I LOVE LUCY
1951–1957
WOMEN AT WORK IN THE 1950’s
It dominated the ratings for most of its six-year run, and transformed the way television shows were made. “Job Switching,” the premiere episode of the show’s blockbuster second season, may be I Love Lucy’s most famous episode—and it is certainly one of its funniest. But “Job Switching” is more than a television landmark; it is also a product of its time. The episode’s deceptively simple premise—housewives Lucy and Ethel get jobs at a chocolate factory while their husbands stay home to do housework—offers rich insight into the roles that middle-class men and women were expected to play in 1950s America.

Left: In the April 28, 1952, episode, “The Freezer,” Lucy and Ethel get two sides of beef and a giant walk-in meat freezer. Lucy walks in and can’t get out, becoming a “human Popsicle” before Ricky and Ethel rescue her.
THE LUCY PHENOMENON

I LOVE LUCY SLID QUIETLY INTO THE CBS SCHEDULE ON MONDAY, OCTOBER 15, 1951, AT 9:00 P.M.—THE LAST THING IT EVER DID QUIETLY.

The show exploded into a national phenomenon. Six months after its premiere, more than ten million of the country’s fifteen million television sets tuned in to a Lucy episode—the first time so many viewers had watched a single program. Lucy ended its first season at third place in the overall ratings, and was the runaway top-rated show for four of the next five years.

According to popular myth, Lucy’s Monday broadcasts brought America to a grinding halt. The telephone company reported that phone usage dropped dramatically during the show’s half hour. In Chicago, the department store Marshall Field’s switched its evening hours from Monday to Thursday, a change it announced in a display-window sign reading “We love Lucy, too, so we’re closing on Monday nights.” When presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson’s campaign pitch cut into Lucy’s airtime in the fall of 1952, angry viewers flooded his office with hate mail. CBS reported that a record 44 million people watched the January 19, 1952, episode, in which Lucy gives birth to Little Ricky. And Lucy was a merchandising bonanza, inspiring licensed products ranging from bedroom suites and pajamas to toys, games, dolls, lingerie, and Desi dressing gowns.

Above: TV Guide, April 3, 1953. The fictional birth of Little Ricky and the actual birth of Desi Arnaz, Jr., were timed to coincide. The double births pushed Lucy’s popularity to an all-time high and set off a new wave of product licensing that inspired the epithet, “Lucy’s $50,000,000 baby.”
The original conception for *Lucy* was something quite different from what it became, and the show took its final shape only after a difficult period of development marked by several clashes between Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, its creators and stars, and CBS and sponsor Philip Morris.

A film actress since 1933, Lucille Ball was a movie star by the early 1940s. By the late 1940s, she had become disenchanted with her film career, and in 1947 she took a job as the female lead—a scatterbrained housewife married to Richard Denning—in the CBS radio program *My Favorite Husband* (1948–1951). The show was a success, and it significantly broadened Ball’s fame and appeal. In 1950, CBS told her that it wanted to transfer the program to television, adding that Jell-O would continue its sponsorship only if Ball and Denning remained as the leads. Ball, however, saw an opportunity to salvage her crumbling ten-year-old marriage to bandleader Desi Arnaz. She told CBS that she would do the show only if Arnaz took the Denning role. CBS and Jell-O balked because Arnaz was Cuban. CBS was sure that viewers would never accept him, with his thick Cuban accent, as Ball’s on-screen husband, despite their marriage in real life.

Setting out to prove the network wrong, the Arnazes formed Desilu Productions and created a stage show—essentially a vaudeville act about a movie star and her bandleader husband—that they toured around the country. The show’s tremendous success made the network more receptive to the idea of a Lucy/Desi show, but it still refused to finance production. Instead, CBS offered to sell airtime to the Arnazes if they produced the show themselves. They borrowed some money, shot a test film, and then went out to find the all-important sponsor.

At this early stage of television history, advertisers were much more powerful than they are now, and sometimes even owned the shows they sponsored. Such programs would have only one advertiser, its name often part of the title. *Texaco Star Theater* (1948–1956), *Colgate Comedy Hour* (1950–1955), and *Philo Television Playhouse* (1948–1955) were all on the schedule in 1952. Advertisers exercised direct control over the creation and content of programs, a role that now belongs solely to networks, though the economic imperative of attracting advertising dollars still heavily influences programming decisions.

Half a dozen ad agencies turned down the Arnazes’ test film before it landed at Philip Morris. The cigarette giant signed on, and production was slated to begin. Everything looked swell until the Arnazes’ desire to stay in Southern California bumped up against established methods of television production and the limitations of early television technology.

In 1951, most television programs were broadcast live from New York City. Videotape wasn’t introduced until 1956, and television cameras were, in effect, transmitters, not recorders. A television program played in a studio and went into the camera and out over the airwaves or coaxial cables as a broadcast signal. However, in 1951, live broadcasts could reach only as far as Chicago via coaxial cable. For television stations in the earlier time zones in the West and regions of the East not linked to New York by cable, it was therefore necessary to record the live program for later broadcast. This recording was done on film. A camera set up in the studio filmed the program as it appeared on a studio television monitor, just as if you were to film the image off your TV set. The result was called a kinescope. Grainy and warped around the edges, the picture quality was worse than the original broadcast image.

The Arnazes refused to move to New York to do *Lucy* live, instead proposing to stay in Hollywood and film the show prior to broadcast. CBS and Philip Morris liked the idea but not the additional cost it entailed, and the Arnazes took pay cuts. In exchange, the network and sponsor gave them total ownership of the *I Love Lucy* programs. The high-quality films proved to be wrong. The show’s runaway success, and the ability to rebroadcast the episodes exactly as first aired, made Desilu Productions the first television empire and the Arnazes multimillionaires.
PRODUCTION METHODS

I LOVE LUCY MADE TELEVISION HISTORY IN NEARLY EVERYTHING IT DID. BUT PERHAPS ITS GREATEST INNOVATION WAS TECHNICAL—A NEW PRODUCTION METHOD THAT GREW OUT OF THE DECISION TO SHOOT THE PROGRAM ON FILM AND THE “PROBLEM” THAT LUCILLE BALL WAS AT HER BEST IN FRONT OF A LIVE AUDIENCE.

Before Lucy, no one had ever tried to shoot a sitcom on film in front of a live audience. To do so meant that the show had to be acted in narrative sequence, like a stage play, so the audience could follow the story. Since one camera could never be mobile enough to capture the changing points of view that are the hallmark, and in large part the appeal, of moving-image media, Desi Arnaz hired legendary cinematographer Karl Freund to devise a multicamera system of filming Lucy. The system Freund developed used three cameras to film the half-hour show in approximately one hour. There were several pauses to allow the actors to change costumes and the technical crews to adjust lighting and reset the cameras.

I Love Lucy was filmed in front of a live audience at 8:00 on Friday evenings. Lucy began production on a five-day schedule starting Monday, but as cast and crew became familiar with the routine, they shortened it to four days. On Tuesday, the actors gathered around a rehearsal table for a script reading with the writers, who made changes based on the actors’ interpretations and input from them and the director. On Wednesday, after memorizing their lines, the actors rehearsed on the set without cameras or camera crew. On Thursday, the camera and electrical crews came in to work on lighting and camera movements. The cast then entered to rehearse the show again, while camera placement, movement, and lighting were fine-tuned.

Thursday night, the actors went through a cameraless dress rehearsal for the benefit of network officials and the writers, who often made further revisions to the dialogue and action. On Friday afternoon, the entire cast and crew rehearsed again, and at 4:30 did a final dress rehearsal with the cameras. The audience came in around 7:30, and Lucy went before the cameras at 8:00. Because of the careful planning and numerous rehearsals, retakes were seldom necessary. Over the weekend, a film editor assembled the program by selecting the best shots from the three cameras. Prints, which cost approximately $30 each, were made and sent to CBS outlets around the country in time for the Monday airdate.

I Love Lucy started a trend toward filming television shows, which soon made Hollywood, where the film studios and other facilities were, the center of television production. Lucy’s three-camera system was copied almost immediately, and won Desilu and Karl Freund numerous awards for technical achievement. Desilu’s multicamera system and four- or five-day shooting schedule remained standard practice in sitcom production for nearly five decades.
**“JOB SWITCHING”**

THE PREMIERE EPISODE OF THE SHOW’S SECOND SEASON, “JOB SWITCHING” IS A RICH MINE OF SIGNS, SYMBOLS, AND LANGUAGE THAT CONTAINS A BROAD EXPRESSION OF ROLES Assigned TO MEN AND WOMEN IN 1950S AMERICA.

A deft visual and verbal shorthand propels the plot of the episode—telling the story in the less than thirty minutes of available airtime. That code language holds the key to the show’s message then and its meaning today.

The episode’s first scene establishes both its premise and the sharp gender boundaries that, when blurred, will be the source of the comedy. Ricky bursts into the Ricardo apartment and confronts Lucy with a check to the beauty parlor that she has bounced. The tone of the ensuing argument makes their husband/wife relationship feel more like that between a parent and child. A stern, paternal Ricky announces his discovery of her misdeed and demands an explanation. Her sheepish reply, spoken like a question, is “You don’t give me enough money?” That explanation provokes a furious volley of orders and questions from Ricky, to which Lucy responds, “Yes, sir,” “No, sir,” and “Yes, sir. Yes, sir.” Fred and Ethel, the Ricardos’ upstairs neighbors, enter mid-argument, and Fred defines the territory we have entered: “When it comes to money, there are two kinds of people—the earners and the spenders—or as they are more popularly known, husbands and wives.” Lucy rises to the challenge, proposes they switch roles, and pulls a reluctant Ethel along with her. Ricky and Fred, confident in their ability to lie around the house all day playing canasta, a popular card game at the time, jovially indulge them.

As the episode progresses, the characters switch aspects of each other’s identities—costume, behavior, and tone of voice—as well as their jobs. Inscene two, we see Ricky in the kitchen preparing breakfast, but the first thing we notice—the audience’s laughter tells us they noticed it too—is the flowery apron he’s wearing. Ricky and Fred, confident in their ability to lie around the house all day playing canasta, a popular card game at the time, jovially indulge them. Lucy strides into the kitchen for breakfast, in a reversal of the usual sequence, just as Ricky finishes putting out the food. Though she doesn’t wear Ricky’s clothes, she does pick up some of his behavior. She sits in his place at the breakfast table, reads the morning paper in such a way that it blots him out, and ignores his questions. Ricky gets the message, but the larger point is the way the sequence turns the tables on Ricky, making him the subservient one. And then he gets in trouble—he accepts Lucy’s compliments on the delicious breakfast, only to find out that Ricky ordered it from the corner drugstore after ruining a dozen eggs trying to cook it himself. It is the first of many failures on both sides of the job switching experiment.

The largest and most interesting failure belongs to Lucy and Ethel. The two women are far less prepared for their foray into the workforce than the men are for their domestic chores. Ricky and Fred are at least familiar with the kitchen

because it is not a male function.

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and know what an ironing board looks like, but Lucy and Ethel have washed up on truly foreign shores when they visit the Acme Employment Agency. Their visit is certainly funny, but much of the humor comes from the genuine looks of insecurity, bewilderment, and fear that cloud Lucy’s and Ethel’s faces. They have no training, no experience—as Ethel says, “We don’t know how to do anything.” Being women limits their options as well. The man at the agency rattles off a list of positions that includes the standard assortment of acceptable jobs for women. “I have a lot of stenographic jobs available,” he announces cheerily.

All looks grim until he reveals two openings for candy makers. Lucy responds intuitively and enthusiastically to the suggestion, her face brightening immediately, almost like a child’s, as she says, “Oh, that’s it. That’s our specialty.” Lucy doesn’t really know anything about candy making, but she is confident because she senses familiar territory—domestic territory. With its obvious associations with cooking and its more subtle associations with a major preoccupation of childhood—and a symbol of childishness—the job that takes Lucy and Ethel out of the domestic sphere essentially returns them to it; the candy [factory] is called Kramer’s Kandy Kitchen. Many jobs commonly held by women in the 1950s, like nurse, housekeeper, cook, and teacher, were extensions of women’s domestic duties.

Despite its name, Kramer’s Kandy Kitchen is not the place for the 1950s conception of a middle-class married woman. The factory’s lady boss—severe and angular, with close-cropped hair, no makeup, a voice like a bark, and no apparent sense of humor—is almost military in demeanor. She addresses Lucy and Ethel either individually by their last names as if they were men or collectively as “girls.” They learn about their jobs in an “indoctrination session,” and they wear identical plain uniforms, topped by hats that conceal their hair. The message taking shape is that women begin to lose their femininity at the point at which they enter the working world.

Perhaps the most interesting character at the candy factory, and maybe in all of “Job Switching,” is Lucy’s coworker in the dipping department. This woman is not only thoroughly defeminized but dehumanized as well, to the point that she seems literally to have lost her senses. She never speaks; she doesn’t acknowledge Lucy’s entrance; and she is utterly oblivious to Lucy’s attempt at conversation. Her particular task—form balls of dough with one hand while dipping them in chocolate with the other—would be difficult for most people, on the order of simultaneously rubbing your stomach and patting your head, but she performs it effortlessly. Lucy, comically flailing away next to her, is clearly incapable of it. When Lucy, trying to swat a fly, accidentally slathers the coworker’s face with chocolate, the response is automatic and primitive—she slathers Lucy right back.

In the second factory scene, the boss reassigns Lucy and Ethel to wrap chocolates on the conveyor belt. Lucy now responds to the boss with a guttural, “Yes, sir.” The conveyor belt, of course, moves too fast for them. They compensate by stuffing the unwrapped chocolates into their hats, their bras, and, most significantly, their mouths. Lucy and Ethel are now back where they began—the sign on the door behind Lucy reads “Kitchen.” They are literal consumers who have scammed their way into an industrial system where they don’t belong, wreaking general havoc and destroying the crowning symbol of American industrial achievement—the conveyor belt. They practically eat the factory.

The episode ends the only way it could have in 1952, with Lucy and Ethel fired, Ricky and Fred’s dinner an epic disaster that almost ruins the Ricardo kitchen, and all four of them back in their usual clothes. Everyone acknowledges their failures, and we are safely returned to the status quo. The most notable aspect of this brief, almost perfunctory scene is that Ricky and Fred leave their wives a note in which they again address them as “girls.” And the men give each of their girls a big box of chocolates. It’s a joke, and it’s funny, but it is also true that Lucy and Ethel have come home to resume their roles as oversized children pledged to love, cherish, cook, clean, dust, vacuum, honor, and obey.
HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE 1952 WORLD OF “JOB SWITCHING” REPRESENTS AN ERA MANY AMERICANS LOOK BACK TO WITH NOSTALGIA.

Postwar America

Lucy and Ricky’s apartment, complete with the latest appliances, shows the material wealth middle-class Americans were accumulating in the aftermath of World War II. Like other television couples of the era, the Ricardos and Mertzes epitomized the ideal of the American family—breadwinning husband and homemaking wife—a norm “Job Switching” inverts for laughs but ultimately affirms. The unlocked apartment doors and casual visits by the neighbors suggest a simpler, safer world of shared values—values that were white and middle-class, despite Ricky’s Cuban background. “Job Switching” is a window onto the ’50s Americans want to remember, real enough in its way, but the popularity of the show, then and now, has also preserved a view of American life that ignores the traumas of the early ’50s, such as the cold war and accompanying Red Scare, and the hot war in Korea, and also omits those Americans—black, poor, Hispanic, Native American—who didn’t fit the idealized pattern.

Post–World War II America was, by many measures, at the height of its power and influence in the world. The United States had led its allies to a hard-fought victory against the Germans and Japanese in 1945; convinced other countries to join the newly formed United Nations, located in New York; provided postwar aid through the Marshall Plan to get Western Europe back on its feet; and successfully defended the Greek government against Communist insurgents. No other country came close to the U.S. in military spending or conventional weapons capability.

On the home front, the members of the “Greatest Generation” were reaping the rewards of their efforts. Millions took advantage of government programs that provided college educations to war veterans, fueling the explosion of a new middle class. Home from the war, soldiers married and moved to burgeoning suburbs, some with mass-produced homes affordable to newly affluent buyers, who were predominantly white, married, and young. The resources once devoted to producing war materiel were turned to making products for consumers whose real wages, on average, were rising. By 1952, Americans were enjoying the highest standard of living in the world. They equipped their new dream houses with the latest labor-saving devices—washing machines, dryers, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators—and, of
The Cold War

In 1952, the U.S. was at war in Korea—a war that commentators now refer to as the Forgotten War. During the three-year conflict to preserve the independence of South Korea from the Communist North Korea, more than 36,000 American military personnel died, and 100,000 more were wounded. The war was just the latest front in the cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union. That contest for worldwide hegemony began in 1946 and did not really end until 1989, with the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe. In 1952, many Americans feared the Soviets might be winning. The U.S. seemed to lack clout commensurate with its world leadership—in 1949, it had “lost” China to the Communists, according to propaganda widely accepted in the American press, and then the Soviets developed their own nuclear bomb, with missiles to deliver it. The threat of nuclear war was ever-present. It’s hard to recapture the fear Americans lived with in the midst of their ’50s prosperity—fear of destruction raining on them from the sky. It inspired schools to teach children to hide under their desks in case of nuclear attack, and later in the decade led to a craze for useless but impressive-looking fallout shelters.

Many Americans were also afraid that “godless Communism” would spread from its half of the world and smother their freedoms. Politicians made their careers exploiting voters’ paranoia about Communist infiltration of American institutions—from the State Department to Hollywood. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy first discovered the political benefits of making wild accusations of Communist influence on those institutions, and the fledgling congressman (later president) Richard M. Nixon first made a name for himself as one such “red-baiter.” Somehow, the lure of Communism seemed so potent that voters believed, among other things, that allowing performers with hidden Communist sympathies to write for or appear on American movie and TV screens would undermine “true” American values.

Congressional committees demanded that targeted Americans defend their political beliefs at public hearings. Government employees lost their jobs; screenwriters were blacklisted; teachers in thirty-two states had to take loyalty oaths. Even Lucille Ball was not immune to scrutiny. In 1953, Congressman

I Love Lucy

In 1952, Lucy Ricardo moved to the suburbs, like many middle-class Americans of the era. The new suburban communities really were ethnically and racially homogeneous, and many baby boomers spent their childhoods sheltered from the fears and injustices that permeated American life in the ’50s.

Women and Family Life

Though Lucy and other shows presented the division of male and female roles at home as timeless, the ’50s actually represented a reversal in a long American movement toward greater rights for women. The war years had seen tremendous new opportunities for women as men joined the military. Labor shortages in wartime industries allowed women to fill jobs previously considered too rigorous for them. The media heralded female riveters and welders in defense plants as patriots. After the war, most women lost their high-paying, skilled jobs to returning veterans. A backlash began in the early 1950s and the arrival in the mainstream of feminism—itself a reaction to the stifling attitudes of the ’50s. Family life, which had been interrupted by the war, became the focus of American culture. As Betty Friedman later wrote, “The suburban housewife was the dream image of the young American woman...She was healthy, beautiful, educated. concerned only about her husband, her children, and her home.”

Psychologists, educators, magazine writers, even moviemakers and advertisers of the ’50s all agreed that no job was more exciting, more necessary, or more rewarding than that of housewife and mother. Any woman who wanted more from life than domesticity—seemed neurotic and unfeminine. Schools taught girls typing, cooking, and etiquette, while boys took classes in carpentry and auto mechanics. The percentage of women in college was smaller than it had been in the ’20s or ’30s, and the number of women pursuing advanced degrees also declined. If women had to work—and of course, many of them did—the jobs available to them were low-paying “women’s work.” Women were typically cleaners, secretaries, receptionists, and nurses; they still maintained full responsibility for child care and domestic chores. By the end of the decade, potential customers.

In the political and cultural climate of 1952, the popular “safe” subject was wholesome family values. White, Anglo-Saxon nuclear families dominated the airwaves on such shows as Father Knows Best (1954–1960). TV wives were zany and submissive, devoted to their husbands, their children, and their home. "godless Communism" would spread from its half of the world and smother their freedoms. Politicians made their careers exploiting voters’ paranoia about Communist infiltration of American institutions—from the State Department to Hollywood. Senator Joseph R. McCarthy first discovered the political benefits of making wild accusations of Communist influence on those institutions, and the fledgling congressman (later president) Richard M. Nixon first made a name for himself as one such “red-baiter.” Somehow, the lure of Communism seemed so potent that voters believed, among other things, that allowing performers with hidden Communist sympathies to write for or appear on American movie and TV screens would undermine “true” American values.

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I Love Lucy was a national phenomenon in 1952. What do you think made it so popular? Can you think of any show that is on television today that is a “national phenomenon”? If so, how is the show—and the popular response to the show—similar to or different from I Love Lucy?

CBS originally refused to cast Desi Arnaz as Lucille Ball’s husband. Why? If I Love Lucy were being made today, do you think the network would resist casting Arnaz? Why or why not?

According to the guide, “the characters switch aspects of each other’s identities,” as well as their jobs. What does this mean? What examples does the guide give? Is the “job switching” experiment successful?
Screening America is a curriculum-based education program that uses films and television episodes to assist in the teaching of English, social studies, and English as a second language.

Gail Sussman Marcus, history consultant.

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