

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

Episode 9: Boss Lady

BEN MANKIEWICZ: No doorbell. What kind of place is this?

LUCIE ARNAZ: What, was this today? There you go.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucie Arnaz is immediately funny.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Oh no. How are you?

LUCIE ARNAZ: Hi there Ben. It's so nice to see you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Oh my goodness. Look at this view. Come on. This is beautiful.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Maybe, just maybe, she gets her sense of humor from her parents: Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. We're at Lucie's place in Palm Springs, about 11 miles from where her parents once had a home.

LUCIE ARNAZ: We spent a lot of holidays here, a lot of Christmas and you know-whenver they had time off from the show, they would come here.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucie got the best features of both her mom and dad. She's tall and thin like Lucy -- with that same sense of style.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And you got the message about the jeans.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: I did get the jeans and a white shirt message. Thank goodness. Thank goodness.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She's wearing a crisp white shirt and dark jeans. Her hair is grey and cut short. It's not that she looks so much like her mother- it's more like she exudes her. A matter-of-factness, cut the small talk. It happens to be one of the reasons I like Lucie Arnaz so much. She actually looks more like Desi. She can also sing just like her father.

LUCIE ARNAZ: My dad built a house at Thunderbird Country Club, one of the first houses that went up there. That was the first country club in Palm Springs.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The view from the family room is quite something. There are mountain ranges in every direction

LUCIE ARNAZ: This one is the San Jacinto, because at the top of it over here is where the tram is the Palm Springs aerial tramway on this side.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the corner is a baby grand piano. On top are framed photos, a lot of them. Mostly family photos but some celebrities too. Lucie Arnaz smiling with Martin Short. Another of her posing with Tony Bennett. There's one very prominent painting on the wall. It's a portrait of her mother. It doesn't really look like Lucy. At least not the I Love Lucy Lucy. Her hair is a little less red - it's wavy, not curled. She's not smiling. This is a version of Lucy that only the people closest to her got to see.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Real quick, though? What's the story with that? Yeah. Who did that?

LUCIE ARNAZ: Claire Trevor Bren.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Claire Trevor, the Oscar-winning actress from the movie Key Largo.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And she was a wonderful artist, and she gave that to my mom. It's really good. It's a beautiful shot. What year is that? Probably early sixties.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The sixties. That's what I came here to talk about. The sixties were the beginning of Lucille Ball's third act. When most people were slowing down, Lucy was reinventing herself. Again. Lucie Arnaz was witness to it all. And now I was sitting across from her. About to hear the stories firsthand.

LUCIE ARNAZ: All right, I'm going to turn my phone off, I'm going to unplug this.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: All right. Let's start, so I don't take too much of your time.

LUCIE ARNAZ: We're good, you can be here. We're good. All right. You're welcome. I have an extra room.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: 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 Nine: Boss Lady.

1960 was a tough year for Lucille Ball. In April, she ended her TV show, she stopped being Lucy Ricardo. Her marriage to Desi Arnaz ended a month later. It was a humiliating, public divorce. She could have taken a break Done some traveling. But Lucy did the thing that she did best - she went back to work. And she went to the place where it all started. Lucy went back to New York. She moved east with her mother Dede, her chauffeur, her maid, her nanny -- and her two kids, Desi Jr. and Little Lucie.

Lucy rented a sprawling apartment on the sixteenth floor of the Imperial House. It was a swanky white-brick high rise on the upper east side. Lucy was 49 years old - and still one of the most recognizable people in the country. She went straight to Broadway - this time she didn't have to audition, didn't have to prove anything to anyone. It was a long way off from stealing nickels at Nedicks. Not only could she get a starring role on Broadway -but she had a new musical written just for her. It was called Wildcat.

WILDCAT: Who's the greatest at getting her man? Wildcat! Ooooh Wildcat!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy played Wildy Jackson, an oil prospector hoping to strike it rich in Texas.

WILDCAT: Here's the way you spell it chum, P-E-T-R-O-lium!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Wildcat was a physically demanding role. For nearly three hours, Lucy was running, dancing, climbing on props, and singing. There were 14 musical numbers in Wildcat. Lucy was in half of them. She was never much of a singer. The songs in Wildcat were written to her limited range. One song, the best number in the show, became her anthem.

WILDCAT: You gotta say hey look me over, lend me an ear. Fresh out of clover, mortgage up to here.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy performed "Hey Look Me Over" for years to come. She'd do it on talk shows, on tv specials, at charity benefits. It was the perfect song for her, a cry for attention. And it had an upbeat message. The right attitude can conquer anything.

WILDCAT: I figure whenever you're down and out, the only way is up.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy rehearsed round the clock. Her mother Dede looked after the kids.

LUCIE ARNAZ: She was basically the one who primarily raised us most of the time when my mother

wasn't there.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Back in the 1950s, there was no such thing as “work-life balance” - especially for women. Women had to choose between working and staying home with the kids. Lucy always chose work.

LUCIE ARNAZ: Those most formative years, when you make that connection to the mom, you know, whether they're nursing you or not, it's your mom. You smell her. She teaches you how to do everything. you know, who's going to teach you how to go to the bathroom and wipe your butt, wash your teeth and take a bath and all those things that they're going to teach you? And in our case, it was rarely my mother. She didn't have time, period. That's all there was to it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Wildcat was the hottest ticket in town. It sold out for months. But the show itself was a bit of a mess. Audiences didn't want to see Wildcat. They wanted to see Lucy Ricardo.

WILDCAT: Come on Joe, shake my hand and tell me no hard feelings.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The only real laughs came when Lucy ad libbed. One time, she saw an actor on stage wearing a nightshirt and cap. Lucy said, “Say, do you know Fred Mertz?” It brought the house down.

Thousands of people were coming to see Lucy but she was lonely. The cast members in the show could tell. And they wanted to set her up.

LUCILLE BALL: And there was a girl in the show, played my sister and she kept wanting me to meet someone in particular and in particular this friend of theirs. And I said I don't feel like meeting anyone. I'm too tired.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Lucy did eventually agree to a blind date. With a guy named Gary Morton. Gary was 13 years younger than Lucy, but he looked older. He was tall and wore a dark toupee. He smoked a lot of pot. Had a reputation as a ladies man. And he was a stand-up comic.

GARY MORTON: I like to sit at home and watch television. As a matter of fact when I'm not working I sit at home sometimes two or three years.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Gary didn't do standup the way we think of it now. He moved around a lot. He did voices. It was more like a one-man comedy sketch.

GARY MORTON: They go "would you exchange a headache for an upset stomach?" Can you picture walking into a store going, "Here's a headache, gimme an upset stomach."

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Gary worked the Borscht Belt. The mostly Jewish clubs and hotels in upstate New York. Based on what I've seen, Gary was a talented performer. But his act wasn't great. There's a reason he never hit it big. When Gary met Lucy, he told her he'd never seen her on TV.

LEE TANNEN: He said that he really didn't know how famous she was. You see, because he worked nights and he slept all day. So he didn't know about I Love Lucy. I mean, could you buy this bullshit? Who didn't know that? I mean, who didn't know Lucille Ball in 1960?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lee Tannen. Gary's cousin.

LEE TANNEN: Gary was brought up in the Bronx, the same neighborhood I was. Morton Goldaper from the Bronx. This guy had nothing going for him. I mean, if she wanted to marry, somebody, to be with somebody who is the polar opposite of Desi, she found it. Not good looking, not rich, not talented. I did hear he was well endowed, like Desi. That's just hearsay.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy and Gary started going out. She thought he was funny. And he distracted her. He took her mind off Desi and the divorce.

CAROL BURNETT: He was very supportive of her and they had a very good relationship.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Carol Burnett was one of Lucy's closest friends. Carol told me why Lucy stuck with Gary.

CAROL BURNETT: At one point talking about Gary, she said, Kid, he makes me laugh. That was it, you know, he makes me laugh.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Now Lucy had a boyfriend. But there was still the grueling pace of a Broadway show. She did eight shows a week and saw Gary at night. Lucy was exhausted.

LUCILLE BALL: I just would go home and my mother and the kids were there and I'd fall into bed and get up the next day and go to work. And I lived through it. I didn't know that I had osteomyelitis. All the bone marrow, my body was gone. And I began to fall.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Osteomyelitis is an infection in a bone. It's painful. It makes you tired.

WILDCAT SOUNDTRACK: I am dancing on my tippy tippy toes.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In April, while performing a number called "Tippy Tippy Toes," Lucy collapsed on stage.

LUCILLE BALL: I fell off the stage. I fell down on the stage. I was so damn sick.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She couldn't keep performing in Wildcat. The show closed a few weeks later. She personally gave refunds to the people who had bought advanced tickets. It cost her \$165,000. Or about one and a half million dollars today. At around the same time, Gary Morton asked Lucy to marry him. They had known each other for just a few months. Lucy's divorce from Desi wasn't even final yet. To everyone's surprise she said yes.

LUCIE ARNAZ: What?!? You're marrying him? I remember being devastated. I really do. I remember being quite devastated. Cried my eyes out. I can remember exactly where I was sitting on the carpet. I remember that my dad called right after that and I picked up the phone and I just cried and I cried and I cried and he cried. And he tried to make me feel better. I think he said something like give him a chance.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Seven months later, on November 19, 1961, Lucy and Gary got married at the Marble Collegiate Church on 29th street in Manhattan. This was Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's church. He was the pastor who was all about positive thinking. Lucy loved him. The guest list was small. Just a few close friends, Lucy's kids, and her mom Dede. Dr. Peale married them. News about the wedding got out, of course. More than a thousand fans and reporters gathered outside the church. Back in California, Desi put on a strong front. Secretly, he was a wreck.

LUCIE ARNAZ: He was very hurt. Maybe even thought, hey, you know, we'll take a little break. Maybe we'll get back together again. In my mind, they were absolutely going to get back together again. I had just watched the parent trap three times. I knew there was a way they could get back together again. I just thought of something. I wonder if my mother got married really soon so she wouldn't be tempted to get back together again with my father. That could be. I just thought it was really too fast. It could have been a little different to this day. I don't know why she got married so fast.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Why do you think?

LUCIE ARNAZ: I don't know. I as much as I say I know about all these people, there's still some unanswered questions. I don't know. I think it was impulsive on her part. She met somebody who made her laugh. And boy, did she need to laugh at that point in her life. And he was tall and kind of rugged, handsome in a funny kind of New York, Brooklyn kind of way. And I hope he was good in bed, that's all I want to say. I just hope it was worth it, Mom, that's all I'm saying.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Not a lot of kids say that about their mom's second husband.

LUCIE ARNAZ: Yeah, but I'm 70, so I can say all kinds of shit.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Desi wasn't completely out of Lucy's life, at least not yet. Desilu was in trouble. With I Love Lucy off the air, it only had one hit show.

THE UNTOUCHABLES: The Untouchables, a Desilu Production.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The studio needed a shot in the arm.

THE LUCY SHOW PROMO: Yes, it's Lucille Ball, returning to television with the unique comedy that made her television's top comedienne.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi recruited Lucy to star in a new sitcom. CBS ordered a full season even before a pilot was shot. Lucy didn't love the idea. She wanted to go back to making movies. But her sense of responsibility won out. After all, she owned half of Desilu. Still, Lucy had demands. She wanted her new show to air on Monday nights, just like "I Love Lucy". CBS agreed. And she wanted someone she could count on as her co-star.

THE LUCY SHOW PROMO: Returning with Lucy is her perennial partner in laughs, Vivian Vance.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Vivian Vance had also recently split up from her husband. With art imitating life, The Lucy Show featured Lucy and Vivian without Desi or Bill Frawley - their TV husbands from I Love Lucy. Lucy and Viv were now single mothers living in the same home, raising a bunch of kids together.

THE LUCY SHOW: I dunno Chris, there's something about you and a boy in a car I don't like. What is it? The whole idea.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi and the writers didn't want to remind viewers of Lucy's real-life divorce, so they made Lucy's character a widow and they renamed her "Lucy Carmichael." Vivian played a divorcee. "The Lucy Show" was also groundbreaking television. It was the first time a divorced woman was a main character on TV. Lucy told CBS that viewers could relate.

LUCILLE BALL: We had done domestic situation comedy with married people, and the next change which was without the husbands, was certainly audience identification for millions of women who try to go through life without a man and have to raise children and what goes on, life without a man.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi was no longer in front of the camera. He was the executive producer. That meant he hired, he fired, he directed scenes, and he weighed in on creative decisions, Both big and small. And he did all this while running Desilu Productions. There was one job, though, that was no longer Desi's. He wasn't the one warming up the studio audience. Lucy brought in someone new: her husband Gary.

GARY MORTON: Actually I just got back here from Miami. And they keep building beautiful little motels down there. And y'know what I noticed, the desk clerks.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was hard for Desi to watch Lucy's new husband warm up the crowd. That used to be his job. And Desi was still drinking, even at work.

LUCIE ARNAZ: He didn't drink to get mad or in anger, he drank to be jolly and to have a party, but he didn't understand he had a disease and that one would lead to 12, you know?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi started falling asleep during rehearsals. Eventually he stopped showing up at the office. Lucy sent her brother Fred to talk to Desi about the drinking. Fred was on the Desilu board. He approached Desi gently. He said "there's been a lot of talk that you're not really running the studio." Desi fired him.

LUCIE ARANZ: The booze destroyed him. And I hated to see that happen, because what a thing to destroy, he was just too good to be true.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy was protective of Desi, but she knew something had to be done to save the company. She wanted to buy Desi's shares, and she had the option to do it. He'd no longer be a part of Desilu. The company they created together. Desi could have bought Lucy's shares instead. But he didn't have the money or even the credit. So, he sold. Lucy now owned Desilu productions.

LUCIE ARNAZ: She did not want to do any of the business, hated running the studio later on, hated it! But she had to buy him out at that time. So she was forced to do that, but it wasn't something she liked.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucille Ball became the first woman to ever lead a major Hollywood studio. She was 51 years old. After the break, Lucy goes from being the star to being the boss.

LUCILLE BALL: Well, I inherited three studios, it was nothing I ever expected or wanted, and I really wasn't capable of it either.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: As the boss, Lucy was now in charge of more than 1300 employees.

LUCILLE BALL: I don't like to hire and fire. I don't like to do a man's work behind a desk. I'm not cut out for it. I like the acting. I like the doing. I like being the participator and all of the entertainment.

ROBERT OSBORNE: They had Desilu picnics. They tried to make it very family oriented and Lucy would show up. But Lucy was always the boss and always, I think, terrified people.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Robert Osborne. TCM's first host and a good friend of Lucy's. He spoke to PBS in 1999.

ROBERT OSBORNE: Lucy was not fun. She was not a light hearted person. She wanted work. She loved to work, but she didn't want the responsibility of worrying that if the stockholders reports weren't good or this this show or that show got canceled, that they'd have to lay off people. And that was very serious stuff to her.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy wasn't like any other studio head in Hollywood history. Not only was she a woman, she was on television every Monday night.

THE LUCY SHOW: The Lucy Show, starring Lucille Ball.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: "The Lucy Show" was supposed to last just a single season. But it was a hit. And ran for six years. Between "The Lucy Show" and reruns of "I Love Lucy" – it seemed like Lucy was always on the TV. Running the studio meant Lucy had less time to rehearse. She stopped memorizing her lines. She used cue cards – and she fought with her directors.

THE LUCY SHOW BEHIND-THE-SCENES: Get the camera going! It's going!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There's some remarkable behind-the-scenes footage of "The Lucy Show." Lucy is at an aquarium. She's swimming in a dolphin tank. And she's actually surrounded by porpoises and seals. You can hear her arguing with the director, Maury Thompson.

THE LUCY SHOW BEHIND-THE-SCENES: 61 apples, take 1. I can't, I can't get my feet down. Well come here then.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: This was not an easy shoot. But Lucy hit all her lines, she smiled and she cried on cue.

THE LUCY SHOW BEHIND-THE-SCENES: Waaaaah, Maury! Are you alright? Waaaaah.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the past, Desi dealt with the directors and the writers and the other actors - he was the one who knew how to be diplomatic.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And my mother knew she wasn't good at it, and she really didn't like being in charge and having to be responsible for those conversations later on in life. She always wished he was still there to help her with all that. And she didn't throw a temper tantrum, she didn't pick up a script and throw it at anybody. She just would put them in their place. And I said, if a guy did that, they'd say he's a tough taskmaster. If a woman did it, it's like she's really tough to work with.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Here's Carol Burnett again. They sometimes guest-starred on each other's shows.

CAROL BURNETT: We had a break, a dinner break. So she and I went across the way to the farmer's market and we went into a little Chinese restaurant there, and she was having a whiskey sour and she took a little sip of that. She said: "When I was married to the Cuban, she said she said he did everything." And it was all perfect, she said. And then we got divorced.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After Desi left the studio, writers gave their scripts directly to Lucy. There was one script that she absolutely hated.

CAROL BURNETT: And she said the script was terrible. It stank. So she called lunch and she said, I went to my office and I was thinking about it. And I realized I had to get tough, you know, usually when women when men are tough, it's OK. When women get tough they're - they call them a bitch, you know? She was nervous about that, but she knew she had to do something, and be strong like Desi

was. She took a little drink of her whiskey sour. She said, kid, I went back and I told them in no uncertain terms what was wrong with the script. They had to fix it. They had to stay up till three o'clock in the morning to do that. And she went and took another sip. She said, kid, that's when they put the S on the end of my last name.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy may have hated running a studio but she had good instincts. In 1965, she made television history - again. The studio had two pilots in production. They were both expensive. The Desilu board told Lucy to pull the plug on them. If they sold, and more episodes were ordered, it could bankrupt the studio. So, here's Lucy - the only woman in the boardroom. Being told by the board members - all of them men - to cancel both shows. Lucy went with her gut. She approved both pilots and they both sold. Here's one of them.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: [opening credits]

Mission Impossible ran for seven seasons. It won six Emmys in its first two years. And it spawned a film franchise worth more than three billion dollars. And here's the other show Lucy greenlit.

STAR TREK: Space - the final frontier.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Star Trek is... well, it's the biggest TV franchise of all time. Without Lucille Ball, Star Trek would not exist. It's tempting to call Lucy a feminist icon. Especially since her rise to the top coincided with the new women's liberation movement.

DICK CAVETT: Women's lib can be a tediously boring subject. Yes, it can.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Dick Cavett asked Lucy about it in 1974.

LUCILLE BALL: I am, you know, so liberated that I can't stand anymore. I don't I don't have any views on it. I don't have any I don't even have one line except that I don't understand, if a person wants to be liberated, male or female, I know a lot of males who aren't liberated, you know, go ahead and be liberated. I don't care. I've been liberated beyond endurance.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Over the years, others had asked her the same question. Her answer never changed. For Lucy, being in charge wasn't political. It was simply a matter of necessity. She needed to run the studio to keep working. In 1966, Desilu ran into money problems. Star Trek and Mission Impossible were expensive to produce. Just like the board predicted. Lucy was still paying back money she'd borrowed to buy Desi's shares of the studio. And she was tired. She had been head of the studio for almost five years. All the while starring in a hit show. So when a huge conglomerate wanted to buy Desilu, Lucy was interested. A media company called Gulf and Western made Lucy one offer after another. Finally, in 1967, Lucy sold Desilu. Sold the land, the property, and all the shows.

LUCIE ARNAZ: What I remember the most is the day she sold the studio to Gulf and Western. That was the day I saw excitement in her eyes. It was like, 'We sold it! We sold it. I don't have to do this anymore!' And she was very excited that she got a good price for it. And she's like, I'm done, done with all those meetings done with all that stuff.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The studio named after Desi and Lucy was rebranded as "Paramount Television." Lucy made 10 million dollars on the sale. The equivalent of 79 million dollars today. Coming up, Lucy's home life is shattered as her son becomes an addict. I haven't talked about Lucy's other job -- maybe her hardest job. She was a mother to two teenagers.

PASSWORD: This is the delightful daughter of Lucille Ball, 13 year-old Lucie Arnaz! Lucie Thank you, and this is my brother, Desi Arnaz Jr. Thank you, and we're both here to play Password.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: During the 60's, Lucy appeared regularly on the game show "Password" - and she brought along the whole family. It was a savvy move. There they were, Lucy, Lucy's kids, and the new stepdad Gary, all playing together in front of millions of viewers.

LUCIE ARNAZ: Yeah, we lived in a fishbowl, our whole lives.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucie Arnaz grew up around cameras. Being on a gameshow was no big deal.

LUCIE ARNAZ: But that was the few times we could actually hang out with mom is if we went to work with her, you know, be a part of the show. And she was good about that. You know, she was good about giving us a shot.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They seemed like a normal family. But this was Hollywood. Lucy's family was never quite normal.

PASSWORD: Hiyo Desi. How old are you now? I'm 11 and a half.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi Jr. looked a lot like his dad. There was a softness about his face. He still had his baby fat. Desi Jr. also had a band, just like his dad and they put out an album.

PASSWORD: What's this I hear about the new record? Oh, I'm in a combo, two other boys, Dino Martin Jr. and Billy Hinsche. We just made a record for Reprise Records.

NOT THE LOVIN KIND: Tell you baby I'm not the loving kind. So you better get it off your mind.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Dean Martin's son was in the band too. Their act was squeaky clean. Desi and his bandmates wore matching suits and ties. Their hair wasn't long, just a little shaggy. And their music was pretty innocent. They appeared on television. They even went on tour. By the time Desi Jr. was 12, he was making thousands of dollars off songs like "I'm a Fool."

I'M A FOOL: I'm a fool, just a silly fool, to be in love with you.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi Jr. played the drums, just like his old man. And he experimented with pretty much every drug available: pot, coke, LSD, mescaline, quaaludes. Not to mention booze. And he had plenty of groupies. Desi Jr. fought constantly with his mother. Gary didn't get too involved. After all, he was the stepdad. Desi Senior couldn't say much either. He had his own struggles with addiction. Desi Jr. started staying with his dad more and more. Lucy was desperate to keep tabs on her son. So she hatched a plan where she could work with her kids. CBS wanted to renew the Lucy show for a seventh season. She agreed but she insisted on completely retooling the show. This time, her co-stars would be her kids. And they'd be playing her kids, too. The show's name also changed.

HERE'S LUCY: Here's Lucy, starring Lucille Ball. Also starring Gale Gordon, Lucy Arnaz and Desi Arnaz Jr.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: At first, "Little Lucie" was against the idea.

LUCIE ARNAZ: I didn't want to do it. I said, Oh no, no thanks. Why? Who on Earth is going to think that I got this part because I was right for it or good. They're going to know 'It's Lucille Ball's daughter. She got the part because, ' And that was the frickin truth! I said, I'll do it, but you have to promise me mom on my life that if we do the show and we're, you know, the reviews come out or the buzz starts and

they're going well, the show's cute. But what is with those kids? And my god, you know what? You'll know we're not cutting the mustard. Please get me out of there as quick as you can, have me written out of the episode or something. You know, for a 15 year old, I thought this was pretty cool. And she agreed to do that. And I believed her.

HERE'S LUCY: Mother, it's a man! Oh, hello! Yes, this is Lucille Carter.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy made Gary Morton the executive producer. That annoyed the writers. Gary knew nothing about making television. Here's Lucy did well anyway - it lasted six seasons. But Lucy's plan - creating a network show to keep an eye on her kids - that didn't go as well. Desi Jr. continued to use drugs. He just became better at hiding it. He also had a pair of high-profile Hollywood flings. First with Patty Duke, then with Liza Minnelli. Both women were Oscar winners. Both were six years older than he was.

Desi Jr. left the show after three seasons. Lucie Arnaz stayed for its entire run, And Lucy - she still had one more dream that hadn't quite come true. She wanted to return to the big screen. To be a movie star. Lucy didn't make many films when she was a studio head. But there was one movie she was determined to make.

YOURS MINE & OURS: You do like children, don't you? Yeah, yeah within reason.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy was 55 years old when she starred in the movie "Yours, Mine and Ours." It was directed by Mel Shavelson. He was a former jokewrite for Bob Hope.

MEL SHAVELSON: Lucy was very good. Except Lucy was used to being the whole show. Handling everything. She did her television show, she was in charge. And I would not let her direct when I was supposed to be directing the picture. We had a lot of arguments about it. Problem with Lucy is she was not only smart, she knew the business inside and out, she knew the angles for the camera, she knew what I was supposed to be doing.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the film, Lucy plays a widow in her forties with eight children. She starts dating Henry Fonda, a widower with ten kids. It's not easy to play a romantic lead in your mid-50's Especially when you're a woman. Especially back then.

MEL SHAVELSON: Her face had fallen apart by that time. Forty years or more of makeup and she was wrinkled. She knew that camera had to shoot straight in with the light straight in so it filled out the wrinkles. We went on a public appearance tour and she was with me. We walked out afterwards. And a little girl came out and took her hand and looked up and said Lucy what happened to your face? And Lucy turned and ran away, she wouldn't talk after that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The cruelty of Hollywood didn't end there. In Lucy's next movie - the critics turn on her too.

MAME TRAILER: Warner Bros. is proud to present Lucille Ball, the most versatile actress of our time, in the multimillion dollar production that took two years to capture on film, that grand musical: Mame.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Mame was an adaptation of a Broadway musical about a free-spirited flapper whose nephew comes to live with her. It was a beloved show. Mame was an iconic role. It would have been hard for anyone, no matter how talented, to step into a role like this. It was risky for Lucy to take it on - she wasn't much of a singer.

MAME: Open a new window, open a new door, travel a new highway that's never been tried before.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On Wildcat, Lucy's songs had been written specifically for her range. On Mame, she wasn't so lucky.

MAME: If you're with me, whatever comes, we'll see that trouble never comes!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy went on tour to promote Mame. Here she is on the Merv Griffin Show.

MERV GRIFFIN: Word is around that your Mame is one of the best musicals ever produced.

LUCILLE BALL: Oh thank God, I'm so glad to hear that, I really am.

MERV GRIFFIN: You sing, you dance?

LUCILLE BALL: Sure I'm singing, well you can't really call it singing and I wouldn't call it dancing but I'm out there doing what they asked me to do now don't press me.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Mame opened around the country, the critics were savage. They panned Lucy's voice, her dancing and her age. It didn't help that the movie shot Lucy in a hazy, soft focus. Gene Siskel was one of the best known movie critics at the time. He wrote, "each time we see Miss Ball in close up, it appears as though the camera lens has been smeared with vaseline." Lucy hoped her millions of fans would show up to see Mame. They didn't. The movie was a bomb. After Mame, Lucy never returned to the big screen.

Two weeks after Mame premiered, "Here's Lucy" aired its final episode. During the mid-seventies, Lucy didn't work much. She made some primetime specials for CBS. She was still on TV all the time but in reruns. In 1977, without much warning, Lucy's world came crashing down. Her mother Dede died.

LUCIE ARNAZ: She'd had a stroke and she died and she had been taking care of her own house and everything. 86 years old and sharp as a tack. When Didi passed away, I really thought I was going to lose my mom, too. She was so upset. Did your mom call you?

Yes. My mother called me to say we lost her. It's funny to say like that, too, we lost her because she was like the anchor, you know, it was like the bottom fell out.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy could never get close enough to her mother spend enough time with her. On and off throughout Lucy's childhood she was separated from Dede Sometimes for months at a time. After that, Lucy made sure Dede never left her side.

LUCILLE BALL: She was my biggest fan, never missed a show every Thursday she would bring her entourage of friends and it was her big day. And she, she was some gal.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There was a small, private funeral for Dede. Lucy coped the way she always did -- by throwing herself into work.

LUCY CALLS THE PRESIDENT BEHIND-THE-SCENES: Standby, quiet folks please.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: A few weeks later, she was back in front of a studio audience, shooting a special titled "Lucy Calls the President."

LUCY CALLS THE PRESIDENT BEHIND-THE-SCENES: Here we go in five, four, three, two. Hey Lucy! Coming.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In the audience that day was a young writer named Jim Brochu.

JIM BROCHU: And Lucy made an entrance down the stairs. And, of course, she appeared, everybody applauded and she broke down. She just broke down in tears. Of course, everybody just got very quiet. And we watched her bawl for a couple of seconds. And finally she took a breath and she apologized to the audience and she said, I'm so sorry. Ladies and gentlemen, this is the first taping I've ever done where my mother was not in the audience. She passed away recently. And I miss her.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy took a moment to pull herself together. Then she walked back to her starting position and told the crew to roll tape.

LUCY CALLS THE PRESIDENT BEHIND-THE-SCENES: Standby and go. Standing by, here we go. Here we come, there we go. Four seconds! Four seconds, three, two, one. Action. Hi! Oh hi Viv. How ya doing girl? Great!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: "Lucy Calls the President" had a special guest star: Vivian Vance. She and Lucy quickly fell into a familiar rhythm.

LUCY CALLS THE PRESIDENT: Honestly Vivian for heaven's sake, what's wrong with you? Well I didn't have time for lunch. Well you could stand to skip a meal.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Vivian had recently had a stroke. She asked to be shot only from the side. During rehearsals, Lucy insisted that Vivian go see a specialist. She got a diagnosis nobody wants to hear. Vivian Vance passed away from cancer in August 1979. As the seventies came to a close, Lucy lost her mother and her best friend. She was 68 years old. Her husband Gary was spending more and more time on the golf course. Her children were grown, out of the house, with problems of their own.

LUCILLE BALL: I was traumatically bored for several months after I quit work and Vivian died and my mother passed away at the same time. That really put me in a long stretch of boredom and I miss my work, I miss it very much.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The most famous woman in the world had never been more alone.

Next week on our season finale: Lucy returns to TV one last time.

ROBERT OSBORNE: When that last series failed, she was quite a broken woman, very, very upset about that because she thought the public didn't like her anymore.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And she watches Desi fight for his life.

LUCIE ARNAZ: I could just hear them. Telling each other that they loved each other. That's all they did was say, I love you. I love you.

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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