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Gregg Oppenheimer Loves Lucy

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On a recent Sunday afternoon, the sanctuary at Kehillat Israel was transformed into a radio studio circa 1950 simply by placing a few microphones and a group of veteran actors in the center of it.

Everyone was there because they love Lucy, and the one-act play, "I Love Lucy: The Untold Story," by Gregg Oppenheimer was about to transport the audience back to a time when Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz were household names.

Oppenheimer addressed the crowd before the performance. "Hi, I'm Gregg Oppenheimer and I'm a recovering attorney." At that point, everyone knew a good time was ahead.

Oppenheimer's father, Jess, created the television series "I Love Lucy" in 1951, and ran its predecessor, the radio show "My Favorite Husband," which also starred Ball. He also wrote "Laughs, Luck . . . and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time," although he died before finishing the manuscript his son completed it by interviewing people and reading and transcribing the many interviews his dad had done over the years.

Though "I Love Lucy" ran for only six seasons, it has entertained generations of people around the world through reruns. Millions of people were glued to their television sets every Monday to watch the show, which also starred William Frawley and Vivian Vance, the honorary mayor of Pacific Palisades in 1957-1958.

To give an idea of how popular "I Love Lucy" was, according to Oppenheimer's book, "The TV birth of Little Ricky on CBS was watched by an incredible 44 million viewers—15 million more than would tune in to President Eisenhower's inauguration the next day on all three networks."

Jess Oppenheimer used episodes from his real life to create interesting plotlines for television. For example, when Lucy tried to get her passport, there was difficulty finding her birth records; this was inspired by the time the passport office had trouble locating the documents proving that Jess' German-born father was a naturalized U.S. citizen.

In keeping with radio authenticity, the KI audience was treated to old jingles sung live. Oppenheimer operated sound effects via a laptop computer while sitting in a chair facing the cast.

The enthusiasm at KI was palpable, from the audience to the actors at the microphones to the actors sitting down in between their scenes, following along and

laughing just like everyone else. "I loved watching the big smiles on the faces of the actors who were sitting. And the younger people in the cast just loved working with the old-timers. They're such amazing professionals," Oppenheimer says.

The radio show began the same way that radio shows long ago did—with an announcer and then a jingle, for Chock Full O' Nuts coffee. Phil Proctor as columnist Walter Winchell (he also plays Desi Arnaz) sets the scene: this story is going to explain how "I Love Lucy" got on the air. Throughout the show, we are privy to meetings with top CBS brass, Jess Oppenheimer and his visionary ways, Lucy's insistence on having Desi cast as her husband in the new television show and the creative financing of the show.

The old adage of leave them wanting more couldn't have been truer than in this case. When the 55-minute production ended, people immediately started saying that there should be another act. Lifelong "I Love Lucy" fan Dr. Alisa Bromberg laughed throughout the entire show and thought "it was extraordinary."

Longtime Palisadian Bob Schiller, who joined the writing staff of "I Love Lucy" during the show's fifth season, was in the KI audience. When Oppenheimer introduced

Schiller, who was sitting in the back row with his wife Sabrina, the crowd gave him a standing ovation. Schiller enjoyed the show, and when asked how he remembers so many details about his time on "Lucy" he responded, "I remember everything. We thought it was pretty good."

After that one-time performance at KI, Oppenheimer realized he should try creating a second act. By the time I sat down to interview him several days later, he had already begun the process.

We sat in his one "period"



Gregg Oppenheimer draws laughter as he introduces the recent performance of "I Love Lucy: The Untold Story" at Kehillat Israel.

Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

room, filled with framed photos of Jack Benny, Fred Astaire and other stars from that era, a Philco radio from the 1930s and an old-fashioned rotary phone with Lucy's phone number: MURray Hill 5-9099.

Oppenheimer describes the process of creating the one-act, which

play. "I took my favorite scenes and it turned out to be very easy to adapt for radio because I had forgotten to include stage directions.

"We workshopped it in Seattle and it premiered August 6, 2011, on the stage of this beautiful 1,400-seat theater in Jamestown where Lucy used to watch vaudeville comedians. That was really special." The crowd of 800 was smitten. Subsequently, it was heard on Sirius radio, and later it was performed at the Motion Picture and Television Fund home in Woodland Hills.

For the 50th anniversary of the debut of "My Favorite Husband," Oppenheimer put on a benefit for the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation called "Lucy's First Sitcom." "We got together every surviving member of the cast of 'I Love Lucy' and 'My Favorite Husband.'"

Oppenheimer was enamored the first time he heard his words spoken, which were only introductions for all the actors. "I had never written anything that somebody got up on stage and said before. That was exciting. I didn't write anything funny."

The performance at KI marked the sixth time the show was performed. At first, Oppenheimer, who counts many of the actors in the cast as friends, which that day included Dick Van Patten as Bill Paley and Charlene Tilton as Lucy, wasn't comfortable giving them direction. But after various performances in various cities, including conventions that focused on old-time radio shows, he got comfortable and "started telling the actors what to do."

The writing is snappy and funny, with a timeless appeal, and certainly humorous to any fan of "I Love Lucy." "The thing I love about Gregg is his sense of the legacy that his father left, and his preserving of the radio genre," Tilton says.

Oppenheimer graduated from Palisades High School in January 1969, and was at Pali during student demonstrations demanding the right to have long hair. He fondly recalls 1964's "Ringo Riots" at Paul Revere. "A girl claimed to be Ringo's cousin. People were crowding around her—it almost caused a riot."

He met his wife, Debbie, in the dorms at UC Berkeley when he was in law school, and they have been married since 1977. They have lived in the same house in Santa Monica since 1988, and their daughter, Julie, is 27. He practiced law for 15 years before taking a sabbatical to write the book. He finally quit his day job when he got a publisher.

Though interested in the entertainment industry when he was at Revere and PaliHi, Oppenheimer

wasn't sure what he was going to do. "I was interested in math," he says, and went to MIT, where he was an art and design major.

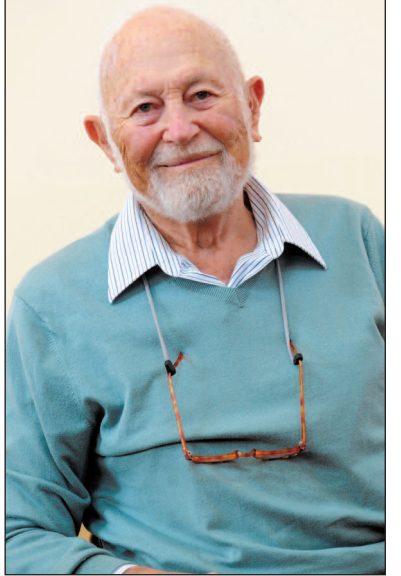
Getting friends and family jobs in Hollywood is a way of life, but not for Jess Oppenheimer. "I asked my dad if I could get a job at MGM and he said no because he didn't believe in nepotism." On his own accord he got a job on his dad's "The Debbie Reynolds Show," which his father approved, because the elder Oppenheimer had nothing to do with setting it up.

"Sony had just come out with the first sort of home videotape recorder," Oppenheimer says. "It cost \$5,000, which was a lot of money back then. But Pali bought one so they could record all of their athletic events." He learned to use it and taped athletic events, and it turned out to be the same machine as the one that was being used for the Debbie Reynolds show. When the guy who was supposed to work it for the show didn't show up, Oppenheimer was offered the job, which he kept until he came down with a case of mononucleosis.

"I had such a great time. Mostly TV shows are just standing around, at least most of the time, but I was standing around listening to stories from Tom Bosley." He fondly remembers walking around the back lot at



Jess Oppenheimer, the creator of "I Love Lucy."



"I Love Lucy" writer Bob Schiller. Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

Desilu Studios in Culver City when he was younger.

Gregg Berger, who played several characters at the KI reading, including one of the announcers, discussed the importance of keeping radio theater going. "The opportunities to do this are dwindling and it's not only a privilege and pleasure to help keep it alive, it's a responsibility."

"It's just a wonderful medium. And everybody misses it," Oppenheimer says about radio.

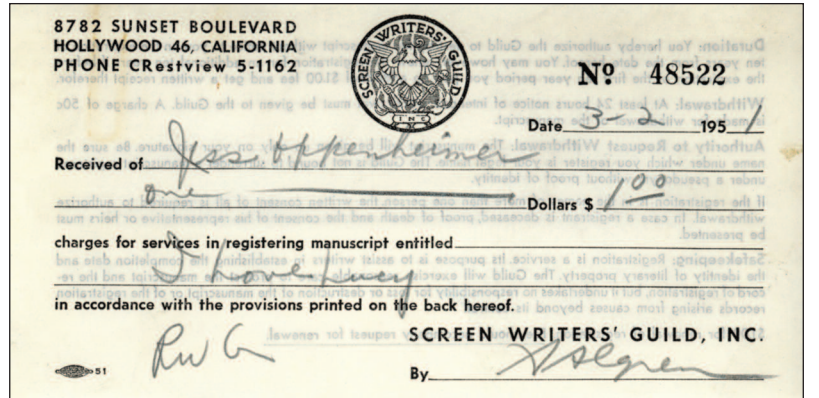
Photos: Courtesy "Laughs, Luck . . . and Lucy: How I Came to Create the Most Popular Sitcom of All Time," which is also available as an audiobook.



The "I Love Lucy" cast—William Frawley, Vivian Vance, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz—with Hans Conried in the back.



Gregg Berger and Phil Proctor performing for the crowd at KI. Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer



A receipt from 1951 for registering "I Love Lucy" with the Screen Writers' Guild.