

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

Episode 8: The End of Desilu

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In January 1955, the Hollywood Confidential story had just hit newsstands. It said Desi was with sex workers. It was a bombshell - the kind of public humiliation Lucy hated.

FOREVER DARLING: I'm sick and tired of the whole thing! It seems you're just sick of me. You just don't like our whole marriage. Well maybe I don't. What makes you think I do?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Only a few months later, Lucy and Desi started filming a new movie together. It was called Forever Darling, about a couple in the throes of a marital crisis.

FOREVER DARLING: You snore, you suck your teeth all the time, you talk with your mouth full. You don't know how those things can get on a person's nerves, sometimes I think I'll scream! Then scream! I WILL NOT!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was an interesting choice for two people whose own marriage had been quietly falling apart for years. While promoting the movie, Lucy and Desi put on a happy face.

FOREVER DARLING: Forever Darling is a real plug for matrimony. You see, is a story about two people that find complete happiness and understanding in marriage. Am I right, honey? That's right. I love the picture. I even love the producer.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy hated the picture. Critics and audiences didn't care for it either. It was a romantic fantasy about a guardian angel who helps the couple find their way back to each other.

FOREVER DARLING: You and Larry are drifting apart. You're going one way, Larry's going another. One thing leads to another until two people who really belong together are separated for good.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy later told Rolling Stone she hoped the movie would do the same for her and Desi. That

it might be the miracle that could save her own marriage. Forever Darling had a happy ending. But Lucy and Desi, well that's a different story. I'm Ben Mankiewicz, and this is 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 Eight: The End of Desilu.

Desi and Lucy were at a crossroads. They'd been married 14 years. A few months before they started filming Forever Darling, they had one of the most important conversations of their entire marriage. Here's how Desi remembered it in his memoir, read by an actor:

DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK: Lucy and I had a long talk about our future. I told her, "We have two alternatives. We can sell four years of the I Love Lucy shows we have done for Philip Morris for at least three million dollars, I'm sure. After we give Uncle Sam his cut, we'll invest the rest safely and conservatively, which should bring us at least one hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year in income, without touching the capital.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They could cash out and live comfortably for the rest of their lives. Spend more time with the kids. Teach them to fish and ride horses. Lucy had thought about a quieter life. At around the same time, she wrote to a high school friend in Jamestown. Said she and Desi were thinking about retiring to a house on Lake Chautauqua, not far from where Lucy grew up. Nostalgia for her hometown always tugged at Lucy. But her ambition pulled her in another direction. She told Desi:

DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK: You said we had two alternatives. What is the other one?" she asked. "I hate to even consider it. We must get to be as big as MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox, Warner Brothers, Paramount, Columbia or any of the other big studios.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was go big or go home. Desilu would eventually go big. Really big. But first — Lucy went home.

FOREVER DARLING PROMO: Hi! Hi, we're back to tell you about the MGM movie that Desi and I just made. It's called Forever Darling.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1956, Lucy and Desi went on tour to promote Forever Darling.

FOREVER DARLING PROMO: It'll be coming to your favorite theater very soon. As a matter of fact, we're having the world premiere tomorrow night in Jamestown, New York! That's my hometown.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy hadn't been back to Jamestown in ten years. Now she was bringing her husband home for the very first time. Lucy and Desi flew into Jamestown on a helicopter - that was pretty exotic in 1956. And dramatic. 250 students stood in formation on the high school football field. They formed the words HI LUCY DESI. A radio reporter from ABC News was there as the high school band played.

MAX ROBINSON: Desi's waving to the crowd and Lucy is behind him. Here is Lucy. Hi, how are you? Oh honey, I can't help it. It's just too much for anybody. It's just the greatest thing that's ever happened to me in my whole life. And God bless Jamestown for everything.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: A twenty-year-old woman was behind Lucy. Her name was Janice Swanson. She looked like she belonged on the cover of Seventeen Magazine - Janice was elected "Miss Jamestown." She'd won the honor of greeting Lucy and Desi in a contest. The reporter asked Janice what she thought of Lucy and Desi.

JANICE SWANSON: They're the most natural people I've ever met. They're very wonderful and charming and they seem to fit in so well with everything we've done, even though it's been a panic here.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Twenty-five thousand people lined the streets for a parade. That was half the people who lived in Jamestown. There was a marching band. It rained and there was a sea of umbrellas. Desi stood on the back of a fire truck, wrapped in a thick overcoat. He was wearing a fedora. A cigarette dangled from his lips. Lucy was in the backseat of a car. A photographer from Look Magazine captured the moment.

CHRIS OLSEN: Lucille Ball is looking out the window and there's several ladies there amidst thousands to greet her.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Chris Olsen. Janice Swanson is his mom. Miss Jamestown.

CHRIS OLSEN: And you see a very tentative Lucy. And she knows everyone loves Lucy, the movie star, but she does not yet herself know: what does her hometown feel of her?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Chris wrote the book Lucy Comes Home. It's about the two days Lucy spent in Jamestown. Chris talked about the photograph he chose for the cover.

CHRIS OLSEN: She's waving and I kind of picture her saying, "I'm home, hello, I'm home. It's me."

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It must've been a strange moment for Lucy, seeing herself through the eyes of the people that knew her before fame and fortune. There was a big shindig in the Crystal Ballroom at the Jamestown Hotel that night. Lucy wore a white gown with sequins. The room was PACKED. When Janice Swanson was crowned Miss Jamestown, Desi placed a tiara on her head. And he kissed her. There's a photo of that kiss. Desi's head is turned sideways, his eyes are closed, and he's cradling Janice's chin. If you saw that picture without any explanation, you'd say those two were in love. But the people who were there that night saw something else. Janice is in her 80s now. She's told the story to her son Chris over the years. She said it was obvious to everyone it was Lucy and Desi who were in love.

CHRIS OLSEN: And they would find themselves across a packed ballroom by standing on top of a table and mouthing, "Are you OK, Desi? Yeah, I'm good. Are you OK, honey?" And that touched Mom and really resonated with me on how much they loved each other.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The next day, Lucy and Desi visited Lucy's childhood home in Celoron. LOOK Magazine tagged along. The house was smaller than she remembered. She ran her hand over the curtain rod in the living room, where she and Freddy and Cleo used to stage their shows. "This is the room where I used to dream," she said. That night, Lucy and Desi boarded a train for New York City to finish the promotional tour. It was the last time Lucille Ball would ever see Jamestown. Lucy's home was now in Hollywood. 1000 North Roxbury Drive, the house and Desi bought in Beverly Hills – after they left the ranch. It was a five-bedroom mansion with a grand winding staircase. They had staff. Maids, cooks, divers, security guards. It was the kind of place you buy when you're famous. Jimmy Stewart lived down the block. So did Ira Gershwin and Rosemary Clooney. But every now and then, Lucy was reminded of where she came from. Like the time Jack Benny showed up in her kitchen.

WANDA CLARK: And then she told a story about Jack Benny, who did live next door

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Remember Lucy had gone to see Jack Benny's radio show before she worked in television. Benny taught her how to use her face to make people laugh. Here's Lucy's secretary Wanda Clark.

WANDA CLARK: So, one night the family was at dinner. The kids were still young and at home. I wasn't there. I wish I had been Jack came across that driveway, came in the back door through the kitchen and the dining room playing his fiddle, walked around the dining room a couple of times and Lucy was falling on the floor. She was laughing so hard he never broke character. He walked out the

kitchen door and went back home without saying a word, just played his fiddle while they were having dinner. That's a great story. Oh, it is a great story.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The house on North Roxbury Drive was proof Lucy had arrived. And when Desi asked Lucy to choose — quit the business or grow Desilu into a Hollywood powerhouse — her answer was clear.

TOM GILBERT: Lucy said, I want to keep going. So that was another point where she chose career over marriage.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Tom Gilbert. He wrote a book about Desilu.

TOM GILBERT: She was driven, and she was focused and single minded in a lot of ways. She did not like not working, that's what gave her purpose more than the kids and more than a marriage. You know, it was the working.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Some people bring their work home with them. Lucy and Desi? They brought home to work. Whenever they filmed an episode of, I Love Lucy, both of their mothers were usually sitting in the audience. The people who worked at Desilu often said it felt more like a family than a job. Desi even hired one of his childhood friends, Marco Rizo, to be the show's pianist. Marco would play during rehearsals. Sometimes Lucy would come by and make requests. One song in particular, called I Didn't Know What Time It Was. It was a special song for Lucy and Desi. The one her character sang in Too Many Girls - that first movie they made together - the reason they met in the first place. When Desi would hear Marco play those opening bars, he'd drop whatever he was doing and race across the soundstage so he could sing it to Lucy.

KEITH THIBODEAUX: There was a lot of those kind of moments. They were both very nostalgic and very romantic. They were the loves of each other's life, you know?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Keith Thibodeaux was the actor who played Little Ricky on I Love Lucy. He was five years old when he started on the show.

KEITH THIBODEAUX: I identified more with Desi than I did with Lucy because he was a musician. He was from Cuba. He had a he had a different accent, you know, and I came from a south Louisiana Cajun family. I felt, you know, comfortable around him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But for every tender moment on the set, little Keith Thibodeaux also saw Lucy and Desi fight at work.

KEITH THIBODEAUX: They were both intense individuals, but the marital difficulties were something that was very, very hard for them, as well as the people on the set.

TOM GILBERT: Desi's drinking escalated around 1955. He'd always been something of a drinker, you know, I mean, he was in nightclubs his whole career and usually, you know, when he worked as a bandleader. So, it was easy access. But it began to show up at the job around 1955 and there were a little telltale signs.

MAURY THOMPSON: Well, um, it got bad.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Maury Thompson was now the camera coordinator on I Love Lucy. He talked about Desi's drinking with PBS.

MAURY THOMPSON: At 10 o'clock in the morning, he would ask for some tomato soup. And it was loaded with vodka, you know, it's loaded and a couple of sips of it and he's gone. He's gone. and staggering, going to sleep, just the worst, the worst. And we had to put up with it, we had to put up with it, when it got that bad you just couldn't work with him.

KEITH THIBODEAUX: One night about 11:30 or so we heard all this commotion and Desi had been drinking and I guess got word that that this tutor had had called Desi Jr. a spoiled brat.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Keith Thibodeaux would often spend the night at Lucy and Desi's because he was friends with Desi Jr. Over the years Keith saw Desi lose his temper a lot.

KEITH THIBODEAUX: And he really laid into this guy. I mean, literally physically was beating him up, knocked him out of the house, I mean, down the stairs and just cussing. I mean, here we are in our bedroom, and you know, of course, his kids. It's like, what in the world is going on? You know, it's like somebody is dying out there. Desi and I were both shaking and trembling ... and Desi came up there and he just hugged both of us and said, I'm sorry partners, he said. He said, you know, he was he was that kind of guy. Desi was volatile you know, especially if he was drinking. I was very sensitive to that as a child and that maybe contributed to some of the things that I experienced on the set, such as I began to stutter during one point during the filming of the show. And Lucy told my father that I needed some time off. So, I took some time off.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy worried for Keith, and for her own children. Right before the family was scheduled to move into the new house in Beverly Hills, a pipe burst. It left water stains all over the white carpet and the freshly plastered walls. Desi lost it. He stormed around the house, kicking the walls. Then he started tearing them down with his bare hands. In front of the kids. Desi always had a temper. But what Lucy saw that time was something new. It was rage. The pressure on Desi was growing. Desilu had agreed to make 52 more episodes of the I Love Lucy Show. They were also making more than a dozen other shows. In all, Desilu filmed more than 350 hours of television between 1955 and 1957 — much of it overseen by Desi. And he was still appearing every week as Ricky Ricardo on I Love Lucy. Desi had been diagnosed with an intestinal infection called diverticulitis. Doctors told him to slow down. In 1957, the couple tried to make some changes. Here's Tom Gilbert again:

TOM GILBERT: After the kids got to be a certain age decided to discontinue the half-hour show and it was still the tops in the ratings, because they wanted more time to be with the family.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi convinced CBS to replace I Love Lucy with five hour-long specials. They'd rename it the Lucille Ball-Desi Arnaz Show but keep the same cast. They invited their famous friends to be guest stars. Everyone from gossip columnist Hedda Hopper to the actress and pinup girl Betty Grable. But one guest star was more memorable than most.

THE LUCY DESI COMEDY HOUR: Oh, how do you do darling? I'm your new neighbor, Tallulah Bankhead.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Tallulah Bankhead had been a big Broadway star in the 1940s. She wasn't Lucy's first choice to appear on this particular episode, called The Celebrity Next Door. Lucy wanted Bette Davis. Tallulah Bankhead was a wildcard. A heavy drinker and a chain-smoker. She was beautiful, but always looked like she was about to roll her eyes at something tedious. Bankhead was also erratic. Once she jumped into a hotel pool fully clothed in a beaded ballgown. She was known for doing cartwheels every chance she got. She had a reputation for never wearing underwear.

LUCILLE BALL: She had a wonderful way about her. But you had to be ready, and we weren't quite ready.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Bankhead was only on set for a few days, but she managed to frustrate everyone on the crew. One day she tore off her pants and plopped down cross-legged on the floor of Desi's office in the middle of a meeting. Someone finally covered her with a dressing gown. She seemed drunk and out of it at

rehearsals. Lucy was irritated. She was dead serious about her comedy. They'd spent three months working on a script, and Tallulah Bankhead couldn't be bothered to learn her lines.

LUCILLE BALL: She never could remember them. She never quite made it. She'd always go back and say, oh, she'd go get the script and she'd read it. I'm never going to, never going to learn that goddamn thing. Terrible, terrible speech." I said, "What? Do you want us to change that?" No, no, no, leave them alone. It's going to be allllllrriiiiight."

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When the time came to shoot, Lucy was convinced it was going to be a disaster.

LUCILLE BALL: I was a wreck! Because she wasn't going to make it. And by this time, we've thrown away the scripts, everybody's supposed to know their lines and everything. And she comes on and said "oh, Christ," you walk away and said, "Darling, I don't know what's going to happen." So, all right, now comes the show and I got my own problems to think about. Suddenly we are up to the scene, and I go, oh, my God, here it comes. So, I'm like this. [pause laughter] Forgot my lines and she went right over the top. I couldn't remember a line worrying about her. She was so great, and she turned to me in front of the audience, says "What's the matter dahling can't you remember your lines?"

TOM GILBERT: The actual performance when the camera was rolling, she was like, fantastic. I mean, she was she met Lucy line for line and actually overwhelmed Lucy in their big fight episode, which pissed Lucy off because Tallulah, you know, rose to her full height.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the episode, Bankhead winds up starring in a PTA production of an old-timey play called The Queen's Lament. Ricky Ricardo plays an English nobleman who tries to woo her.

THE LUCY AND DESI COMEDY HOUR: Good evening Fair Lady, I wouldst have an audience with the quin!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy didn't know it, but while she was doing battle with Bankhead, Desi was cooking up a plan: to buy RKO. The very movie studio where he and Lucy first met, 17 years earlier. During breaks in the show, Desi was working the phone.

TOM GILBERT: RKO was a B-grade motion picture studio, you know, the big ones were Warner Brothers and MGM. Anyway RKO fell into, you know, hard times, it was it changed hands, Howard Hughes owned it first, then it was sold to General Tire Company and General Tire Company, you

know, which specialized in tires, really had no business making movies and found that out very quickly. So, they wanted to unload it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi heard that General Tire was asking 6.5 million for RKO's two Hollywood lots, including everything on them: the cameras, the sets, the props—all of it. It was a steal.

It would take everything Lucy and Desi had — plus another coupla million — but buying RKO would make Desilu a major player in Hollywood. Even bigger than MGM and 20th Century Fox. It was a gamble, and just the kind Desi lived for. He called Howard Hughes for advice. Hughes told him to grab it. Desi called the bank and secured a two-million-dollar loan. Desi was still in costume in his velvet breeches and a feathered hat when he called the head honcho at RKO. He offered him just over six million. That was less than the asking price.

DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK: "I think you just blew it," he said, "but I'll present your offer and call you right back." I waited with my silly Shakespearean costume — we still had to do the second act. Lucy came in and said, "Come on, what are you doing? We are waiting for you." Just then the phone rang. It was Dan, who said, "You got it." ... Lucy asked, "What the hell was that all about?" "We just bought RKO Studios." "We did what?" "We bought RKO Studios."

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi and the executives explained the deal to Lucy.

TOM GILBERT: They took her in, and they told her what the story was and that, you know, they were going to buy this huge studio and that everything was going to be sacrificed if it didn't succeed. And she said, well, what do you guys think? And they said, let's do it. And the executives thought it was a good idea. And it really was there was no choice for. I mean, it had to go forward. So, she said, OK, then do it. And she went back and continued rehearsing.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy and Desi now owned the studio that gave them their big break. There was a rumor going around that back in her early days at RKO, Lucy sauntered onto the lot and said, "Someday I'm going to own this studio." Lucy denied she ever said that.

LUCILLE BALL: Can you imagine? Can you imagine being 20 years old and walking into a studio as a star, like a stupid starlet, getting fifty dollars a week as a model and saying someday I'll. Oh, no, this isn't that ridiculous. Some son of a bitch wrote that and it sticks.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: By buying RKO, Desilu had reached the top of the mountain. But Desi and Lucy - were facing a long downhill slide. We'll be right back.

LUCILLE BALL: Someone told me about a marvelous man that was making life a lot easier for millions of people. And at that time, I needed something to make my life a little easier. And I went looking for this man and I found him. I went into his audience, and I listened to him and then I asked to meet him. I went backstage and I've been in love ever since.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That man was Norman Vincent Peale. Peale was a minister from Ohio, a rising star in the growing self-help movement of the 1950s. He'd written a book -- a best-seller -- called the Power of Positive Thinking.

NORMAL VINCENT PEALE: Positive thinking works wonders!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Peale was known for mottos like: "Expect great things and great things will come." Psychologists were skeptical of Peale's methods -- even called him dangerous, a con man. But that didn't keep the rich and powerful from going to him for help. Peale would go on to advise presidents: Nixon. Reagan.

RONALD REAGAN: Few Americans have contributed so much to the happiness of their fellow citizens as Dr. Norman Vincent Peale.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Even Donald Trump.

DONALD TRUMP: Norman Vincent Peale, the great Norman Vincent Peale was my pastor. He was so great.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy first met Peale when she was 42 years old. The two of them told the story to journalist David Frost:

LUCILLE BALL: Well, I want to tell you, David, this time that she refers to this coming backstage. It was in the church, actually, and she came back into my office, and we had a nice little chat. And then she did a very strange thing. She got up and started pacing the floor and started to cry. And I asked her, what in the world are you crying about? And we'd been talking prior to that about her great career. She'd come into a magnificent popularity such as she has today and always has. And I ask her what she's crying about. And she said, I'm crying because I'm afraid it won't last. It was the happiness that I had at that point. Yeah, well, that's right. I remember that. But the point is, she has never known that she's a star in her own heart. She'd never know that everybody else knows it, but she thinks she just plain.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy once told a reporter for the Associated Press that success sometimes scared her. She worried that all the good things in her life would suddenly vanish. Even her own children. So, in 1957, the same year Desi and Lucy bought RKO - Peale introduced Lucy to his business partner. Smiley Blanton was a well-known psychiatrist in New York. Lucy described him as a frail man who spoke in a whisper. That fall Lucy went to New York and spent two or three hours a day on Blanton's couch. She even convinced Desi to fly out and join a few sessions. One of them lasted from nine in the morning until six at night. They yelled. They kicked over the furniture. They threw pillows at each other. They laughed too. Lucy felt great about it. As anxious as she was, Desi was worse. She'd begun to see that he was a self-sabotager. He needed to punish himself.

LUCILLE BALL: Desi was a very hardworking, brilliant, generous, overly generous man, but he had a drinking problem and a self-destruct, and it happened in business even before it happened with us. There are a lot of people that are gamblers and brilliant, but if they drink and they self-destruct, that's the way they are.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But maybe through therapy Desi was facing his issues head-on. It didn't stick though. Desi went back to Hollywood. Lucy stayed in New York another month. She hung onto what Norman Vincent Peale had taught her for the rest of her life. And one mantra in particular:

LUCILLE BALL: The thing that he finally got through to me was one sentence: He said, use this and use it until you learn the meaning of it, it's very fundamental and it starts like a childish thing, put a sign up so that you see it first thing in the morning: Is this good for Lucy?

DESI ARNAZ: This show is all about one of Lucy's dreams. One that actually did come true.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The first thing Lucy did when they got the keys to the RKO lot was remodel a bungalow. It had been Ginger Rogers' dressing room back in the studio's glory days. Now it was Lucy's. And she renovated the old Little Theater to turn it into a workshop for young actors. Just like Ginger's mother, Lela, had done for her when she was starting out. Lucy recruited and mentored a group of young actors who would star in a variety show called the Desilu Revue. She called them "the kids."

LUCILLE BALL: Honey, don't forget to tell her that the reason for the workshop is to give the kids a place to show off their talent.

ROBERT OSBORNE: that's how I actually met her!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One of those “kids” was TCM’s own Robert Osborne, who later became Lucy’s close friend.

ROBERT OSBORNE: I came into her life at a wonderful time for me because it was at a time when Desi was not around a lot. I think also when you're in a domestic situation and your partner is straying. And part of the reason, you may think, is because you're getting a little older. that's a very vulnerable age when you're used to being young and you may not think you're so young anymore. So, what you really want to be around is younger people to make you feel young.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: While Lucy was running the workshop, Desi had just landed one of the biggest contracts ever negotiated for TV. A huge sponsorship deal with Westinghouse.

DESI ARNAZ: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and welcome to another Westinghouse Desilu Playhouse, tonight we're gonna see a story written by Rod Serling and starring William Bendix. Our story begins in a doctor's office.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The Westinghouse Desilu Playhouse launched a few hits, including a show from a young writer named Rod Serling that would eventually become The Twilight Zone. You may have heard of it. Then there was The Untouchables, about Eliot Ness. The federal agent who took down Al Capone. Neville Brand played Capone.

THE UNTOUCHABLES: I’m away for ten months and we got a problem with this. Ness. Ness, ness
ness.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: At first Desi thought of casting himself as Ness. But then decided to give the role to Robert Stack. The Capone family and Desi’s old high school buddy, Sonny Capone — actually sued Desilu over the series. But the show was a hit. Things were on an upswing at work. On December third, 1958, Desilu went public. Lucy and Desi each got about two and a half million dollars from the sale. Lucy invested her share. They still kept separate bank accounts. But most of Desi’s earnings went to pay off his debts.

TOM GILBERT: I think it was the third hour of the Lucy Desi comedy hour they shot on location in Las Vegas with Fred MacMurray and Desi got heavily into gambling. And so, they had they were trying to get him out of there. So, they chartered a plane home. And on the way home, Desi bribed the pilot to turn around and he went back, and he went back into the casino and lost 45,000 dollars. He just couldn't be stopped.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But going public turned up the heat on Desi.

TOM GILBERT: As Desilu became more and more important and bigger, it was a lot of pressure on Desi and especially when they had shareholders, because then you really have to be on your toes, and you're easily called on the carpet.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi had become a liability at work and at home. To Lucy, even an embarrassment.

LUCILLE BALL: I wouldn't go out with him to a party or anything because he was incapable. So, I stayed home. That's lousy. No, it was all right. It's better than being at a party with him.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lucy, talking to reporter Dotson Rader in 1984. Rader remembers a story Lucy told him about her marriage.

DOTSON RADER: Where it got, she said the point where it just got to be too much is he would pick up women at parties they would have at their house. And take them up into their bedroom and then have sex with them in her bed. And she said, you-know, you'll fuck them in the maid's room or something but don't use our bedroom. I was kind of surprised she told me that because I you know, you sort of have this image of the two, she and Desi, having this wonderful marriage and. You know, I kind of felt sorry for her, actually there's a point where you can't take the pain anymore, right?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There's a word Lucy used over and over again to describe how Desi's cheating. His very public cheating. Made her feel. Humiliated. She wanted to retaliate, humiliate Desi right back. When they went to Palm Springs, Lucy would go to Desi's favorite bar. She'd try to catch him cheating. Once she raced across a golf course with Maury Thompson bouncing along in the card to confront Desi with another woman. Thompson says Lucy really did love Desi. But she was just so hurt.

MAURY THOMPSON: She just couldn't hold back, embarrassing him in front of people. He stooped over once and she kicked him, and she meant to kick him higher, but she didn't, and she kicked him lower, and the poor man just folded. And he limped around for days, just days. It was awful.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Anyone who knows what it's like when a relationship is ending will recognize some version of this. Those moments of cruelty between people who once loved one another, who may still love another, but can't make it work. The cruelty looks different in each marriage. But it's almost always there. And it's as powerful an impulse as falling in love. Sometime in the mid 1950s, Desi Arnaz sat down and wrote a note. It's dated April 20th. It's not clear exactly what year. It's written in pencil, on two pages of lined paper torn from a

spiral-bound notebook. It's addressed to no one. Desi's handwriting seems to grow more urgent as the letter goes on. It says: "I've come to the terrible realization that my wife doesn't love me. She loves her children, her mother, her family; as far as I'm concerned if I behave well, I'm a nice guy to have around—but there's no love she can't forgive me anything, and the reason why she can't forgive me anything is because she really doesn't love me. I have a sick feeling in my stomach. I've had this feeling before—during the Cuban revolution, during Lucy's commie accusation and now—The other two times there was something you could fight, but you can't fight this," Desi wrote. "The woman does not love me."

KATHLEEN BRADY: I think they did love each other. I don't think they always knew how to express it in a way that either could understand.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Kathleen Brady. Lucy's biographer, speaking to PBS.

KATHLEEN BRADY: I asked Lucille Ball, in fact, do you think Desi ever loved you, and she said, yes, he loved me when we were first married. He loved me when we bought our first house, and we planted our garden. And I was very, very touched by that. I think he loved her, but knowing how much pain, sorrow, anger, and hatefulness they put each other through, I find it hard to process this great love story business. A lot depends on how you define love. It was a story of a remarkable, passionate partnership.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the spring of 1959, Lucy and Desi made one final attempt to revive their marriage. They booked a vacation. The couple set sail on a French ocean liner. But instead of a romantic getaway, Lucy - brought an entourage.

TOM GILBERT: They had taken a European trip to try to mend the marriage. They took the kids, they took cousin Cleo, and they took Cleo's husband, Kenny. When they got to London, everything was fine because London had the show and knew Lucy and Desi. Then they went to Paris. Not so much did they know him. Then they got to Rome and a coat had been left behind in Paris. So, the coat was, it was his coat, and it was forwarded to Rome, and it was addressed to Mr. Ball. And that's when Desi went off. And according to Cleo, he wasn't sober from that moment on.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi got drunk in Capri. He tripped on the cobblestones and smashed his face. Cleo said it looked like a pomegranate -- purple with bruises.

TOM GILBERT: It was a disaster. When they got back, Desi would stay in the guest house on Roxbury Drive where they lived, but largely they were separated.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Keith Thibodeaux, who played Little Ricky, remembers those days too. And what it was like for Lucy and Desi's kids.

KEITH THIBODEAUX: We were playing in the backyard. Desi was at that point staying in the guest house and they had an argument in there and there was glass crashing and cursing and all this rumblings going on in there. And we could hear it from in the backyard, and we were just kind of like huddling in the bushes, in the tree by a wall and just looked at one another. And, you know, just said, there they go again.

TOM GILBERT: And during this period, Lucy would go back and forth to New York a bit. And one time she was in New York, and she called Cleo and she said, you know, I don't know what I'm going to do. And Cleo said, well, you have to get your priorities straight, you know, what do you want? Do you want your marriage, or do you want your career? And Lucy said, my career. So that was the end of it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Back at the studio, Lucy and Desi still had a couple of episodes left to film to fulfill their contract with Westinghouse. In *The Ricardos Go to Japan*, Lucy and Ethel dress up as geishas in a scene that ... doesn't play quite the same now as it did in 1959.

I LOVE LUCY: Me go now, geisha girl take coffee break -- eh, tea break.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Between takes, Lucy was crying through her pancake makeup.

TOM GILBERT: When Lucy was unhappy, everybody was unhappy. You know, when the marriage was on the rocks, everybody felt it. So, you know, Desi would say-tell Miss Ball to move over there. And she would say, tell Mr. Arnaz, you know, I'm not going to do that.

MAURY THOMPSON: They weren't speaking, just weren't speaking to each other. You could just tell he was miserable, just miserable. And then you knew things were happening at home that weren't happy. So, it was a dreadful, dreadful ending.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Soon after that episode wrapped, Lucy and Desi had an explosive fight in Desi's office. Desi asked for a divorce. Here's how he remembered it in his book.

DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK: She didn't even answer. She just turned her back to me and left. When I got home that night, she said, you meant what you said? Yes, I'm very sorry, but I did. I cannot keep

on living this way. Her temper got the best of her. Why don't you die then? That would be a better solution, better for the children, better for everybody. I'm sorry but dying is not on my immediate schedule. I'll tell you something, you bastard... you cheat... you drunken bum... I've got enough on you to hang you. By the time I get through with you you'll be as broke as when you got here. You goddamn spic... you... you wetback!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi moved out. They never lived together under the same roof again. Lucy and Ricky Ricardo said goodbye forever in January of 1960. The episode was called Lucy Meets the Moustache.

I LOVE LUCY: Lucy you look wonderful. Thanks Ethel. Yeah, you ought to grow a moustache!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy was wearing striped pajamas, a hat and a big mustache. It was supposed to be funny — but she kept breaking down in tears. At the end, Ricky takes Lucy in his arms for a scene where they kiss and make-up.

DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK: This was not just an ordinary kiss for a scene in a show. It was a kiss that would wrap up twenty years of love and friendship, triumphs and failures, ecstasy and sex, jealousy and regrets, heartbreaks find laughter . . . and tears. The only thing we were not able to hide was the tears.

TOM GILBERT: The kiss lingered. It was poignant and I think everybody realized that, you know, that was the end of it, that that kiss summed up, you know, all those years together.

DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK: After the kiss we just stood there looking at each other and licking the salt. Then Lucy said, you're supposed to say 'cut.' I know. Cut, goddamn it!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi ends his autobiography there, in 1960. His life went on for more than 25 years after Lucy. It seems telling that he chose to end his life story on that day. Two months later, Lucy filed for divorce, for real this time. Desi was served with papers on March third, 1960. The day after his 43rd birthday. Lucy was chipper when she got out of the limo at the Santa Monica courthouse for her divorce hearing a few months later. She wore a black-and-white checked suit and carried a jeweled umbrella. She joked with reporters. But inside the courtroom, she was teary-eyed. She told the judge about Desi's temper. It was "a Jekyll and Hyde thing," she said, and it embarrassed her. When fans heard news of the divorce, it felt personal.

TOM GILBERT: It was dismay is the only thing I can think of to say. It was like they were so good together, so funny. What's wrong? What happened? Nobody understood it. I think she got 8000 letters saying don't do it. But-what can you do? it was a national event.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Even a representative from the Catholic Church called Lucy and asked her to reconsider. She told reporters at the courthouse there would be no reconciliation this time. Lucy knew the marriage had to end, but she never understood how it all fell apart. Here's Lucy talking to Barbara Walters in 1977.

BARABRA WALTERS: You had the success; the marriage look perfect. It was everything. And then it fell apart. That was his problem. And I heard you were devastated. I couldn't understand it any more than, you know, for the same reason you're asking the question. It seemed like we had everything. I think people still don't understand. I don't either.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy called it the lowest point in her life.

ROBERT OSBORNE: I think the one thing she wanted more than anything in the world was to be able to work, be financially secure and be with the one man that she loved. And that didn't happen.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy grieved. The dream of a quiet life on Lake Chautauqua. They happy home she never had but wanted so badly to create for her kids. She grieved all of it. Desi could never be the husband Lucy needed. You can hear some of that disappointment in her voice she got interviewed by Gene Shalit on the Today Show in 1979. Her daughter Lucie Arnaz, Little Lucy, sat next to her on the couch.

THE TODAY SHOW: What do you hope for your daughter? For her future? I hope that she finds a man who appreciates his home, and really means it. Really want to be in it. And someone who cares about the closeness. And is not always looking into the tomorrow, the grass is always greener over there someplace. And appreciates... what they have.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Little Lucie Arnaz did find a man who appreciates her, and her father sang a song at the wedding. The title song from Forever Darling, the last movie Desi and Lucy ever filmed together. There were a few dozen people at the wedding, but some suspected Desi was singing it for an audience of One.

DESI ARNAZ: Forever Darling, while other hearts go wandering. You'll find mine as faithful as can be. I'll be your true love, forever and forever. I'll care for you eternally.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Next time on the Plot Thickens, Lucy finds a new husband.

LUCILLE BALL & GARY MORTON: I'm cute. He's not a loser. I married a loser before, He was brilliant, but he had to lose. This man's sweet. I like getting up in the morning.

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