

# Television in the 1950's



- Did your family gather regularly in front of the television set during the evenings?
- Do you remember the evolving size and shape of television in the 1950's?
- When did your family first purchase a color television set?
- Did you ever eat frozen TV dinners? What were your favorite (or least favorite) foods?
- Have you ever heard of the Dumont Television Network?
- Do you remember television commercials, political ads, or either of the presidential conventions ('52, '56) being broadcast? Do you think they influenced your parents' voting?
- Did you enjoy watching variety shows? What acts or stars made an impression on you?
- Did you watch a variety of programs or stick to 1-2 genres?
- What was your favorite program from the decade?
- If you were a child in the fifties, did you have a "television hero?"

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### *I Love Lucy*

The most popular television show of the 1950s was without doubt the situation comedy *I Love Lucy*. The first weekly episode was aired on CBS on 15 October 1951 and it became a mainstay of American comedy through the decade. The series showcased comedienne Lucille Ball who had appeared in over fifty, largely unsuccessful, films for four different studios in the 1940s; she had become a household name through the CBS radio comedy *My Favorite Husband* (1948-51), in which she played Liz Cooper, a forerunner of her television persona Lucy Ricardo. The transition to television enabled Ball to add slapstick to the observational family comedy of the radio series. Given the paucity of women in comedy on either side of the Atlantic, there were few female comic role models for Ball to follow, and the fact that she was 40 when the series first aired was itself a challenge to Hollywood's emphasis on youth. Ball found her inspiration in vaudeville

resolved themselves with the patriarchal reaffirmation of Ricky as the man of the house.<sup>45</sup>

After the sixth series ended in May 1957 there were thirteen one-hour specials: *The Lucy-Desi Comedy Hour* (2 March 1960) was the last, filmed during the break-up of Ball and Arnaz's marriage. CBS scheduled re-runs of early episodes in the mid-1950s and the persona of Lucy was kept alive into the 1960s, with Ball portraying her as a widow and single mother. But the fact that these later shows – *The Lucy Show* (1962-8, with Vivian Vance as Lucy's sidekick), *Here's Lucy* (1968-74) and the very short-lived *Life with Lucy* (1986) – did not have the impact of *I Love Lucy* suggest that the Lucy phenomenon was deeply wedded to 1950s ideology and culture.



Figure 4.3 Lucille Ball tests Vitaminatevegamin in 'Lucy Does a TV Commercial', *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 5 May 1952).



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and silent comedy, particularly Charlie Chaplin's tramp, the mischievous Harpo Marx, and the deadpan physical comedy of Buster Keaton. Ball also filtered the mugging, disguise and grotesquerie of female vaudeville comedy into Lucy, the wannabe star and exuberant wife of Ricky Ricardo, band leader at the Tropicana Club, played by real-life Cuban husband Desi Arnaz. The husband-and-wife team and the show's domestic setting encouraged viewers to engage closely with Lucy and Ricky's antics, while Lucy's relentless search for recognition fitted in with the vogue for stardom.

The show was punctuated with song and dance numbers that Ball and Arnaz had performed in vaudeville during the summer of 1950, but it was Lucy's comic capers that stole the show; as Stefan Kafer comments: 'not since Carol Lombard [in the 1930s] had there been a glamorous woman so willing to make a fool of herself in pursuit of laughter'.<sup>37</sup> Ball's physical comedy was framed against the domestic setting of *I Love Lucy*, which strove for familiarity with its audience by focusing on the married life of the Ricardos and their middle-aged neighbours Fred and Ethel Mertz (William Frawley and Vivian Vance). Running for six series from 1951-8 the location shifts from Manhattan in the first three series (1951-4), to California in the fourth season (where all the episodes were shot), to a season charting the Ricardos and Mertzes in Europe (1955-6), and to the suburban setting of Connecticut in season six (1956-7) where the two couples remained together - an element that Lynn Spigel notes was common among shows like *The Honeymooners* for extending 'metaphors of neighbourhood'.<sup>38</sup> Most *Lucy* episodes focused on the Ricardo household, with scripts such as 'The Freezer' (28 April 1952) mining the comic potential of domesticity: when Lucy and Ethel order far too much beef to store in Lucy's new walk-in freezer they decide to go into town to sell the excess meat to unsuspecting housewives before Ricky catches them. The situations become ever more farcical, with Lucy getting into ridiculous scrapes - in the same episode she becomes locked in the freezer and is transformed into a frozen piece of meat.

Preceding the centrality of the TV set in mid-decade shows, some *Lucy* episodes such as 'The Quiz Show' (12 November 1951), 'Ricky and Fred are TV Fans' (22 June 1953) and 'Mr and Mrs TV Show' (1 November 1954) make television the focus, and other episodes in the first series parody the advertising industry, particularly 'Lucy Does A TV Commercial' (5 May 1952). In this episode, Lucy is determined to front a commercial for Vitameatavegamin, a tonic which promises to overcome listlessness but has hidden alcoholic properties. Ricky wants a young 'pretty girl' to do the commercial for his act, and Lucy has to resort to deception and tricks (including an audition literally inside a TV set) to put herself in line for the role. However, Lucy has to do so many takes in the studio before the producer is happy with her performance that she consumes a hefty quantity of the tonic in the process. At first the medicine is repulsive to her, but after several spoonfuls it lives up to its promise of tasting 'just like candy'. Vitameatavegamin's ridiculous name becomes ever more twisted by Lucy's slurred words - degenerating into 'Vita-veeda-vigee-vat' and

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'Vita-meedy-mega-meenie-moe-a-mis' - and her handling of the script is ever more farcical as she abandons taking the tonic with a spoon and slugs from the bottle. By the time Ricky appears to perform his musical act, Lucy is blind drunk and completely disruptive.

Episodes of *I Love Lucy* were filmed in front of a live audience using three separate cameras (a technique first devised in 1950) and Ball often improvised on set using Arnaz as her comic foil. Such was the show's popularity that it won two Emmys in its first two years and the episode 'Lucy Goes to the Hospital' (19 January 1953), in which Lucy gives birth the day after Ball had done so, knocked Eisenhower's inauguration off the front page of the papers. But it is important to avoid simply equating *I Love Lucy* with Ball's comic performance: equally vital were writer-producer Jess Oppenheimer and co-writers Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll Jr (who had all worked on *My Favorite Husband*), the cinematographer Karl Freund, and the work behind the scenes of Arnaz, particularly in establishing the independent company Desilu in 1950, after buying out RKO.<sup>39</sup>

Desilu was set up to promote the couple's vaudeville act, but the importance of the independent company with its 50 per cent share in *Lucy* was demonstrated in 1953 when Ball's name was connected with communism, an accusation which went back to 1938 when Lucille and her brother Fred registered communists for their grandfather. When Ball's name was cited in *Red Channels*, she was threatened with the blacklist. The FBI had extensive files on Ball and Arnaz, and for most actors it would have been the end of their career. But Ball was cleared of suspicion after testifying as a witness at a HUAC subcommittee in September 1953, and Arnaz began the third series of *I Love Lucy* with an impassioned speech stressing that communists had chased him out of Cuba and that Ball had never been a party member.<sup>40</sup>

The phenomenon of *I Love Lucy* stemmed not just from the viewers' identification with the show's characters and settings, but also the fact that the cultural journey of the Ricardos reflected directly - and even helped to shape - the trajectory of national culture. The visibility of commodities (including the show's sponsor up to 1955, Philip Morris cigarettes), the trappings of suburbia, and the nation's love affair with Europe in the mid-1950s, echoed the lives of many middle-class Americans and gave viewers a sense that their experiences were shared ones. Lori Landay argues that the show was a triumph of commodification, with merchandise (including fashions, clothes, games, furniture, and dolls after the birth of Little Ricky in 1953) reinforcing *I Love Lucy* as a 'central story cycle' of the 1950s with its narrative of marriage, domesticity, and the desire for a middle-class lifestyle.<sup>41</sup> But while the show became part of cultural commodification, Lucy's exuberant personality and her constant straining against the conventions of marriage (dissatisfied with the role of housewife) and social expectations (with its emphasis on youth and glamour) gave many episodes a more subversive edge. However, although Lucy's adventures and incompetence led her into disastrous scrapes in the public sphere, the episodes often ended with her seeking sanctuary in domesticity and plots