

# TCM THE PLOT THICKENS

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## EPISODE 4: DESI

**I LOVE LUCY:** "What are you gonna say when you meet my mother?" "Oh... uh, bonas dyes, may-dree."

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** There's this one episode of I Love Lucy where Ricky Ricardo brings Lucy home to Cuba to meet his family for the first time. On the plane to Havana, he coaches her on some basic Spanish phrases.

**I LOVE LUCY:** "Honey it's buenos días madre! "I don't think that's very nice, making fun of my Spanish." "Well, you've been making fun of my English for 15 years." "That's different. Spanish is a foreign language." "Well, English is a foreign language to me." "Well, the way you speak it, it is to me too."

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Ricky and Lucy came from opposite worlds -- they spoke different languages. Quite literally. The show mined these differences for laughs. Especially Ricky's accent. The real-life Ricky Ricardo was, of course, one Desiderio Alberto Arnaz y de Acha the third. Better known to us - as Desi Arnaz. Desi had a few things in common with his TV alter ego: They were both Cuban. Both bandleaders. Both trying to make it in America alongside a sparky redhead named Lucy. But the real story of Desi's life before Lucy? That - wouldn't have made it past the censors back then. There was violence. Gangsters. Sex. And -- like any good sitcom -- a few hilarious misunderstandings.

I'm Ben Mankiewicz, and this is 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. When she was twenty-eight, Lucy met Desi Arnaz at the RKO studio in Hollywood. He would become the most important man of her life. This is the story of how Desi found his way to that studio in Hollywood - and to Lucy. Their partnership would change both of them -- and show business -- forever. This is Episode Four: Desi. Our story begins in Cuba.

**1950s CUBA ARCHIVAL FILM:** Beautiful harbor of Cuba.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Specifically - Santiago de Cuba, where Desi Arnaz was born on March 2, 1917. The family he was born into was kind of a big deal: one of Desi's grandfathers was a doctor who traveled with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders.

**1933 CUBAN TRAVELOGUE:** Cubans by popular subscription erected a beautiful statue to Theodore Roosevelt as a token of their undying gratitude.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Another was a VP at Bacardi Rum. During Prohibition, Americans flocked to the island to drink daiquiris at the source.

**1933 CUBAN TRAVELOGUE:** But many travelers are far more interested in this: the entrance to the famous Bacardi distillery.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Cuba in the 1930s was a playground — for tourists, and for young Desi Arnaz. By the time he was in high school, Desi had it all: looks, girls, money, and connections. His dad was the mayor of Desi's hometown -- a rising star in the regime of President Gerardo Machado. And they were wealthy. They owned a few ranches in the countryside, a home in the city and a summer house on a small island. And some of the Arnaz men had yet -- another kind of house. A place to keep their mistresses.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** It was not unusual for a married man of the upper classes to have an official family and an unofficial family, to have an official wife and to have an unofficial mistress.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Gustavo Perez Firmat. He's Cuban-American and a literature professor. He's written a lot about Desi.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** The unofficial family, that house was called La Casa Chica, the small house. The official family lived in the big house. In Spanish, we call them queridas: loved one. And it's strange that your wife is not your querida.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi's grandfather had seven children with his wife. His mistress raised at least seven more. Desi though, was an only child. He was named after his father, Desiderio, from the Latin word for "desire." When Desi turned 15, his uncle took him out to celebrate.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** For Cuban boys of a certain class and maybe of any class, it was a kind of rite of passage for to be taken to a brothel for him to lose his virginity when he was 14, 15, 16. And in this

case, it was his uncle who took him to a fancy brothel in Santiago called Casa Marina. Desi began frequenting brothels when he was 15 and he never stopped.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** At Casa Marina, Desi says he learned “the whole deal” — skills he would later use to seduce some of the most glamorous actresses in Hollywood. Desi’s childhood was full of music and dancing - and girls. Desi's three favorite things came together every year during the festival known as Carnival—

**1950s CUBA ARCHIVAL FILM:** Carnival means excitement!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** —that’s when roving bands called comparsas would take over the streets.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** Comparsas are these sort of groups of street revelers that go down the street dancing and singing and playing instruments, playing drums, playing cowbells, playing frying pans, whatever they can get a hold of.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** They were loud and fun and sexy -- Desi ate it up. Years later, when he was invited to be King of Carnival in Miami, he reminisced about it to a TV reporter.

**DESI ARNAZ:** When I was a kid, I never missed that, you know, three or four days a week, you know, everybody dance and the beautiful girls and costume.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But when Desi was 16 years old, his entire life changed. That’s because in 1933, Cuba was a powderkeg waiting to go off.

**YESTERDAY NEWSREEL:** Havana: Hotbed of Cuba’s carnival of intrigue. It’s 1933 and newly elected Prez Gerardo Machado has parlayed his control of the army and of public utilities into a mighty force that has suppressed unrest and revolt.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** Machado was a dictator, and he became a very repressive dictator. And that, created lot of social unrest in Cuba.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It was August 12th, 1933. As Desi remembered it, it was a muggy afternoon in Santiago, and school was out for the summer. He was at his friend Jack’s place — playing penny-ante poker. He told the story in his memoir, which he titled, simply, A Book. The excerpts you’ll hear are from the audiobook and they’re read by an actor. During the card game, Desi had a strange premonition: He said to Jack—

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** I don't know why, but I feel I should go home." "What do you mean, you should go home? Just because you're winning, eh?" I said, "I'll be back in a little while" As I got home, the phone was ringing. It was my mother's brother Eduardo, he sounded very excited.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** His uncle told him to get his mother out of the house right away. They're coming after you

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** "Who's coming after us?" I asked. "Machado has fled the country and anyone who belonged to the Machado regime is in danger." All Machadistas are being arrested or killed. Their houses are being ransacked and burned."

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The powderkeg had just exploded.

**YESTERDAY NEWSREEL:** In August of 1933 the revolution is on! Riots break out in the streets, Macahdo's police hurl their horses into the mobs, to no avail.... Irate Cubans, roused to fighting fury, rush to destroy Machado-owned property.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** When Desi hung up the phone, he heard a rumbling sound.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** I looked out and I could not believe what I saw. About eight blocks away, just beginning to come over the top of the hill on our main boulevard, there was a mob of 500 people or more, carrying torches, pitchforks, guns, and God knows what else.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** He helped his mother into her coat, grabbed some cash and a gun. They managed to escape just before the crowd set fire to their home. Desi's father, meanwhile, was 500 miles away, in the capital.

**BRITISH PATHE:** Here are actual scenes of mobs running wild in Havana, celebrating Machado's downfall. As rioting crowds surged through the streets shouting for the blood of Machado and his henchmen.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Old newsreel footage shows rebels hurling pianos from second-floor balconies and burning piles of furniture in the streets. Machado had already slipped out of the country with sacks full of gold. But Desi's father wasn't so lucky.

**DESI ARNAZ:** He was in jail six months. They put all the congressmen in jail, all the senators, all the mayors, all the governors, everybody was in the can!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The Arnaz family lost everything. Desi would later describe driving past the wreckage of his house in Santiago. He saw the family car flipped upside down on the sidewalk, heirlooms lying broken in the yard. The last thing he saw was his guitar, smashed and still smoldering.

**ARCHIVAL TRAVEL FILM:** Let's look at Florida, that most southern projection of the USA which has been variously known as the peninsula state, the sunshine state, and even the mermaid state.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi Arnaz stepped off the ferry in Key West in June of 1934. He was about 5 feet, 10 inches tall. He was a lanky teenager. But he had the broad shoulders of a man. He wore his jet-black hair slicked back and swept over to the side. A stray lock often fell down his forehead - especially when he danced. He had dark eyes and an easy smile. Like so many others, Desi was looking for a fresh start in America. His timing couldn't have been worse.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** The United States was in the middle of a depression. These are not prosperous economic times and so we have these people who come here. And then you have to figure out a way to make a living.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi's father greeted the boat. After six months in prison, he'd gone into exile in Florida. The plan was for Desi's mother to stay on the island until the Arnaz men could set the family up in Miami. But it was an uphill climb.

**DESI ARNAZ:** I couldn't speak English. I was going around to see if I could find a restaurant that says "Se habla español."

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** I think it must have been difficult for both of them. Desi's father, who was an educated man who had been an important politician in Cuba, had to make a living selling tiles. They lived in the warehouse where the tiles were kept. And at night they had to swat away the rats. So, it had to be a struggle at the beginning.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi enrolled at St Patrick's High School in Miami Beach. That's where he met his first American best friend: Al Capone, Jr., the son of America's most famous gangster. To make ends meet, Desi got a job cleaning bird cages. And in the winter of 1936, he landed his first showbiz gig: singing and playing guitar for a rumba band. They were hired to play between sets of the Buddy Rogers Orchestra. Desi said when they broke into a Latin beat... the crowd cleared the dance floor. Americans hadn't learned how to

rumba in those days. It was there that Desi caught the eye of a bandleader called Xavier Cugat -- the king of the rumba himself.

Cugat was a little eccentric: he had a thing for miniature chihuahuas and often performed while holding a tiny dog in one hand and his conductor's baton in the other. He even taught one of his dogs to play the piano. But Cugat was a bona fide star: he had songs on the hit parade and a gig leading the house band at the new Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York. He needed a singer for his orchestra, and he invited Desi to audition.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** My Cuban blood was flowing. My hips were revolving, my feet were kicking, my arms were waving. It would have made Elvis Presley look as if he were standing still. I sang the shit out of that song. I was so goddamn excited I hardly heard Cugat say, "say son, you got the job. When can you come to New York?"

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** It was an opportunity that would turn young Desiderio Alberto from Santiago de Cuba into Desi Arnaz, one of the most influential Latin American entertainers in the country. Desi promised Cugat he would see him in New York just as soon as he finished high school. A couple of weeks after Desi graduated from Saint Patrick's High, he got on a bus bound for New York City. Cugat had sent him a one-way ticket and promised to pay him for just two weeks of work -- a tryout, he called it. Desi's father thought he was crazy to go. When Desi got off the bus in Times Square, he had fifteen bucks in his pocket and no idea if this gamble would pay off. Desi got himself a hotel room for a dollar a night, then went straight to the Waldorf. He took the elevator all the way to the 18th floor, to the Starlite Roof supper club. He had just a few days to rehearse with Cugat's orchestra before the show went on the road. During those rehearsals, Desi quickly found a pal.

**MIKE NICOLETTI:** They were actually better friends than I even knew.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Mike Nicoletti. His dad was Nick Nicoletti. He was Cugat's assistant. It was Nick's job to take Cugat's Chihuahuas out for their walk every day. Nick and Desi would become close over the years.

**MIKE NICOLETTI:** At lunch they would all sit around playing cards, you know, drinking alcohol, these long luxurious lunches where they would kind of like party.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Once the tour started, the orchestra played the Arrowhead Inn. It was a casino in upstate New York that was popular with people with last names like Vanderbilt. One night Bing Crosby was there. Crosby was one of the biggest musical stars at the time. He invited Desi over to his table. Desi told Bing

Crosby that Cugat was only paying him thirty dollars a week. "That cheap crook," Crosby said. He marched over to Cugat and demanded he give Desi a raise. Which Cugat did — to thirty-five dollars a week.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** To live on thirty-five dollars a week in New York, even in those days, was very difficult. Today, of course, it's impossible. Having to go through the Waldorf kitchen to get to the bandstand helped. I lifted all the celery, olives, carrots, pieces of bread, buns, and butter and whatever else I could stash into my rumba shirt every time we came back through the kitchen for our ten-minute rest. Those wide, full sleeves with all the big ruffles were very useful.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi watched Cugat and learned the business of being a bandleader. After six months, Desi told Cugat he wanted out. He wanted to start his own band. He told the story to Johnny Carson on the Tonight Show in 1976.

**DESI ARNAZ:** I quit Cugat because like I said I couldn't eat well working with him, I said Cugat, I gotta quit, I gotta get my little band, he said you'll die of hunger, nobody knows the rumba in this country, I said I'm dying of hunger now! What's the difference? He says go to Miami and I go to Miami, I said if I get a job will you send me a little band? He said Sure, so he said you can use Xavier Cugat ... Desi Arnaz Orchestra from the Waldorf-Astoria in New York City. I said that's great, wonderful start.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** When Desi left New York to strike out on his own, he took his friend Nick Nicoletti with him. Nick had a talent for persuasion that would come in handy in Miami.

**MIKE NICOLETTI:** That period in Miami, that seems like kind of a fairytale type time in their relationships and my dad's existence. He worked out this one deal with him and he said yeah I just let Nick do it because he's a better bullshitter than I am.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi hired Nick to manage his new band - Desi Arnaz and his Xavier Cugat Orchestra -- Nick and Desi heard about a new club opening in Miami Beach and thought they'd try to get the orchestra booked there. They walked in one night and acted like big shots. They left huge tips for the cigarette girls and pretended to know about expensive Champagne. In the end they B.S.'d their way into a regular gig. And the paycheck? Six hundred and fifty dollars a week. Desi wasn't even 21 years old yet, but he was already becoming a shrewd businessman—the kind of guy who in Cuba might be called "un vivo." Here's Gustavo Perez again.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** "Vivo" literally means alive, but "un vivo" is a kind of a rogue, a guy who gets away with something, a guy who knows all the angles. throughout the whole book, he delights in explaining

how he got the better of all these American bigwigs: so this is like this Cuban who is showing you that he's actually smarter than all these American types, even though he had no education, he knew nothing about finances and even his musical career. Because he had little or no musical training. And yet he got away with it.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Just before the band's big debut, Cugat sent down some musicians from New York to act as Desi's Latin orchestra. But the drummer couldn't even play a rumba beat. Desi told the story on The Tonight Show.

**DESI ARNAZ:** Now, the drummer was a Spaniard. Now you know, the Spaniards, they all play pasodoble, no matter what they play it sounds like they're playing something for the bull coming into the arena. Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, and a violin player, a saxophone player, and a bass player, two Italians and another Jewish fellow. No Cubans in the whole thing? No nothing. No maraca, conga drums, no, nothing.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The first set was a total disaster.

**DESI ARNAZ:** I came down the stairs. The guy says, you're fired. That is the worst sound I have ever heard in my life! And he was right! He says I would have been better off hiring the Salvation Army.... Anyway, I said to these guys, I bought a bottle of rum, I says, drink up. We're going to try something new.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The band was scheduled to play for a packed New Year's Eve crowd. That's when Desi came up with what he calls his "Dance of Desperation."

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** Was fronting a little band and it was bombing and the musicians didn't know how to play Cuban music, and so he remembered these carnival celebrations.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi thought back to those festivals where Cubans paraded through the streets, banging pots and pans or whatever they could find. It never failed to put people in a party mood — and you didn't have to be a virtuoso to pull it off. So Desi strapped on a conga drum and gave the band a quick lesson on the beat.

**DESI ARNAZ:** To the drummer I said you can go boom-boom-boom-boom, can't you? You don't have to make THAT sound like a paso doble? He says no, Boom, boom, boom I can go. I says alright. Now the violin player, I went to the kitchen, got two frying pans, gave him the frying pans, he says how do I go boom-boom-boom-boom With this thing? I say, you don't go boom, boom, boom with those. You

go ding, ding. This is a guy that probably was hoping to be Jascha Heifetz, he's sitting there with two frying pans... and that's how the conga started. My dance of desperation!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Nick Nicoletti was in the audience. He told the crowd to form a line behind him. One-two-three-kick. Desi climbed on top of the bar and beat the drum until the whole crowd was out of their seats, snaking through the club. Desi claims it was the first time the conga had ever been done in the United States. That's an exaggeration, but Desi deserves credit for making the conga line a staple of every American wedding reception for the last 80 years.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** Back in the days of the conga craze, there were many, many conga songs with funny titles like The Conga from Honga or Boogie Woogie Conga. But the best title, I Came, I Saw, I Conga'd. And I think that's sort of a description of what Desi did. He came, he saw, he conga'd. and he sort of conga'd his way into fame and fortune.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Within a year, conga fever had gripped the country. In New York, a new club called La Conga was set to open near Swing Street, the heart of Manhattan nightlife. The owner offered Desi a regular gig. La Conga was THE PLACE to be seen that summer, especially for New York society girls. They were big fans of this Cuban newcomer. Gossip columnist Walter Winchell wrote that "La Conga is where the debutantes go from prim to primitive."

Another regular at La Conga was a woman named Polly Adler.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** Polly Adler was the most famous madam in America in the Jazz Age between World War One and the end of World War Two.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** That's Debby Applegate. Adler's biographer.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** She was a very tiny woman with a big booming voice. And she was very funny. She had Yiddish, Brooklyn-ish accent and was known for her jokes.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The madam even had her own catchphrase—

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** It is always a business doing pleasure with you.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Adler was running a high-class bordello out of a townhouse in Midtown Manhattan. Half of New York society hung out at Polly's, from the writer Dorothy Parker to mobsters like Lucky Luciano.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** By the early 1930s, there is not a nightclub in America that is not mob connected. That's just a fact. She very quickly became one of the top madams for the Prohibition-era gangsters who were bringing bootleg booze into New York and starting the nightclubs and the speakeasies that would come to dominate New York nightlife. One of the ways that she would advertise is by taking her girls -- especially if she had a new suite of girls -- take them out to the nightclubs where they would sort of parade in and grab everyone's eye.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Polly started bringing her girls to La Conga. It was the hot new nightspot. She would show them off to the clientele — and to the band.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** It's a little basement club, it's very romantic feeling in the low lights with the palm trees and the murals of Cuba on the wall. And she has a couple of her girls there, including one of her new redheads. She always liked to keep a blond, a brunette, and a redhead on staff at any given moment. And if she didn't have a real redhead, somebody had to become a redhead.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** One night, Desi took an interest in one of Polly's redheads. In fact the words he used to describe her were: "Built like a brick shithouse." Always a gentleman. Polly invited Desi to join them for breakfast at her house after his last set.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** Without telling him that she's inviting him to a whorehouse, she invites him over for breakfast. It's deluxe. He's so impressed by the apartment. 14:20: It was done up in shades of red and white with a grand crystal chandelier, lots of sort of 17th-century French furniture and pictures of what they used to call barroom nudes hung on the walls and little knick knacks. She had a movie projector and dirty films that she could pull out and show. But she tried to keep it classy. She had caviar, scrambled eggs, plenty of high-end champagne. And as they're finishing their breakfast, Polly says, "So you like the redhead, huh?" And he says "Oh yeah I like the redhead." by this point, you know he's copped on. It's clear that this is a brothel and he at that stage has no money to speak of and so he's, you know, thanks but no thanks. Can't afford the pleasure. And Polly insists no, no, no, no, no. That's all right, Sonny. This one's on the house.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi Arnaz had a sharp memory. He remembered everything about that first night at Polly's: the way a white silk gown draped over a woman's body and how the parlor smelled like yellow roses. And he never forgot the redhead.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** "Wow! I've had my share of delicious sex in my life, but that redhead was something else. If there was anything I had not learned at Casa Marina, she taught it to me then. She was insatiable."

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi quickly became a regular. He'd do two or three sets a night at La Conga, and when the 2:30 show was over, he'd go to Polly's to be entertained until 7 or 8 in the morning. Then he'd sleep all day and do it all again the next night. Desi was a young kid in a new city in a new country, suddenly getting a lot of attention for his good looks and exotic accent. And Polly's was more than just a brothel: Applegate thinks it was a place where people like Desi could escape the pressure of the spotlight and feel at home.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** Polly's house was a place where you could let your hair down, you could just be free. it was a place where a lot of gay people came. It was a place where a lot of people who were eccentric came. And it was a place where men like Desi Arnaz, could come and feel like you could just be yourself in a way that was almost impossible in other places.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi didn't know it yet, but he was about to meet someone who would give him that same feeling. She grew up over a thousand miles away from the Cuban city where he was born. But she would make Desi feel like he was home. Desi's star was rising fast. At La Conga he was palling around with movie stars and big-time musicians. Soon he was on the radar of New York's most important gossip columnist, Dorothy Kilgallen.

**DOROTHY KILGALLEN (ACTOR):** "Desi Arnaz is a black-eyed, slim-hipped, rhythm-conscious young Latin on the threshold of becoming a fad... he is, perhaps the 1939 equivalent of Valentino."

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** The guy who set the standard for Latin lovers was Rudolph Valentino.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Again, Gustavo Perez.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** Who was Italian from New York. And so, the stereotype was already there. The dancing Latin and the hot-tempered Latin are certainly stereotypes.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** At the time, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart were the hottest writing team on Broadway. They were so famous; everyone just knew them as Rogers and Hart. They came to see Desi at La Conga. They were interested in casting him in their new Broadway show.

A dance musical called Too Many Girls. They wanted Desi to play a skirt-chasing singing-and-dancing ballplayer from Argentina named "Manuelito." They'd written Manuelito a song with a title that'll make you cringe: "Spic and Spanish."

**TOO MANY GIRLS:** All dressed up, Spic and Spanish, but I got no place to go / got some things I got to shooowwww!

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** The interesting thing is that as far as I know, Desi Arnaz never objected to these stereotypes. He went along with them. Why? it was profitable to go along with it. He was giving the audience what the audience wanted.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Rodgers and Hart wanted Desi, but he'd never acted, or heard of Rodgers and Hart, or even seen a Broadway show. Desi got the part anyway. He was cast opposite Diosa Costello, a Puerto Rican singer and dancer who performed with him at La Conga. Desi was riding a lucky streak. But while the musical was in rehearsals in Boston, he worried his luck might've run out. It all started with a sore toe.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** He realized up in Boston that he had a sore toe and it was turning kind of purple. So he goes to the doctor, doctors treating the toe, but then the doctor comes back with bad news. He hates to tell him this, but he has syphilis.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** In 1939, a syphilis diagnosis sounded like a death sentence. There was no penicillin back then. Al Capone, the father of Desi's high school buddy, had gotten the disease not long before—and it eventually killed him. And now a doctor was telling Desi he had it too.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** What he said to the doctor is I don't see how that could be. The girls at Polly's house are really clean. So, he's flipping out and not quite sure what to do. And then at a certain point doctor comes and says, oh, sorry, that was just a mistake. It turned out I had gotten the blood vials mixed up when I took your blood, it was some other guy. He said it was like one of the best days of his life, the day he learned that he did not have syphilis.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** When Too Many Girls finally opened on Broadway, Desi's big moment came at the end of the first act, when his character led the cast in a massive conga line. Van Johnson was Desi's understudy.

**VAN JOHNSON:** We get into rehearsals and we start learning the songs, I've always been crazy about bongos and samba, mambo, and it was just coming back into vogue, and when Desi did the first act finale, with playing the bongos, blew the roof off the theater in New York.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** On opening night, after the finale, Desi sped over to La Conga to play a couple of sets, then he and the crew stayed up waiting for the reviews to come in.

**DEBBY APPLGATE:** The joint was packed. Everyone's wearing white tails and white tie. Desi finishes his last set and then joins the table with all of his friends and colleagues to wait for the papers to arrive. Around four thirty in the morning, Polly Adler suddenly appears out of the crowd, and she's got a stack of papers in her arm, and she barrels over the table where they're sitting and as he put it, booms in that big, booming, deep voice of hers. "Cuban, you are the biggest fucking hit in town!"

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi celebrated the best way he knew how -- with an all-night romp at Polly Adler's. Desi Arnaz came to Hollywood the next year, 1940. RKO had bought the film rights to *Too Many Girls* and cast him to play Manuelito on the big screen. He was 23 years old, and in love for the first time—with a girl he called Freckles.

**LOU GORDON:** Weren't you in love with another girl at the time named Freckles? Desi: Yeah, Freckles yeah.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi didn't identify Freckles in his book. But the radio host Lou Gordon got him to reveal her real name: Renee deMarco.

**LOU GORDON:** She's a great dancer, wasn't she? and you're really in love with her? Very much so.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Renee deMarco was one half of a famous ballroom dance team called the Dancing deMarcos. She was already married to her much-older dance partner, Tony, but her heart was with Desi. And Desi felt that Freckles really got him. She understood that when he went out with other women - it wasn't serious. Freckles never nagged, and Desi intended to make her his wife. His publicist even leaked news of their romance to the press. But on his first day on set at RKO, fate showed Desi it had other plans. The screen adaptation of *Too Many Girls* did not include the entire Broadway cast, and it angered Desi when RKO replaced his Puerto Rican costar Diosa Costello with the white American actress Ann Miller.

**TOO MANY GIRLS:** Unless we can find a millionaire with three hundred dollahs cash!

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The show's main character was written as a wide-eyed ingenue named Consuelo Casey. For the movie version, the role went to a 28-year-old actress from Jamestown, New York, named Lucille Ball.

**TOO MANY GIRLS:** Maybe. Well dad, if you want to know the truth, there was a man.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The first time Desi remembers seeing Lucy, he was sitting with film's director named George Abbott. Lucy had been filming a movie called *Dance, Girl, Dance* on a nearby soundstage. She walked over, still in her costume: a flashy metallic dress and high heels. She was playing a burlesque queen named Bubbles

**DANCE GIRL DANCE:** Bubbles! Hello Madame, I ain't got an ounce of class, sugar, honest.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Who got into a brawl with another dancer. Lucy had a big black eye - part of her character's makeup.

**DANCE GIRL DANCE:** So here I am...

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Desi asked George Abott who the hell was that woman. George said -- that's Lucille Ball. She's playing Consuelo, the innocent college girl. Desi couldn't believe it. He told the story on the *Tonight Show* in 1976.

**DESI ARNAZ:** I said, she's going to be the ingenue? You're out of your mind. I said, there's no way you can put this girl back to play an ingenue, you know?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But the second time Desi saw Lucy - just hours later - well, that was different. Desi remembered every detail, even decades later. He remembered what time it was: five o'clock in the afternoon. He remembered exactly what he was doing: He and the piano player were rehearsing -- a song called "She Could Shake the Maracas," And he remembered everything about the woman who walked into the room at that moment.

**DESI ARNAZ:** She came in with a very lovely pair of yellow slacks and a tan sweater and blond hair-- she was a blond then--and, you know, and those big, beautiful blue eyes. And I said to the piano player, oh, man, that's a hunk of woman, you know? And he said, you met her, this morning. I said, no, I never saw her before in my life. He said sure that's Lucille Ball, That's the one that's --- I said that's Lucille Ball? He said, yes, but this time she came over, says hello Dizzy I said hold it, it's not Dizzy. She said, Daisy? No, that's a flower. I said, Desi. D-E-S-I. Oh, alright. I said, are you doing anything tonight? Because if you don't have anything to do tonight, how would you like to do to learn how to rumba?

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Gustavo Perez has thought a lot about this - what was it about Desi and Lucy that so instantly connected them in that moment? It's kinda why he started writing about Desi. Gustavo is Cuban, also married to an American woman, Marianne.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** I became interested in the I Love Lucy Show to learn how a Cuban man and an American woman make a life together. Marianne told me that when she met me, the only other Cuban she knew was Ricky Ricardo...and then she told me you're Ricky Ricardo with a Ph.D.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** Gustavo thinks that with Lucy and Desi - it was a case of opposites attract.

**GUSTAVO PEREZ:** He liked the fact that she was different from every woman that had met before, she liked the fact that he was different from every man she had met before. And I think sex had a lot to do with it. Because he could rumba standing up and he could rumba lying down.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** The chemistry was obvious to their co-stars, too. Van Johnson played a chorus boy in the film. This is from a PBS interview from 1999.

**VAN JOHNSON:** Well, you could see the fireworks and the sparks, they complemented each other, and she fell in love with him and his accent and his dark beauty. We saw it happen. It was just, they just clicked. Did you think it would last? Forever! Forever.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** On the next episode of The Plot Thickens, Lucy and Desi fight... over the phone.

**DESI ARNAZ AUDIOBOOK:** You Cuban sonofabitch, where were you all last night? What are you trying to do, lay every goddamned one of those chorus girls in Too Many Girls? No wonder they picked you for the show!' Then she'd hang up on me.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** And they fight in person.

**LUCILLE BALL:** I have a very quick temper. And I have been known to throw a few things.

**BEN MANKIEWICZ:** But they fight the hardest to be together...in the same town... at the same time.

**FRED BALL:** I can't tell you how tough it was, but I know it was tough because they weren't together.

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

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