworks exploded in the RKO commissary that day. The meeting lasted only a minute. Not since Johnny Devita has Lucy felt that kind of

immediate attraction. The young man? A Cuban actor named Desiderio Alberto Arnaz y de Acha III. His friends, and soon the world, would know him as Desi. And together Lucy and Desi would make television history. Next time on The Plot Thickens... We go to Cuba, on the eve of a revolution.

**DESI'S AUDIOBOOK:** Get your mother out of the house, right away! They're coming after you."  
""Who's coming after us?" I asked. "Machado has fled the country and anyone who belonged to the Machado regime is in danger."

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** And while Desi's rise had everything to do with talent and ingenuity, there was also this...

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** Because he could rumba standing up and he could rumba lying down.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Angela Carone is our Director of Podcasts. Story editor and creative consultant is Joanne Faryon. Audio editing and sound design by Mike Voulgaris and his exceptional ears. Scriptwriting by Angela Carone, Yacov Freedman, Dale Maharidge, Maya Kroth and Joanne Faryon. Yacov Freedman is our senior producer. Associate production from Josh Lash. Additional editing and sound design by Paul Robert Moundsey and Heather Frankel. Additional script editing by Bryant Urstadt and Susan White. James Sheridan is our researcher, fact-checker and resident Lucy expert. Mixing by Glenn Matullo and Tim Pelletier. Production support from Jordan Boge, Bailey Tyler, Alison Firor, Julie Bitton, Mario Rials, Susana Zepeda, Liz Winter and Reid Hall. Web support by Betsy Gooch. Thanks to David Byrne, Taryn Jacobs, Diana Bosch and the entire TCM Marketing team.

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Check out our website at [tcm.com/theplotthickens](http://tcm.com/theplotthickens). It has info about each episode and photos from throughout Lucille Ball's life. Again, that's [tcm.com/theplotthickens](http://tcm.com/theplotthickens).

I'm your host Ben Mankiewicz, thanks for listening. See you next time.