

# TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

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## EPISODE FIVE: DESILU

**DOTSON RADER:** Can you talk a little bit about that? Mr. Arnaz--how you met?

**LUCILLE BALL:** We met on the set at RKO in... in the summer of 40... He was...very romantic and very - you know, he was just different. I had never had anything exciting and romantic like that happen to me quite so fast.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy was 28 years old when she first met Desi Arnaz at the RKO studio. He was 23. Hours later they were on their first date - at a Mexican restaurant in Hollywood called El Zarape. They had dinner with the cast of *Too Many Girls*. That was the film they were both starring in. Desi played a college football player. Lucy was the ingenue. Lucy and Desi sat apart from everyone else. They were in their own world that night.

Desi told Lucy his story. About his life in Cuba, the revolution, escaping to America, starting the conga craze. They talked until 3 in the morning, danced the rhumba, and then he drove her home. Lucy fell in love with Desi almost immediately. ..." there was only one thing better than looking at Desi" she said. "That was talking to him." And Desi fell hard for Lucy. The only problem was.... they were both with other people...

A few days later, there was another cast party, this time at a beach house in Malibu. Desi brought his fiancée, a dancer named Freckles. Her real name was Renee de Marco. She'd only just arrived in LA. Desi saw Lucy sitting on the beach. He wrote about this in his memoir. The excerpts you'll hear are from the audiobook and they're read by an actor. Desi walked up to Lucy and said hello.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** I had a wonderful time at El Zarape, she said, looking right through me with those damn big beautiful blue eyes. Thank you. So, did I. She patted the sand and said: Sit down. I sat down and never went back to Freckles.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi went home with Lucy that night. The next morning, he called Freckles and broke up with her. Lucy had been dating the director Al Hall for three years. But after two dates with Desi, that was over. Lucy and Desi were crazy in love. They couldn't keep their hands off each other - all they cared about

was being together. But being in the same room, in the same city, at the same time, that turned out to be a lot harder than they thought.

I'm 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 Five: Desilu.

There's a go-to spot for stand-up comics on the sunset strip in Hollywood. It's called The Comedy Store. It's on a corner...hard to miss. The building looks a little dingy, it's painted black with the names of comics written all over it. In the 1940s, it was a swanky nightclub called *Ciro's*. *Ciro's* was known as a "celebrities only" kind of place. Part restaurant, part nightclub - there was a dance floor and a stage for a live band. It was a place where you could order beluga caviar and chateaubriand for two - for about 16 dollars. Movie stars like Marilyn Monroe and Humphrey Bogart went there. So did mobsters. It was a place to be seen... and written about. Gossip columnist Hedda Hopper was a regular. It's also where Lucy and Desi had dinner the night after that beach party in Malibu. They made news that night.

It was the first public mention of them together. There was speculation their romance was a set-up - a publicity stunt by the studio to promote their movie *Too Many Girls*. But as the summer went on, it was clear Lucy and Desi were genuinely in love. And the press couldn't get enough. *Motion Picture Magazine* wrote "Now it's Desi and Lucille, wherever you look."

And this from Hedda Hopper - the biggest celebrity gossip - "Torrid romance of the season is burning between Lucille Ball and the new Cuban importation." It didn't take long for Lucy to introduce Desi to her family, including her cousin Cleo. Cleo was like a sister to Lucy.

**CLEO SMITH:** And she said, 'I want you...to meet Desi. Desi this is my grandfather and my mother and sister and brother.' And he was just very outgoing and funny...he was warm and wonderful, and we embraced him from the beginning.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But Lucy and Desi's relationship was rocky - even at the beginning. They could be deliriously happy one day - and fighting like feral cats the next. In part because they were so similar. Their tempers, their jealous streaks- their need for attention. But they were different too. Lucy was more than five years older than Desi. She'd been working for almost a decade to make it as a movie star. Desi was just starting out. He'd never even seen a Broadway play before he was cast in the musical *Too Many Girls*, the movie version was his big Hollywood break.

**DESI ARNAZ:** Oh, ley o lo!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy and Desi also had different approaches to work. Lucy was focused. Driven. She thought she could fix anything with hard work. Desi was... looser. He never passed up a card game, or a party, or another round of drinks. Lucy's friend Maggie Williams told PBS about it.

**MAGGIE WILLIAMS:** Desi is absolutely the man who must go out on the town, that he's all revved up and he wants to go out nightclubbing and drinking and laughing. And I want to go home.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** They were different in another way. Lucy stuck to one man at a time. Desi played the field.

**CLEO SMITH:** They were dating...but he was also dating Lana Turner, Betty Grable, I mean her competition was pretty good. And that was a little worrisome, I think.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** When filming wrapped on *Too Many Girls*, Desi was cast in the touring version of the play. So, he went out on the road. Lucy and Desi were both jealous. They spent hours on the phone. Often fighting. Desi remembered one call where Lucy just... yelled at him.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** 'You Cuban sonofabitch, where were you all last night? What are you trying to do, lay every goddamned one of those chorus girls in *Too Many Girls*? No wonder they picked you for the show!' Then she'd hang up on me.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** A reporter once asked Lucy about those phone calls with Desi.

**REPORTER:** You keep in touch with each other?

**LUCILLE BALL:** Oh, yes, we have telephone-itis. It's expensive ain't it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** They did manage to squeeze in visits. Lucy would fly to meet Desi on the road - but their time together was short. Lucy was on to her next movie and had to be back on set. When *Too Many Girls* closed, Desi went to New York and back to performing. This time as a solo conga act. By November he was playing the Roxy - a legendary music venue. But Lucy was still in Hollywood. Desi and Lucy had only known each other for only six months, and most of that time was spent apart. Figuring out how to be together led Lucy to make the boldest decision of her life.

The Plot Thickens will be back after the break.

**A GIRL, A GUY, AND A GOB:** You know, I'm not interested in your views on love.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucille Ball made four movies in 1940. The last one was called A Girl, A Guy, and a Gob.

**A GIRL, A GUY, AND A GOB:** Oh, just because a girl elopes she's a nitwit! Hmm!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** RKO sent Lucy to New York for the movie's premiere. She was thrilled because she could see Desi.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I visited him in New York... I was giving an interview to two or three people that day.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The interviews were in her hotel room.

**LUCILLE BALL:** About why I was a bachelor girl and would remain one.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi was there, listening. He told Johnny Carson about it on the Tonight Show.

**DESI ARNAZ:** I don't know if it was Cosmopolitan or Saturday Evening Post or one of those big magazines, about why we were not going to get married.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi had already decided he wanted to marry Lucy. He just hadn't told her yet. And now here she was telling a room full of reporters she wanted to stay single. Later that night, when they were finally alone, Desi proposed... though it was more like a demand.

**DESI ARNAZ:** I said this lady's not going to come across with this article too good because I'm marrying you tomorrow. She said, 'Why do we have to get married? Why can't we live together?' I said, 'I want kids.' And she said, 'Look, you love me...I love you.' 'Yeah,' I said, 'What else is there?'

**LUCILLE BALL:** I just had a little bag, one dress, one coat, one hat and a change of clothes to stay overnight in New York and he said, 'come on, we're going to get married.' I said 'In a black dress!' We got something to eat. And we had a champagne toast and took off for Connecticut.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** They crossed the state line and persuaded a judge in the town of Greenwich to waive the state's five-day waiting period for a marriage license.

**LUCILLE BALL:** And the judge saw us and said, you cannot be married in this ugly office. You must go to a beautiful spot. There's a wonderful spot out here called the Byram River Beagle Club. And I said I know the spot. I've hunted there. I said, 'oh God, that would be wonderful.' A beautiful little farmhouse with a big fireplace. And there was snow on the ground.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy wore the black dress. And she added a silver fox coat and matching hat. It was November 30th, 1940, when Desiderio Alberto Arnaz y de Acha III married Lucille Desiree Ball. The wedding was short. The ring was from Woolworths. None of that mattered. Lucy kissed Desi -- then, according to reports, she kissed the actual marriage license too. Leaving a mark in bright red lipstick. We tracked down a copy of Desi and Lucy's official marriage certificate - the one kept in the county records. There wasn't any lipstick on it, but a couple things jumped out at me. They lied about their ages - Desi made himself a few years older - Lucy a few years younger. And there was something else - their names. Lucy's middle name is Desiree, after her mother DeDe. Desi's name is Desiderio. They both mean the same thing: Desire. And really, that was the driving force between Lucy and Desi: that undeniable chemistry. That desire.

**LUCILLE BALL:** We were married and then we hightailed it back to the Roxy.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi had to be back in Manhattan for a show. They sped through traffic... But the news traveled faster than they did. Lucy and Desi walked onto the stage to a standing ovation. Seven thousand people were in the audience.

**LUCILLE BALL:** The Roxy people had given the entire audience, from the balcony down, rice. Argh, I think I had rice in my ears and my hair, my teeth, my clothes for months.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Back at the house on Ogden Drive in Los Angeles, Lucy's cousin Cleo said the family was surprised by the news.

**CLEO SMITH:** It was a shock to all of us. I mean, we knew she'd be going East. We knew she wanted to see him and all that...And she was just oh, so in love, that she couldn't see straight.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Their friends in Hollywood were skeptical. Eddie Bracken knew Lucy and Desi - he starred with them both in Too Many Girls. He thought the marriage was doomed.

**EDDIE BRACKEN:** People were making bets as to how long that marriage would last. I came closest. I had it over six months but they got along wonderfully. Was great at the beginning.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Beginnings are always great.... They're a lot easier than forever. Lucy and Desi honeymooned by train across America. When they got back to Los Angeles, they started looking for a place to live. They loved the San Fernando valley, a more rural part of LA in the 1940s. Lucy and Desi found a place in Chatsworth, in the northwest corner of the valley. They called it The Ranch. It had five acres and a grove of 200 orange trees.

**VAN JOHNSON:** Beautiful little one-story house with that old swimming hole type of swimming pool.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's their friend actor Van Johnson. He told PBS about the Chatsworth house in 1999.

**VAN JOHNSON:** And she had vegetables and stuff. She loved to garden and weed. Lucy was a great hostess. And... every hour on the hour she came out of the kitchen with another big tray of hors d'oeuvres.

**LUCILLE BALL:** We celebrate anything, barbecues, birthday parties, old fashioned swimming parties, Western parties, Halloween night everybody all dressed up and having a ball.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi built a bohio, a thatched hut common in Cuba. Inside was all Lucy -- she decorated it by going to secondhand shops. When people moved to California, they got rid of their old stuff as soon as they could afford modern furniture. Lucy picked up Victorian pieces, oil lamps, other vintage things. Things that reminded her of Jamestown. Lucy loved wearing what she called her "station wagon" clothes -- light sun dresses, tan cotton pants. And they actually bought a station wagon. They both wanted kids, so why not. It wasn't your typical Hollywood life - it was more domestic. Rustic. Eventually - the house did become a ranch. They got roosters, a pig, and a cow. The ranch needed a name. Two other famous actors - Douglas Fairbanks and Mary Pickford - called their 18-acre estate "Pickfair." Lucy and Desi wanted to mash together their names too. Arnaball sounded really bad. Ballarnaz was worse. Finally, they got it... Desilu. It was a place where Clark Gable popped by on his motorcycle. He lived nearby. A place that smelled of orange blossoms in the spring. It was paradise.... except when it wasn't. Lucy and Desi had some pretty rough fights.

**REPORTER:** I understand that when you get mad, you're apt to throw things.

**LUCILLE BALL:** That's true. Frances, where did you ever hear that? It's absolutely true. I throw away anything I can find. I have a very quick temper. I'm over it before the other guy gets angry at me. And I have been known to throw a few things that's sort of a childish habit I'm growing out of. What do you like to throw best? Well, I threw a chair once, I picked up a typewriter once. It was a little heavy. I didn't try that again.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy joking with the press about her temper was one thing. But living with that mix of anger and passion must have been hard. She and Desi had created a home, but it wasn't always a peaceful one. One week after Lucy and Desi's first year anniversary... Pearl Harbor was attacked.

**PEARL HARBOR NEWSREEL:** December 7, 1941. No American will ever forget this Sunday morning in Hawaii.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The second World War had come to America.

**PEARL HARBOR NEWSREEL:** After the President's address, Congress declares war on Japan.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi was 24 and tried to enlist, but he wasn't a citizen yet. So instead, he signed up for the Hollywood Victory Caravan, a group of famous actors selling war bonds.

**HOLLYWOOD VICTORY CARAVAN:** How do you do ladies and gentlemen, this is Bob "Hollywood Victory Caravan" Hope, telling you not to let up buying those bonds, don't stop for nothing!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The Hollywood Victory Caravan kept Desi in showbiz and on the road, away from Desilu. He hung around A-listers like Bob Hope, James Cagney and Cary Grant. The group raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the war effort. In January 1942, Lucy found out she was pregnant. She was 30 years old. She couldn't wait to set up a nursery and start their family. But three months into the pregnancy, Lucy miscarried. She and Desi were sick about it. Lucy wanted to be optimistic, she decided things would work out next time. But for Lucy and Desi next time would be a long way off. Later that year, Lucy had her best role to date... in maybe her best movie ever. She played a self-centered showgirl who ends up in a wheelchair in *The Big Street*.

**THE BIG STREET:** You got a job? What kind of a job? As what? Bus boy. Bus Boy. Cleaning tables, filling glasses, making with the butter. Well, you are not even a good busboy.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Henry Fonda plays the unlucky busboy who falls in love with Lucy. All he wants to do is take care of her. All she does is treat him like dirt.

**CAROL BURNETT:** I do remember seeing The Big Street with Lucy and Henry Fonda.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Carol Burnett. The legendary comedian and good friend of Lucy's. She saw The Big Street when she was nine years old.

**CAROL BURNETT:** And I just thought she was the meanest thing...the character she was playing was really bitchy. There was no hint of the genius of her comedy. She was a good actress. I mean, as mean as that character was, she was very good in that movie.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The Big Street didn't make any money, but critics raved about Lucy's performance. The Big Street was a turning point in Lucy's career. RKO sold her contract to a bigger studio: MGM. MGM was the lion of Hollywood, the Cadillac of studios.

**DU BARRY WAS A LADY:** Du Barry was a lady oh what a lady was she!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** One of Lucy's first major parts for MGM was the title role in Du Barry was a Lady, a musical from 1943.

**DU BARRY WAS A LADY:** Du Barry was a lady no matter what they may say...

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy's singing voice was dubbed in a lot of the numbers -- but the biggest change was to her hair. This was the movie where Lucy went red. The man behind that decision was Sydney Guilaroff. He was a legend at MGM. He was the first hair stylist to be included in a movie's opening credits. He did Vivien Leigh's hair in Gone with the Wind. He decided Judy Garland should have braids in The Wizard of Oz. Du Barry was a Lady was shot in Technicolor. Lucy's natural hair looked fine in black and white, but in color, it seemed flat.

**LUCILLE BALL:** My natural hair is sort of a mousy brown, I'm afraid.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Sydney Guilaroff had a solution -- he dyed Lucy's hair a deep red. It popped on screen. After that, Lucy was a redhead for life.

**LUCILLE BALL:** This is a happy color for me, I like it. It has been very lucky for me. I've had it for several years. I wouldn't know what to do about it.

**REPORTER:** Are you superstitious about it?

**LUCILLE BALL:** How do you mean?

**REPORTER:** That you feel it's lucky for you?

**LUCILLE BALL:** Oh, yes. Yes, I think I am.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** A few years later, Lucy made another Technicolor movie called Easy to Wed.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** But then when Easy to Wed came in... it was it was Sydney Guiaroff at that point that turned it orange...

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's TCM host Robert Osborne talking to PBS. He was a friend of Lucy's.

**ROBERT OSBORNE:** You would see Lucy walk down the street, and if you didn't know who it was, you knew it was somebody, because no normal human being except an actress would ever have hair that color. But it was gorgeous and it fit her so well. Lucy had a secondary part and absolutely walked off of the picture because for the first time, not only did she have the orange hair...she was zany. She was slapsticky and funny. Nobody had ever quite seen that side of Lucy before.

**EASY TO WED:** Pour me another glass of bubbly.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Easy to Wed has a scene that features one of Lucy's specialties -- playing drunk. She and her co-star Van Johnson get loaded on champagne.

**EASY TO WED:** Come my Paraphilia, let us down the sweet draft of Bacchus. What's that? That's Shakespeare for bottoms up. Oh all right.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Easy to Wed was a box-office hit. With her orange hair and comic swagger, Lucy stole every scene she was in. The audience noticed. And so did Hollywood. 1944 was a difficult year for Lucy. In January, her grandfather died. Fred Hunt had a stroke. His fourth one.

He was 78 years old. Lucy and her mother Dede made the trip back to upstate New York in the dead of winter. Back to Jamestown to bury her grandfather. Lucy visited Grandma Peterson while she was there. She even saw her old boyfriend, Johnny DeVita.

By now, Lucy was a movie star in her hometown. The place she'd run from so many times. It was a bittersweet homecoming. Grandpa Hunt was the only father figure Lucy had ever really known. Eventually Desi was drafted into the army, but a knee injury kept him from being sent overseas. Instead, he was assigned to entertain wounded troops. He was stationed close to home, just ten miles from the Desilu ranch. But even when he could go home -- Desi usually didn't. Lucy suspected he was sleeping with the actresses he performed with. And his memoir, Desi admitted he was cheating.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** If she had caught me in bed with a girl, unless it was right in the middle of the act, I would have jumped out and demanded to know how that girl got in there. Thank God she never did, or I wouldn't be writing about it today.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It's true Lucy hadn't caught Desi in the act... but she knew something was going on. Coming up -- Lucy files for divorce... for the first time.

**LUCILLE BALL:** Desi and I have been happy. We've had our ups and downs. I don't think there's anyone who's been married that hasn't.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy put on a brave face in public. But it was a different story at home. She was convinced Desi was cheating on her. So, she filed for divorce. Back then, if you wanted a divorce, you had to appear before a judge and make your case. On the day of Lucy's court appearance, Desi turned on the charm.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** Lucy told Desi that he was divorcing her. And he says, what do you mean, what are you doing today? He says to her.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Gustavo Perez Firmat. A Cuban American author who wrote about Desi.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** And she says to him, what do you mean what am I doing? I'm divorcing you! and he says, OK, but so what are you doing tonight? And she says I'm doing nothing tonight. And he said, well, why don't we go out? And she said, but I'm divorcing you today. And he said, OK, but you're divorcing me today, so let's go out tonight after you've divorced me.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy agreed to the date but still went to court. Lucy didn't tell the judge about Desi's cheating. Instead, she testified that she was a "nervous wreck" because the couple argued "far, far into the night." She said Desi deprived her of sleep. The court granted the divorce - but there was a loophole. Under California law, a divorce was not final for 365 days. So, if a couple got back together - and changed their minds - the divorce was void. Fresh from filing, Lucy and Desi went out on a date. One thing led to another, as these things do and... Lucy and Desi, newly divorced... spent the night together.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** And he describes this as an incredible night of passion and love, which meant, he says, that the divorce was invalid because you could not sleep with the person you were divorcing at the time, for a year.

**LUCILLE BALL:** We talked it out, and we decided this: usually when couples divorce, they remarry, the woman then makes a better wife, than she was before for the man she marries, and the man makes a better husband than he was. So, two other people, people profit by our mistakes. So, we decided that we should stick together and profit by our own mistakes.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy and Desi each promised to do better. Lucy tried to bite her tongue more, to control her anger. When a reporter asked Desi what changes he was making in the marriage, Desi said he'd try to sleep with the windows open because Lucy liked the cold night air. Lucy's biographer Kathleen Brady says that by 1945, Desi's movie career was all but over.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** There was basically no work for him in Hollywood. So, he went on the road with his band. He was never home.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi eventually got a regular gig in Los Angeles -- at Ciro's, the nightclub to the stars. The place they used to go when they were first dating. But bandleaders don't keep normal hours.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** He worked nights. She worked days in the movies. And they basically had no marriage.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Their commute from the ranch to work took them over the mountains between Hollywood and the San Fernando Valley. Lucy left for work early in the morning - around 5am. She made the drive down to the studio, on a curvy road called Coldwater Canyon. At the same time Desi drove north, on his way home to the Desilu ranch from his Ciro's gig. They would pull off the road and meet at 5:30 in the morning, just to see each other, just for a minute or two. Then they'd get back in their cars. Desi would drive north, to the Valley,

and home to sleep. Lucy would go the other way, into the heart of Hollywood, heading to work. By the mid-1940s, Lucy decided to leave MGM.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I had a wonderful time at Metro, but as soon as they didn't feel that I was making money for them good box office, I felt that was the time to get out and become box office at some other place.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But that didn't happen. The movie roles dried up. So, Lucy did a play, called Dream Girl. She played the owner of a bookstore with a wild imagination. It was another chance for Lucy to show off her comedy skills - her physicality as an actor. The play took off and Lucy toured the country for almost five months.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I was 32 weeks for that show. It was the hardest thing I ever did. And yet I was mentally better fit than I have ever been. I was thinking faster. I was feeling better. People said I looked better.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** She especially loved being in front of a live audience. It energized her. And she got terrific reviews. But being on the road meant Lucy saw even less of Desi. He was also on the road, touring with his band.

**FRED BALL:** I can't tell you how tough it was, but I know it was tough because they weren't together.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Lucy's brother, Fred Ball. He was the manager for Desi's band. He told PBS that Lucy didn't trust Desi.

**FRED BALL:** She would call me and ask me about how Desi is behaving. And I made it real clear...I said, 'Lucille. I've got a business relationship with Desi. And that's what I'm going to take care of. Don't get me involved, I will not have any part of your personal relationship...You talk to him, not to me.' And I told Desi that, too.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy was determined to find a way for her and Desi to work together. For two reasons - she'd be able to keep an eye on him - and they could work on having the family they'd always wanted. CBS approached Lucy about starring in a radio show.

**MY FAVORITE HUSBAND:** We present My Favorite Husband, a new series based on Isabel Scott Rorick's sophisticated Mr. and Mrs. Cugat, starring Lucille Ball.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It was a comedy about an upper middle-class couple. Lucy played the wife of a banker. Movie stars didn't often work in radio. But Lucy had a plan. She wanted Desi to play her husband. CBS executives said no way. The husband was supposed to be a straightlaced Midwestern banker, and straightlaced Midwestern bankers didn't sound like a bandleader with a Cuban accent. Lucy surrendered. An actor named Richard Denning was cast as her husband.

**MY FAVORITE HUSBAND:** Good morning, George, darling. Good morning, ladies, you're looking very good. What's wrong with that evening gown? Well, you see me wearing an evening gown before. I've seen you wearing galoshes, too, but not at breakfast.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy had done radio before, as a guest on other people's shows. But working on a comedy, week after week, was a new experience for her. Jess Oppenheimer wrote and produced the show. Back in the 1960s, he told a reporter Lucy was a nightmare to work with.

**JESS OPPENHEIMER:** The only difficulty was, was determining who was going to be the boss of the show. And this is not easy to do with Lucy. We had several big, knockdown, drag out fights of crying and hysteria. And I walked out several times. Lucy must be dominated by someone.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Oppenheimer taught Lucy how to play to a live audience. He told her to stop reading the lines and start acting. And then he sent her to a taping of a different radio show.

**JACK BENNY PROGRAM:** Here it is New Year's Eve, and in just a few hours it'll be 1945.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Comedian Jack Benny starred in the most popular radio show of its time.

**JACK BENNY PROGRAM:** Gosh what I wouldn't give to be 19 again. What you wouldn't give to be 45 again!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Jack Benny got more laughs between the lines than he did when he was delivering a joke. He'd put his hand to his cheek and look around at the audience. The longer he looked, the longer they laughed. After seeing Jack Benny, Lucy began using her face to get laughs from the studio audience. Listen to how much she gets out of a joke about toast.

**MY FAVORITE HUSBAND:** Liz. Yes, George. Is that toast as good as it sounds? No, it's fine. For heaven's sakes, do you have to make so much noise?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** My Favorite Husband became a hit for CBS. All of this happened while Desi was still out on the road.

**JESS OPPENHEIMER:** Her home life was very unhappy during the whole time. And the only thing she had to really enjoy and throw herself into was her work. And she just wouldn't quit. She wanted to work, work, work, work, work, you know, rehearse all the time.

**JESS OPPENHEIMER:** Although it may be a tragedy for the performer because she's escaping from an unhappy situation, it's wonderful for a producer. You get a polished performance that you don't get with lazy actors.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Together Jess Oppenheimer and Lucy dreamt up her character for the show. A woman who was down to earth - not a typical socialite wife of a bank vice president. But someone a little zany - someone who was constantly scheming and getting into trouble. It was a character Lucy could own, a home for all of her instincts and talents. That character in My Favorite Husband was the beginning of Lucy Ricardo...the role that would make Lucy more famous than she ever imagined.

By 1949, Lucy and Desi had been married for eight years. They still wanted children, so they came to an agreement. Desi would stop touring and only take local gigs. They would each consult doctors to see if there was a reason, they weren't getting pregnant. Desi's mother thought they weren't conceiving because they hadn't been married by a priest. So, in June of 1949, Lucy and Desi got married again.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I studied enough to be married in the Catholic Church and I am becoming a Catholic. I could embrace any religion. No one particular religion is more precious to me than another.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It took nearly a year of Desi staying at home, but in May of 1950, Lucy took a test -- and found out she was pregnant. She started watching her diet and making sure she got enough sleep. She and Desi made plans for a nursery. But at the end of Lucy's first trimester, she started hemorrhaging. She spent a week in the hospital before she lost the baby. Somehow, the story leaked. Lucy's miscarriage made headlines in papers around the country. Thousands of letters poured in from fans expressing their sympathy. Over the course of several months, Lucy answered every single one.

**REPORTER:** Is there any chance of doing your own television show?

**LUCILLE BALL:** Well, they want me to do My Favorite Husband, the radio show that I do for CBS, is a very good show to put on television. It's well written. It's written like a movie script.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Television was still very new in 1950, but CBS saw its potential. They also saw potential in Lucy. My Favorite Husband was popular, and unlike a lot of radio performers, Lucy was a natural in front of the camera. She was, after all, a movie star. CBS wanted My Favorite Husband to make the jump from radio to television. Lucy was interested -- but she had one demand.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I said, 'I don't want to work with Richard Denning, I want to work with my husband...I'd like him to stay home, get off the road.' He'd been out with his band five and a half years. He'd been in the Army three years, and we'd been married nine years. And we hadn't been together a year and a half. And we wanted to have children. You can't do that by telephone.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** CBS was sympathetic, but they didn't think America would accept a Cuban American as Lucy's husband. Here's Desi on the David Letterman show.

**DESI ARNAZ:** Nobody wanted me to play Ricky. The network. The sponsors. Nobody. Who the hell believes this Babalu fellow is going to be married to this typical American girl?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi was right, CBS didn't want him. Lucy decided to prove to the CBS executives that audiences would accept them as a couple. So, she and Desi hit the road with a vaudeville act.

**LUCILLE BALL:** Well, it'll be a variety show, we'll carry some acts with us, and we'll do a little singing, a little dancing, a little gab in between.

**VAUDEVILLE ACT:** Lucy? What Ricky? Did you hear about the big fire down in the shoe factory? I'll bet some heel started it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy and Desi's vaudeville act was a hit. But CBS kept saying no. That's when Lucy played hardball. She and Desi had a script written for a television pilot and they shopped it around to other networks. NBC was interested. CBS found out and panicked. They didn't want to lose Lucy to their competitor. So, CBS bought the show. With Desi.

In fighting for Desi, Lucy became an accidental champion of breaking the race barrier on television. Remember, this was 1950. Before the Civil Rights Movement - before the end of segregation in America. It was groundbreaking to show a white woman married to a Latin man with an accent.... on television. But Lucy wasn't being political. She just wanted to be with her husband.

**LUCILLE BALL:** We find that when we're together 24 hours a day, that's when we're the happiest. Separations are bad for anyone.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Lucy got what she wanted. No more pre-dawn meetings in the dark, at the top of a canyon road. Now, she and Desi would be partners. At home.... and at work. By the summer of 1950, Desilu was more than a house in the middle of an orange grove. It was a corporation: Desilu Productions. And Desilu had sold its first show -- a show called I Love Lucy. On the next episode of The Plot Thickens, Lucy and Desi have to figure out how to make a television show, and it wasn't easy.

**JESS OPPENHEIMER:** If you came to a rehearsal, first reading of Lucy, you'd say keep everybody but the redhead. She's terrible, fire her.

**LUCILLE BALL:** But when I got into television, I started learning from the very first week. It was just so exciting.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** And Lucy and Desi get some good news... but it comes all at once.

**KATHLEEN BRADY:** They wanted children desperately, they were thrilled when the children came along. By then, they had so much gone on in so many directions that... Ultimately, I don't know how much that mattered.

**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).