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Lucy In the Sky: A Visit to the Lucy Desi Museum

Richard Klin · Wednesday, November 29th, 2023

Jamestown, New York is the site of the small, but mighty, [Lucy Desi Museum](#). The museum's official appellation includes the formal mention of the principals' surnames—Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz—but much of the museum's signage and descriptive copy render the names simply as Lucy and Desi. Their enduring fame is such that no last names are required, nor is there a need for extensive explanation. It is understood that this museum's focus is *I Love Lucy*, a television show that debuted at the tail end of the Truman administration—over seven decades ago—and has been transmitted ever since. The show's basic schema is understood as well: *I Love Lucy* is the comedic chronicle of the titular character, Lucy Ricardo, married to Cuban-born bandleader Ricky Ricardo—played by real-life spouses Ball and Arnaz—and Fred and Ethel Mertz (William Frawley and Vivian Vance), the Ricardos' New York City landlords, best friends, and sometime antagonists.

Lucille Ball grew up in Jamestown, a city situated in southwestern New York State and on the banks of Chautauqua Lake. The Chautauqua Institution is nearby, from which the historic Chautauqua movement—the eclectic, traveling hybrid of uplift and entertainment—emanated. The young, ambitious Ball left Jamestown for bigger and better things, but she remained anchored to her hometown. The fictional Lucy Ricardo also hails from Jamestown and the locale garnered steady mention throughout the run of *I Love Lucy*.



It is entirely fitting that this museum sits here, in Jamestown. Blocks away is another museum, the new-ish National Comedy Center. Murals of some of *I Love Lucy*'s more notable scenes pepper the town. Jamestown has made full use of its most famous resident. One could spend the entire day touring various sites and locales where the young Lucille Ball lived her pre-fame existence. Making full use of Lucille Ball's legacy, though, can incur unexpected pitfalls. In 2009, an amateurish commemorative statue was unveiled, bearing little resemblance to Ball and inadvertently rendering her with such grotesque features that the statue was derisively dubbed "Scary Lucy." In 2016, a new, more accurate and pleasing statue was unveiled. The matter was (presumably) resolved.

These efforts could be construed as commercialism or crass local boosterism, but somehow the feeling instead is of support and understanding. You want Jamestown to succeed, to grow and prosper.

The Lucy Desi Museum maps out the show's trajectory in an organized, user-friendly manner, skillfully utilizing a wide range of media. A beautifully preserved vintage radio broadcasts an episode of *My Favorite Husband*, Lucille Ball's late-1940s radio show that served as a precursor for her entrée into television. The museum employs photos, video, text, and all manner of *Lucy* ephemera: shooting scripts, telegrams, correspondence, clothes and costumes (including, curiously, one of Desi Arnaz's suits). There is an official *I Love Lucy* bedroom suite from the early 1950s, which true acolytes could purchase and utilize in their own homes.

The museum also houses two meticulously re-created sets that are instantly recognizable to any *I Love Lucy* aficionado: the Ricardos' East Sixties apartment and the Hollywood hotel where Lucy and Ricky—accompanied by the ever-faithful Fred and Ethel—decamp for an extended California stay. In real life, here at the museum, these sets are in the bright tints and hues of the 1950s. The

effect is slightly jarring, as if *I Love Lucy*'s filmic, black-and-white palette—so visually attractive and a key to the show's enduring appeal—is the reality, not the actual physical manifestation.



The Lucy Desi Museum should not be construed as simply for devotees of the show. It also functions in a broader sense as an interesting orientation to the early years of television: a long-ago land of bulky cameras, minimal viewing options, and a medium that approximated circadian rhythms, with programming arising in the morning and then, at night, shutting down and going to sleep.

New York City, the locus of *I Love Lucy*, gets less mention than other aspects of the show, but the city is an atmospheric constant. The Ricardos' kitchen, in true city fashion, is appropriately cramped. The show is redolent of a vanished New York of cigarettes, thick steaks, boxing matches, hatcheck girls. Doorbells buzz, telephones blare out their metallic rings, typewriters clatter. Elaborate alcoholic concoctions with distinctive names—like the sidecar—are imbibed. (Not, though, by the Ricardos and Mertzes, who consume mostly coffee and appear to be—very unrealistically—de facto teetotalers.)

There is a (sexist) 1950s *New Yorker* cartoon vibe that runs throughout the series as well. Lucy's life also encompasses ladies' gatherings, where millinery and gossip are central components.

Husbands are the king of the castle—a sentiment that Lucy subverts at every opportunity.



I Love Lucy includes two extended travel segments that stretch over many episodes. One is a journey from New York to California, which utilizes tried-and-true American archetypes: tourist traps, bumpkins, country sharpies. The other is a long trip—again with the Mertzes, who have a minimal existence outside of Lucy and Ricky’s life—through Europe. Those episodes reflect a historical moment: the advent of American postwar affluence. Americans, hitherto, did not simply vacation to Europe. It was the domain of the wealthy or disaffected artistic types. And then, of course, Europe was synonymous with war. Now, in the 1950s, things were different. Travel was available to a much larger swath of the American public. They could soak up some foreign culture, eat interesting cuisine, make fools of themselves. All of this is reflected in *I Love Lucy*.

The biggest connecting thread of the entire show is Lucy’s relentless, obsessive quest for fame, with Ricky doing all that is humanly possible to thwart her delusional behavior. This serves as the catalyst for much of *I Love Lucy*’s plotlines. Lucy lacks any discernible talent, yet hungers for public adulation. Most of her misplaced aspirations center on singing, but any medium will suffice: She tries her hand at acting, at dancing, at sculpting, at writing. She serves as a magician’s assistant. While in Great Britain, she contrives to meet the queen. This component of *I Love Lucy* is astonishingly prescient, with the character embodying a distinctive American trait: A thirst for

fame regardless of talent. *I Love Lucy* anticipated the deluge of reality TV stars, influencers, YouTubers, TikTokers. To be famous simply for being famous is part of the American dream. *I Love Lucy* refined that idea, to brilliant effect. In this regard, it was fifty years ahead of its time.



It is hard to walk through the Lucy Desi Museum and not feel awash in nostalgia. Logic dictates that this nostalgia is misplaced, for many reasons: The real-life marriage of Lucy and Desi was fraught with all sorts of issues that led to their divorce and the end of their comedic partnership. Off-camera, William Frawley and Vivian Vance detested each other. From today's vantage point, most television shows from the 1950s have objectionable content; *I Love Lucy* is no exception. There are offhand jokes about physical punishment for Lucy's supposed misbehavior, which are unfunny, offensive, and jarring to the viewer.

But nostalgia—a nostalgia anchored to some elements of objectivity—is not automatically such a bad thing. And the Lucy Desi Museum offers not just nostalgia, but a truly immersive experience. And that, really, is a very pleasant thing.

(Photos by Lily Prince)

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