

TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

Episode 10: Twilight

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucille Ball did the occasional interview after she left television in 1974, mostly on talk shows. Watching those interviews now, you can feel how excited the studio audience was to see her. Lucy was always asked some version of this question:

MERV GRIFFIN: Would you ever go back to a weekly series, Lucy?

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Merv Griffin. Lucy was on his talk show in 1981.

LUCILLE BALL: I don't think so. I mean.

MERV GRIFFIN: Why?

LUCILLE BALL: Well, Gale is around, but my Vivian's gone.

MERV GRIFFIN: Right.

LUCILLE BALL: And, well, let's not talk about it, there's no, sense in trying to top what we've done.

MERV GRIFFIN: No, but there's a continuity of coming up with something brand new and proving yourself again. No?

LUCILLE BALL: I can't.

MERV GRIFFIN: I thought you were more of a gambler than that. You just don't want to have to go to work every day.

LUCILLE BALL: No. Not at all. You're very wrong about that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Merv Griffin was definitely wrong about that. Lucy missed working. But she seemed to have really thought about why she wouldn't do another series. Listen to how clear-eyed she sounds here, in this interview with Barbara Walters.

LUCILLE BALL: Well, I'd been on long enough, I thought, and I kind of always prided myself on knowing when to get off. And I felt that really I had stayed on about four or five years longer than I planned. And also with the new shows, I began to feel a little old fashioned.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy was basically retired. She was about to turn 70. She was in a stable marriage. Her kids were doing well. Lucie Arnaz was a new mom. Desi Jr. was in recovery. Lucy was healthy, rich, and could fill her days with whatever she wanted.

But Lucille Ball was always at war with her impulse to work. It was so deep inside her. The battle over the next seven years would be one of the hardest of Lucy's life. Learning just let go.

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 Ten: Twilight.

Lucy tried to keep busy in retirement. She was in a skiing accident when she was 60 and still had some trouble with her legs.

LUCILLE BALL: I love word games and I've had to stop some of the, you know, tennis and golf and things like that because of the legs. I used to do those things. I still swim. And I ride a bicycle, but I do a lot of reading, playing games.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One game captured Lucy's attention like no other.

JIM BROCHU: She started playing backgammon in the 70s at a place called Pips in in L.A.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Jim Brochu. He played backgammon with Lucy. Pips was a private backgammon club in Beverly Hills. Members paid \$1000 a year to play there. It had custom backgammon tables and mirrored walls. It was started by another backgammon fanatic, Hugh Hefner. The head of the Playboy empire. Lucy was a regular at Pips.

JIM BROCHU: And she just was very enamored of the game. It's really a great game. And it was just a way for her to pass the time.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: There's a photo of Lucy at Pips. She's sitting at a table. Her bright orange hair has been set with curlers. She's wearing large, oversized glasses that are the same color as her hair. Her nails are painted pink. They match her lipstick. She's pointing, a cigarette in her hand. And she's in the middle of a laugh. A big hearty laugh, mouth wide open.

LEE TANNEN: The best thing I could possibly do is make her laugh. And she had this real guttural laugh.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lee Tannen. He's Gary Morton's cousin. He also played backgammon with Lucy.

LEE TANNEN: Lucy had the most beautiful fingers, you know, and she could smoke with one hand, you know, and roll the dice out with the other hand.

LUCILLE BALL: About the most fun I have when it comes to that is giving backgammon tournaments, although I'm not a good backgammon player, but I like it.

FRED BALL: I remember so many times in the Beverly Hills house where they lived when she would have these tournaments, I call them tournaments. It was nothing but battles between her and her cohorts.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lucy's brother Fred Ball, talking to PBS in 2000.

FRED BALL: And it was ferocious. She was a tiger.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Gary didn't like backgammon. So Lucy was thrilled when Gary's cousin Lee would stay in their guest house.

LEE TANNEN: And so when I came along in 1980, she had about three years of backgammon under her belt. And so I had to I had to learn.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lee says Lucy's house looked like it was frozen in time.

LEE TANNEN: Lots of green shag carpeting, that I hadn't seen in 20 years. But the whole house was lots of shag, lots of Formica. The kitchen was also, by the way, very 1950s. Oh my God. All green appliances. Sort of like you could have used it for an I Love Lucy episode almost.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy was no longer interested in fashion trends. She wore a lot of jogging suits. Sometimes Lee would suggest she wear something else. That seldom went well.

LEE TANNEN: Her thing was she says, me, Jesus Christ, I made seventy five films and I was a showgirl and I had to change costumes and more blah blah. And so I'm going to be comfortable. So the last 10 years of her life, jogging suits with either a Lucy insignia or Big Red L, you know. And, you know, with a jogging suit and with a big, scarf on her head and big glasses and a floor length coat. I mean she looked like she was wearing four different costumes right there. She always had like a white lunchbox style purse. And in the purse she had her compact, then her glasses and her cigarettes. Oh, she had also a plastic bag full of dollar bills because we played for dollar bills.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy liked to play for money, but kept the stakes low. Backgammon was clearly filling a hole in her life.

LEE TANNEN: Backgammon was she was able to control it. You know, she was able to be the star of it. She played with who she wanted to play. She played when she wanted to play.

LUCILLE BALL: I just like to play games. And right now it's a good thing I have a game or two. I miss my work.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1985, Lucy did go back to work.

EVENING MAGAZINE: Now in her early 70s, Lucy spends most of her time at home with her husband of 24 years, Gary Morton. But she is returning to television and a role that's quite a departure for her. Lucy plays a bag lady in the TV movie Stone Pillow.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Stone Pillow was shot on New York's lower east side. Lucy played an unhoused woman named Florabelle. She insisted the character have the same name as her grandmother.

LUCILLE BALL: I wanted her to be vulnerable, feisty, and capable of taking care of herself. And she was a loner.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was a pretty bold move for Lucy. Everyone knew her from sitcoms. Now here she was playing a woman who lived on the street.

LUCILLE BALL: I thought, well, this is sticking my neck out and I don't know what my fans will think, but I have to grow up sometime. And then at least this doesn't have anything that I object to. And it's not a cause celebre, it's something close to my heart I have compassion for.

JIM BROCHU: When she shot Stone Pillow in New York, it was supposed to be the winter.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy's friend Jim Brochu.

JIM BROCHU: And so she was dressed in all sorts of wool and overcoats and wool caps and the gray wig and, you know, not much makeup.

LUCILLE BALL: We were out thirty-three days on the streets of New York. Not one person stopped in front, said, you're Lucy, are you? Not one person.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy gave up all vanity for the role. Except for one thing. She refused to cut her perfectly manicured nails. Instead she painted them black. The shoot itself was hard. Lucy was 73 at this point. And because of delays they had to shoot in the late spring.

LUCILLE BALL: But it was terribly hot and we were supposed to be shooting in the middle of the winter and I was dressed for grizzly February and it was 98, 99, 100, 100 and two and five, hundred and seven, in one place it was 122. Yeah. In a boiler room that we worked in. And with all the clothes and the wig and everything, I lost twenty three pounds.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy had to be hospitalized after the shoot. She was so dehydrated. Stone Pillow was not what the public wanted from Lucille Ball. They didn't want to see Lucy Ricardo poor and destitute, living on the street. The reviews were mixed and fans were disappointed. Dick Martin was a comedian and a director. He was a friend of Lucy's.

DICK MARTIN: I believe Lucille Ball felt trapped as Lucy because there was nothing. You can't get that big and that identifiable and try to break out of it. You can't do it. There is no way.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: For most Americans, Lucille Ball could only be some version of Lucy Ricardo for most Americans. But that wasn't what Lucy wanted any longer. Her husband Gary Morton felt differently. Gary

believed Lucy should give the public what they wanted. So together they made a decision - the worst career decision Lucy ever made.

When we return, Lucy gets canceled.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy was depressed after Stone Pillow. But Gary had a solution.

SOMETHING BIG 1985: Today, Lucille and her second husband, former comedian Gary Morton, form a producing team.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Gary wanted Lucy to go back to television sitcoms. He and Aaron Spelling came up with an idea for a sitcom centered around Lucy. Spelling was the producer of Charlie's Angels and Dynasty. He was looking to get into comedy. They pitched the idea to ABC and landed 22 episodes without a pilot. Lee Tannen blames Gary for luring Lucy back to sitcoms.

LEE TANNEN: Gary, who saw big money in it for her because ABC was willing to pay her big, big bucks. And that was really important to Gary. Money was really important to Gary.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But let's be honest, Lucy was no pushover. She was convinced her fans only wanted to see her as Lucy Ricardo. TCM's first host - and Lucy's friend - Robert Osborne - thinks Lucy wanted to get out of the house. He told PBS about it in 1999.

ROBERT OSBORNE: She wanted someplace to go. She also wanted a place that she could be a queen in the domain where she was the boss and could call the shots.

LUCIE ARNAZ: She was bored, she didn't feel needed, she wanted to be useful again.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That's Lucy's daughter, Lucie Arnaz.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And this is all she knows. You know, this is what she does. She really wasn't a functioning grandparent in the way most grandparents are. She's not going to go pick up her kids and drive 'em places. And she wasn't ready to retire, retire ever. Actors don't really retire. And Gary talked her into it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In March 1986 the New York Daily News read "Surprise! Lucille Ball, 74, the nation's all-time favorite comedienne will return next fall with a new weekly sitcom." Fans were thrilled. But Lucy was

distracted... by her ex-husband. Desi was still living at the beach house in Del Mar. He'd remarried, a woman named Edie Hirsch. She had lived next door to Desi and Lucy. Edie died of cancer the same year Stone Pillow came out. And Desi had stopped drinking.

LUCIE ARNAZ: The year after Edie died, he went through alcohol rehab. At the advice of my brother because he got so sick. And after an entire lifetime of saying no. "I don't air my dirty laundry in front of anybody," which is a very kind of Latin thing, you know, he said, "OK, what do I have to do?" I was incredibly proud of him for that. I remember sitting next to him in one of those big meetings, and for the guy who never took responsibility and said, you know, I don't drink too much, I can always handle my liquor. And I was there with him when he could stand up next to me and introduce himself to the crowd in the way they do. "My name is Desi and I'm an alcoholic." Proudest moment of my life. God, that was great.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Everyone was relieved Desi stopped drinking. It took a toll on his health. Lucy and Desi talked on the phone often over the years. Here's Desi on Entertainment Tonight in the 80s.

DESI ARNAZ: Because we had 20 wonderful years together and we're still very close. You know, we talk two, three times every other week on the phone and we got some wonderful kids. We've got a grandson. Looks like Rocky Graziano already this character. So we're very close. And we're very good friends. I still love her very much.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But the latest phone call with Desi was one Lucy never wanted. The kind all of us dread. Desi told her he had an aggressive form of lung cancer.

LUCIE ARNAZ: Privately, I'm sure she was devastated. My mom was always very stoic but I also knew that she always felt sorry for him, that he was not in the best of shape and that she watched him deteriorate for years, you know, so this was like. Of course. Of course, this is happening.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: For the next six months, Lucy's life would be consumed by two things. Making a new television show. And watching Desi fight for his life.

A month before Lucy turned 75, she stepped in front of a live studio audience to film her new TV show. Life with Lucy. She played Lucy Barker, a widow and grandmother who moves in with her daughter's family.

LIFE WITH LUCY CLIP: It's so good to be here! It's so good having you here. Oh, I'm in Grandma Heaven!

LUCILLE BALL: She's still zany but she is a grandmother and a caring one. I wanted to do a show about Lucy the way I am now.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy's character also becomes part owner of a hardware store run by her son in law's father. He was played by Gale Gordon. Gordon was in all of Lucy's TV shows.

LIFE WITH LUCY CLIP: I'm co-owner now. Why do you keep forgetting that? Wishful thinking.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Gary was the show's executive producer. He brought back the writers from I Love Lucy, Bob Carroll and Madelyn Pugh. And this time, instead of Desi, Gary approved all the scripts. Lee Tannen went to the first filming of the show.

LEE TANNEN: With an audience, you know, the same kind of three camera system, with the bleachers, with the people, everything was, you know, Gary came out and warmed up the audience, unfunny as he is.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Gary wasn't that funny and neither was the show.

LEE TANNEN: She was trying to do all the things that she did for 25, 30 years. But again, TV was changing and tastes were changing and times were changing. And in 1986, nobody wanted to see Lucy clown like that.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: She climbed rolling ladders in the hardware store and messed with gadgets. Things that look dangerous for a 75 year old woman to do. And it just wasn't as funny.

LEE TANNEN: And she knew it. She knew she knew it from the first table read. But she was stuck. She had to do it.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy had always relied on Desi for advice.

LUCIE ARNAZ: She always sought advice from dad all the time. I mean, they called each other several times a week. He would call her about stuff in his life, and she would always call him for advice on scripts, on deal things that would come up.

TOM GILBERT: He knew what was good for her.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Tom Gilbert wrote about Lucy and Desi's partnership.

TOM GILBERT: And he protected her and he guided her through a lot of the stuff that she was afraid to do because she says, I'm going to look like a fool. And he would say, don't worry about it. It's funny.

LUCIE ARNAZ: I mean, even Gary, you know, God bless him. He's there. He's always there. But he wasn't a deep thinker. He wasn't an inspired thinker, he wasn't my dad, and she missed a lot of the stuff that my dad was great at and that he was passionate about and that he was smart about.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The new show might have been called Life with Lucy, but as she went through rehearsals, Lucy called it Life with Angst. She showed up to work exhausted. She'd stay up late talking to Desi on the phone. He was getting worse. And Lucy would stay on the phone with him while he cried.

Lucie Arnaz moved into Desi's Del Mar house. She called her mother.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And I said I don't know for sure but the nurse is saying, it might not be long. And if you want to see him or anything. That's when I knew that she was upset because I could hear from her voice even on the phone. Her trying to be stoic, you know, that sort of OK, that kind of reaction.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi didn't want Lucy to see him so frail and sick. But Lucy went anyway. She drove down to Del Mar and spent the day with Desi.

LUCIE ARNAZ: You know, he was a little groggy, of course. But he'd always pull himself up and you know, it's Lucy, for God's sakes. I better look good.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy sat by Desi's bed and they talked.

LUCIE ARNAZ: I try to think of things for them to do, you know, do you want tea, cookies? Can I make lunch? No, honey, it's fine. We're fine. So I said, OK, well, I'll just put some entertainment on for you. And I put I Love Lucy shows on the VHS machine and they sat there and watched some of their favorite episodes together. Corny as corny gets. I'm sorry. Yes, I thought it was right. And it was. Because they laughed.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy and Desi reminisced. Then she got back in the car for the two-hour drive back to Beverly Hills.

Life with Lucy premiered on television in the fall of 1986. ABC put it on Saturday nights. Lee Tannen watched the premiere at Lucy's house.

LEE TANNEN: And Lucy was sitting kind of about 20, 30 feet from the TV and Gary was on the other side and. It was just it was disaster and the end credits rolled. And Lucy didn't even say good night. She just walked across the living room floor, the den floor, and up the stairway and into her room. She did come out for three days. Three days.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The critics were not kind about the show or about Lucy. She went on Joan Rivers talk show.

JOAN RIVERS: Are you thrilled to be working again?

LUCILLE BALL: Well, yes, yes, no doubt about that, I'm thrilled to be working but I didn't have any idea that I would get chastised for working. I got some lousy notices, if you'll excuse the word notices, for coming back to work at all, which I thought was very strange. I can take critique, you know, about the show. And I've done that for years. But to be critiqued for coming back at all?

JOAN RIVERS: But don't you think that—

LUCILLE BALL: That threw me. I cried. My God, I cried. If they had just critiqued my show as I said, it'd be different, but they didn't want me to come back to work.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Eight episodes of Life with Lucy aired on ABC. They shot 13. On the day they shot that 13th episode, ABC canceled the show. It was November 6, 1986. Life with Lucy was one of the lowest rated shows on television. Ranked 71 out of the 74 shows.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And it didn't work. And they literally not only just didn't work, but it wasn't her choice, saying, You know, I don't like it, it's not working. They fired her. I mean, they canceled the show. That had never happened to her in her life.

ROBERT OSBORNE: Unfortunately, all she wanted to do was work as an actress and all the public would ever buy her in was, Lucy. And then it came that they wouldn't buy her as Lucy. And then that was the tragedy of her life. 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: For four decades the public adored Lucy. Now she felt abandoned by them. If only she knew back then what we know today. That the public would continue to like her, to love her even, for years to come.

Three weeks after her show was cancelled, Lucy called her daughter at Desi's. It was November 30th. Lucy and Desi's 46th wedding anniversary.

LUCIE ARNAZ: He was really not well. And she called. And she said, how is he doing? And I said, not, not so good, not so good, might just be another 24 hours, I don't know. Doesn't look good. So she says, Can I, can I talk to him? And I said, Yeah, and I put the phone up to his ear. 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. He could only have the strength just to say, I love you, too, honey. And I could hear her saying, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. And if you look at some of their original home movies. There is this thing that they did with each other. They're silent color, 16mm home movies. But you can see them in the home movies mouthing, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you. It was a thing they used to do. Oh my God, that's what that moment was. That was them doing that thing. Oh my God.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: That phone call was the last time Lucy and Desi spoke. Two days later, at five minutes after midnight, Desi Arnaz died in his daughter's arms. He was 69 years old.

To this day, it bothers Lucie Arnaz that her father is often remembered mostly as a drinker and a cheater. As someone who destroyed his marriage to her mother.

LUCIE ARNAZ: There's so much more to him and oddly enough the fact that he was all of those things and still was the most charming host, the best party giver, a tremendous father, like when he was home, he was truly home. Great, participating grandparent. Picked up every check. If he heard that in passing, your producer's mother was in the hospital with a broken leg. He would - without telling anybody - call up the hospital and say, send the bill to me. But he had PTSD from the revolution and from parents who never really said, you know what, you're phenomenal. What you've done is spectacular. They went, Is that it? Is that all we got? Is there anything in there for me? And you just want to order another martini. And when he wasn't drinking, Oh my God! Who was more fun than him? Nobody, I mean, he taught us how to fish. He taught us how to appreciate nature and camping, and he would always point out every single sunset and rainbows. And he was a renaissance man. He was brilliant. He was self-taught, never went to college. He read 10 papers a day. He was just too good to be true.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Desi's funeral was held at the St. James Catholic Church, close to his home in Del Mar.

LUCIE ARNAZ: It was just a few local friends, all the nurses that took care of him. My mom, Gary and Danny Thomas came down. I remember Danny Thomas as soon as he heard he died, called me and said, I want to do the eulogy!

BEN MANKIEWICZ: It was a gig!

LUCIE ARNAZ: Oh, OK, I don't really know you. I don't think I've ever met you, Mr. Thomas. But OK, I'm going to write that down.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: One of Danny Thomas' TV shows was filmed at Desilu. Desi laughed so hard while the pilot was being shot, Danny Thomas used that to get the show greenlit.

About 100 people were at the funeral. Lucy wore a tan suit and blouse. She sat in the front pew with Gary and her children. At the foot of the altar was a photo of Desi smiling in his fishing hat.

The day after Desi's funeral Lucy flew to Washington DC to receive a Kennedy Center Honor.

LEE TANNEN: Firstly, it's the highest honor you can get in the country for the performing arts.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Other recipients that year included Ray Charles and actors Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy, a Hollywood couple married for 44 years. Lucy asked Lee Tannen and his partner to join her and Gary for the weekend in DC.

LEE TANNEN: I remember I got a call from her and she said, you got a tuxedo, baby? because if you don't, you better rent one. Don't buy one. Rent one. I'll pay you back.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Recipients got their medals at the White House, then there was a televised awards ceremony. Lucy was emotional. She was still reeling from the show getting canceled and Desi dying, all within the last three weeks.

LEE TANNEN: She was shitfaced from Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Shitfaced feels good saying that. Lucy would even approve of that because she was. She really was.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: But Lucy held it together for the public events.

LUCILLE BALL: This Kennedy Center honor means a great deal to me at this particular time, boy I couldn't have come at a better time. It just gives me my good feeling back again that I had lost.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Walter Cronkite hosted the awards ceremony and introduced the recipients.

WALTER CRONKITE: A kid with stars in her eyes from Jamestown New York, who became the best known, and maybe the best comedienne of all time.

LEE TANNEN: Even the honor itself took its toll because I think she was so upset that that Desi Arnaz had not gotten it with her or even though would have been posthumously for him. And I agree with her. I think Desi was one of the most underrated people ever to grace television.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy told her longtime secretary Wanda Clark how upset she was that Desi didn't get the award with her.

WANDA CLARK: And Lucy always regretted that they didn't include Desi in that Hall of Fame, she said. They did Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy as a couple. They should have done Desi with me.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: After a short film about Lucy's life, the audience gave her a long standing ovation. Then Robert Stack walked onto the stage. He was the lead in Desilu's hit show The Untouchables. He had a letter from Desi.

ROBERT STACK: He wanted to be here tonight. I'd like to read something that he wrote.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: The camera cuts to Lucy in the balcony box where the award winners were seated.

ROBERT STACK: I love Lucy had just one mission. To make people laugh. Lucy gave it a rare quality. She can perform the wildest, even the messiest physical comedy without losing her feminine appeal. The New York Times asked me to divide the credit between the writers, the directors and the cast. I told them, give Lucy 90% of the credit and divide the other 10 percent among the rest of us.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: As the camera cuts to Lucy again, she puts her hand to her mouth.

ROBERT STACK: Desi concluded, Lucy was the show. Viv, Fred and I were just props. Good props, but props nevertheless. P.S. I Love Lucy was never just a title.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Her hand still covering her mouth, holding back tears. Lucy takes a deep breath. Then the tone shifts. TV sitcom stars Bea Arthur, Pam Dawber and Valerie Harper walk across the stage to pay their respects to Lucille Ball.

LUCILLE BALL: Yes I do have a message and I am leaving it at the sound of the beep and it is five minutes to 10 on a busy morning. This is Lucy. You should be up and out of bed and I'm sick and tired of you sleeping all day. I've been up since 5, I think everyone should get up when I do. I've been out for my walk and I've done the dishes and I've sat down and said what the HELL am I going to do for the rest of the day until Jim gets here. Damn it! Goodbye.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1988, when Lucy was 77 years old, she started playing backgammon with a young writer named Jim Brochu.

LUCILLE BALL: Jim this is Lucy.

JIM BROCHU: How are you? You remember me!

LUCILLE BALL: Yes, I just got home.

JIM BROCHU: Yes, are you available?

LUCILLE BALL: Yes, I'm very available.

JIM BROCHU: As soon as I knew I could make her laugh. That was the bond. And I knew she loved to laugh. Lucy was not funny of herself, but boy, did she appreciate humor. And there was never a better audience.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy had suffered a minor stroke that spring. She had some paralysis on her right side and her face drooped slightly. A nurse had moved in to help her recover. She was self-conscious about her face and speech, so she stayed home even more.

JIM BROCHU: She didn't have much company. Her friends had died, her backgammon partners had died. She wasn't going out.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jim would go over to Lucy's at 1:30 every day during the week. They would play backgammon for 3 or 4 hours and if the TV wasn't on, they'd listen to music.

JIM BROCHU: Bobby Darin at the Copa was her favorite album. We listen to it every damn day. I knew every note of that album. Gary was absent a lot. He would go to Palm Springs. He would play golf. He was usually never there during the day, he'd come home at six o'clock. And they used to call each other by their - well, her made up name and his real name. His real name is Morton Goldapper. And when Lucy was a model, she picked the name Diane Belmont. So Gary would come home and he'd say, Hello, Diane. Hi Morty. And that's how they referred to each other.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Jim went with Lucy to see her daughter Lucie Arnaz perform in a charity show. Lucie Arnaz's career had taken off both in television and especially on the stage.

JIM BROCHU: And it was her orchestra and she looked great. And boy, she stopped the show. To watch Lucille watching Lucie was like watching the moon be reflected in the sun. She adored her daughter. And she knew what a great performer she was. And she just sat there beaming the whole time and being the first to applaud and applaud wildly.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy's relationship with her daughter hit some rough patches over the years. Like any mother-daughter relationship. Though when your mother is Lucille Ball, the details are different.

LUCIE ARNAZ: We had actually been going through a lot of emotional stuff.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: You and her?

LUCIE ARNAZ: Yeah. It was was a rough time for us those last few years, and I know she got real prickly. I didn't understand what was going on. She was. I wasn't able to turn to her much for advice about being a stepmother, which I was at the time or any problems that were happening with my kids. I always wished that I could turn to a parent. I do think she got a little depressed and got in maybe into a frame of mind like, is that all there is? What else is there? Which surprised me, I think. I think it surprised me, but she hardened up well, more closed in the walls around her. Didn't buckle down and just enjoy what was there to enjoy. I saw her pull up, pull away. I mean, her mother was gone. My father was gone. We had our own lives with kids. She didn't have like a best friend. There weren't any people to commiserate with. And maybe she just got kind of lonely and tired. That's what I saw.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 1989, Bob Hope asked Lucy to join him at the Oscars. To introduce a musical number. Lucy didn't want to do it, but she couldn't say no to Bob Hope.

JIM BROCHU: Well, a couple of weeks before the Oscars, I came over about 1:30 in the afternoon and there was a fellow there named Ret Turner and Ret was a dress designer, costume designer, brilliant. And so he had about 10 sketches lined up along the wall. And Lucy was looking at them because she was going to pick one of them to be her dress for the Oscars. And so she pointed to this kind of blue, very light chiffon. She said, I think I'm going to do that one. And I said, Oh. And she said, well, which one do you like? And I pointed to a black dress that had big sleeves, all glitter with a slit for the leg. And I said, I think that's the one. And then she said, yeah, OK. And it had a silver collar. And she said, I want that one but make the silver gold to match my hair. So that's the dress that she picked for the Oscars that night.

ACADEMY AWARDS: Ladies and Gentlemen, Lucille Ball and Bob Hope.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Lucy and Bob Hope walked across the stage at the Oscars, all those sequins sparkled in the lights. But that's not what everyone was looking at - it was Lucy's legs. The slit in the dress was cut to the very top of her thigh. She was 77 and her legs looked amazing.

LUCIE ARNAZ: Come on, look, she walks out and the whole auditorium. What was it like one of those gigantic auditoriums? They all stood immediately, her and Bob Hope. It was a magnificent moment, just spectacular.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: They got the longest standing ovation of the night. Later that evening, crowds cheered as Lucy and Gary waited for their car to go home. They yelled Lucy's name. She laughed and waved. And then she made the most of that dress. She kicked up her leg like a chorus girl. The crowd loved it. It was Lucille Ball's final public appearance.

In the weeks after the Oscars, Lucy felt off. She was tired and not herself. On Tuesday, April 18, 1989, Lucy was in a lot of pain. Her daughter Lucie and Gary drove her to Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. Jim Brochu showed up at the house on Roxbury Drive for their backgammon game.

JIM BROCHU: So it was the next day I was on my way over to the house and I got there at 1:30 and there was nobody there. And finally, Chris, the houseman, came in and I said, Where is everybody? And he said, Madame is in the hospital. Well, she had a mini heart attack, I suppose, that night. And she was admitted to Cedars Sinai. So the news was not good.

LUCIE ARNAZ: We couldn't see her for the whole first like 12 hours, it was, you know, very long operation. She was in intensive care and nobody can go in there.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy went through 6 and a half hours of emergency open heart surgery to repair a ruptured aorta. The next day she was stable and the doctors said she might recover. When she came out of surgery and could finally speak, Lucy whispered to her daughter: "Wouldn't you know, this was the day I was going to get my hair done." Thousands of fans called the hospital.

LEE TANNEN: And, you know, I mean, the calls and the calls, they were coming in and the flowers that were coming in from all over the world Cedars Sinai was the hospital and was across the street from the Hard Rock Cafe and the Hard Rock Cafe hung a big, big sign that said, you know, "We love you, Lucy" that she could see from her ICU window. The love was just the outpouring of love was truly, truly, truly amazing.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: An average of 5000 cards arrived at the hospital every day. Even Michael Jackson called Gary to say he cared about Lucy. People in Jamestown started working on a giant get well card for her. By Thursday, Lucy was sitting up in a chair, cracking jokes.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And they put her in a less intensive care room. And Desi and I both showed up at the hospital the same day that day, which was kind of incredible. That had never happened before. I remember looking at her and saying I said, I got to go, I've got rehearsal downtown. Do you need anything from the house? Can I bring you anything? She said, Yeah, my Florida water. Florida water. It's a tall bottle of this, it's like a guy's perfume, you put on handkerchiefs. She loved it, it's called Florida Water. Bring me my Florida water and a hairbrush. They forgot the hairbrush. OK. And then I looked at her hands and I said, Oh, you have those patty nails? It's fake nail stuff that you put on your nails and it lasts forever and but it ruins your nails and it takes all kinds of shenanigans to get them off and you get addicted to it because to take it off is horrible and then your nails are too soft. So you keep getting, it's like crack. Like crack nail polish. And I looked at her hands and I said, You have patty nails. And she said, I do. I got to get off of these, and I said, I have look at mine awful. I can't, but I got to do a show tonight and I'd go, I can't take them off that we had. We talked about patty nails. Then I kissed her and I thought I'd see her in the morning.

JIM BROCHU: We turned on the Today show and there was the news that she had died that morning. And my friend Ricky Levine Lion was her nurse. And she said she woke up about five fifteen in the morning and she just clutched her heart and she died very peacefully.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucille Ball died on Wednesday, April 26, 1989. TV stations interrupted programs with the news.

Reporters set up camp across from her house in Beverly Hills.

Flags in Los Angeles were flown at half-staff.

NEWS REPORT: Once in a while there is a public figure we come to love. Permanently, utterly. If someone told you earlier today Lucy died, you wouldn't have to ask Lucy who? You knew who her gifts were enormous, they were timeless and universal.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Former president Ronald Reagan spoke to the press . So did comedian Carl Reiner. And Blues singer Lou Rawls. Everyday fans told reporters how much they loved watching Lucy.

Lucy died on Carol Burnett's birthday. Lucy was a mentor to Carol and they'd appeared together often on television.

CAROL BURNETT: Every birthday, she would send me flowers with a card saying, Happy birthday, kid. And so this one morning I got up and it was my birthday and I turned on Good Morning America, one of them, The Today Show. And she had died that morning. On my birthday, and I just it was just such a blow. And then that afternoon, bing bong, I open the door and there were flowers and said, Happy birthday, kid.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucy's ashes were interred at the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles. She wanted to be buried next to her mother DeDe.

LUCIE ARNAZ: She had strict orders that she was to be cremated and that none of that she didn't want a funeral. No quote unquote funerals. I said, no, she should know people should be given the opportunity to mourn.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On May 8th, Lucy's children held three memorial services.

LUCIE ARNAZ: So we did Santa Monica for the Los Angeles people, we did Chicago and New York, all on a Monday night. It all started at nine o'clock, just like the show.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Each memorial service was filled to capacity. Hundreds of people gathered in the streets outside. But Lucie Arnaz also organized a smaller, more intimate service a week later. It was inspired by something she found the day her mother died.

LUCIE ARNAZ: I wandered upstairs to my mother's bedroom, and then next to her bed was this pad and pencil, and on it she started listing childhood things that she was remembering about Jamestown. And one of them was picnics. I loved picnics. And I thought, Oh, wow. And then she had the menu, exactly what she wanted to have. I love picnics. It's my favorite thing to do. We had pimento cheese sandwiches, we had fried chicken, we had Jell-O. We and I went, OK, rip, that page out and went. That's what we're doing. Thank you, Mom! I just figured she's wants me to know this because she said no funeral.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: On Mother's Day, about fifty of Lucy's family and friends gathered for a picnic.

LUCIE ARNAZ: Invited all the people she worked with, as many family members who could be there. Friends, friends, everybody. We took over the Robert Taylor estate up in one of the canyons off Sunset, and it was delightful.

JIM BROCHU: Just a good old fashioned American family picnic. And there was a pool and there were pool games and watermelon races. And it was just a fun, old fashioned picnic. And we raised a glass to her at the end of the day and all knew how much we missed her and how lucky we were to have been part of her life and to be there to celebrate her.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When Lucie Arnaz visited the Forest Lawn cemetery to pay her respects to her mom and DeDe, it didn't feel right. Their ashes were kept in a memorial wall, with a plaque on it.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And I, as the Chorus Line song says, felt nothing. Nothing. It was a cold, awful, ugly white marble wall. And I wasn't the least bit moved.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: Lucie had an idea. She ran it by her brother Desi Jr, then checked with her mother's brother Fred and cousin Cleo.

LUCIE ARNAZ: And I said, You know, everybody's back in Jamestown. The whole hunt plot is there. Her father's buried there. What did you think if I just took Deedee and Mom out of the little wall here and move them back to Jamestown, put everybody together. They said, oh my God, that's a fantastic idea! Fred said, Leave room for me. So that's what we did.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: In 2002, Lucy and DeDe's ashes were moved to Lakeview Cemetery in Jamestown. It's a beautiful cemetery with old trees and lilac bushes, Lucy's favorite flower. Grandpa Hunt is there too. So is her grandmother Florabelle and Lucy's father Henry.

People all over the world mostly remember Lucille Ball as Lucy Ricardo. She lives on that way.... through our TVs and on the internet, on our phones. But now when I think of Lucy I think of other things. I think of falling in love, learning to dance the rumba with Desi late into the night. I think of Lucy in her 20s, in a small movie role, delivering a line that leaves a sailor speechless.

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

BEN MANKIEWICZ: And I think of this moment when she was a young girl in Jamestown.

LUCILLE BALL: I used to welcome a rainy day.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: When she was so present she noticed everything around her.

LUCILLE BALL: I still remember that. I can tell you the kind of day and the way the rain was coming down and the color of the grass and what the flowers did when it rained, how they close up and what the bushes did and how the trees dripped and how they glistened. And I know that that was wonderful.

BEN MANKIEWICZ: A day when Lucy's imagination was open and free. And everything seemed possible.

You've been listening to Season 3 or The Plot Thickens. We hope you've enjoyed it. We certainly enjoyed bringing it to you. Stay tuned for more episodes of The Plot Thickens featuring my conversations with Lucie Arnaz and Aaron Sorkin.

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

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TCM's general manager is Pola Changnon. Our executive producer is Charlie Tabesh.

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

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