

Being the Ricardos: Aaron Sorkin plays fast and loose with the history of the Hollywood Red Scare

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Written and directed by Aaron Sorkin.

Aaron Sorkin's *Being the Ricardos* focuses on a week in the lives of comic performers Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz and their hit television series *I Love Lucy*, broadcast from 1951 to 1957.

Sorkin (writer-creator of *The West Wing*, writer of *Social Network*, director of *The Trial of the Chicago 7*) is a capable, liberal-minded screenwriter and director. His new film indicates that he knows a great deal about the inner workings—and pitfalls—of network television production, but it also exposes an ignorance or a willful dishonesty in relation to big historical questions.

Being the Ricardos begins and ends with events connected to the Hollywood Red Scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s, during which left-wing actors, writers, directors and producers were hounded out of the film industry by the hundreds. Many others were silenced, or openly renounced their previous views. This was “scoundrel time.”

As Sorkin's movie opens, the cast and crew of *I Love Lucy* learn that gossip columnist and smear artist Walter Winchell has made an obvious reference to Lucille Ball on his weekly radio broadcast: “The House Committee on Un-American Activities [HUAC] is holding secret sessions in California. The most popular of all television stars was confronted with her membership in the Communist Party.” Of course, Lucy (Nicole Kidman) knows he is talking about her, and not, as she jokingly suggests, “Imogene Coca” (a comic actress on the then popular *Your Show of Shows* with Sid Caesar).

Sorkin takes artistic liberties with the timeline in order to pack a number of crises into the same few days. Winchell's show was actually aired in September 1953, but the new film places the events a year earlier, during the second season of *I Love Lucy*. At the time, the situation comedy was the most popular television program in the US, with an astonishing 67.3 percent of all households with television sets tuning in (the highest ever average rating for any single season of a television show).

I Love Lucy introduced a number of innovations, such as the use of three cameras, which allowed it to be performed in front of a live audience. Desi Arnaz persuaded famed cinematographer and film director Austrian-born Karl Freund to be the cinematographer for *I Love Lucy*. Freund and his production team are credited with the “flat lighting” system, eliminating shadows and making it possible for the use of various cameras without having to stop between shots.

The cross-cultural marriage between Ball and Arnaz, a Cuban émigré, was also unusual for the day and caused some nervousness at CBS.

Although most of *Being the Ricardos* avoids directly addressing Winchell's claims, hovering in the air throughout the week is the possibility of Ball's career being destroyed by any connection to communism.

Sorkin plays with the date of the events presumably because he wants to

introduce the issue of Ball's pregnancy with her second child, which occurred in 1952. US television, like Hollywood filmmaking, did not allow that condition to be seen or talked about. Arnaz (Javier Bardem) insists that Lucy be visibly pregnant on the show, much to the chagrin of head writer Jess Oppenheimer (Tony Hale), convinced that the network will never allow such a thing. (In the end, when “Lucy Goes to the Hospital”—to have her baby—aired in January 1953, 74 percent of American households with television sets watched it, making it one of the most widely watched shows in history.)

Also loaded into the week's drama is the matter of the truth or non-truth of reports about Arnaz's philandering, which were appearing in scandal sheets of the day.

The series scriptwriters—Oppenheimer, Madelyn Pugh and Bob Carroll Jr.—appear in two guises, as their younger selves in 1952, played by Hale, Alia Shawkat and Jake Lacy, respectively. Then, as older people, they function as a kind of Greek chorus narrating (and interpreting) the earlier events, now played by John Rubinstein, Linda Lavin and Ronny Cox, respectively.

Again, Sorkin understands something about television production. His script effectively captures the inevitable internecine rivalries—between Lucy and Vivian Vance (Nina Arianda), for example—and squabbling among cast and crew members. A number of the segments featuring the scriptwriters in the 1950s are sharp and revealing. J.K. Simmons as the gruff William Frawley is an empathetic presence.

Being the Ricardos accurately points to the heavy-handed interventions of network bosses and corporate sponsors. Sorkin knows firsthand the insecurities of the writers and actors. All of this is fine and even amusingly done at times, including the black-and-white flashback of Lucy's madcap grape-stomping episode in Italy. Kidman, Bardem and Arianda create reasonable facsimiles of their real-life counterparts.

In regard to the secondary and tertiary issues that arise during the week in question, the film presents a well-formed picture. However, when it comes to the questions that truly count, the life-and-death matter of the Hollywood blacklist and of anti-communism in America, the film falls apart and fails its audience completely.

Objections to HUAC's activities and features of the “anti-red” hysteria are raised by various cast members. Vance points to the absurd fact that when seven-year-old actor Rusty Hamer, a cast member on *Make Room for Daddy* (Danny Thomas' sitcom), “signed his contract—or the guardian, whoever signs the contract for him—he had to sign a loyalty pledge. Did anyone know that?” This is a fleeting reference.

It is impossible to discuss the film seriously without referring to its conclusion, so let the reader beware.

Just prior to the actual filming of the week's episode of *I Love Lucy*, a blaring newspaper headline appears (Lucy: “You can see that headline

from outer space”) proclaiming, “LUCILLE BALL A RED.” In the film’s denouement, Arnaz, in front of a studio audience, takes a phone call from FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who assures the cast, crew and audience that Ball has been “cleared” of all charges.

Arnaz did in fact appear before the audience and quip that “The only thing red about Lucy is her hair, and even that is not legitimate” (a line not used in the movie), but the phone call to Hoover, one of the most villainous public figures in American history, is an astonishing “embellishment.” We, along with those present in the theater in 1952, are expected to experience immense relief that the FBI has given Ball a clean political bill of health. The moment is shameful, set in the midst of the Hoover-FBI terror campaign against political opposition, including the execution of the Rosenbergs.

“Kinetically gifted” Lucille Ball (1911–1989) was the daughter of a telephone lineman, who died from typhoid fever when she was not yet four. Her childhood was emotionally and economically difficult. Ball’s grandfather, Fred Hunt, a retired railway worker and a fervent socialist, played a large role in her upbringing in the Jamestown, New York area. According to an obviously disapproving Ball biographer, Stefan Kanfer (*Ball of Fire*), “Hunt’s favorite philosopher was Eugene V. Debs, and he was forever booming the virtues of that fighter against economic injustice—a man ‘baptised in Socialism.’”

In the mid-1930s, on the invitation of Ball, by this time an aspiring film actress, Hunt moved to California with the rest of her family members. He was by now a supporter of the Communist Party. Kanfer writes that Hunt’s “favorite periodical” was the CP’s *Daily Worker*: “Seated behind a desk, Fred Hunt gave political lectures to his new friends, the milkman, the trash collector, and various retirees he met on his Ogden Drive constitutionals. Overhearing the talks, his granddaughter was amused to see that the old man’s radical leanings had been brought to Los Angeles intact.”

In any event, Ball listed her party affiliation as “Communist” when she registered to vote in 1936 and 1938. In 1936, she sponsored a Communist Party candidate, signing a certificate that stated: “I am registered as affiliated with the Communist Party.” The same year, according to records of the California Secretary of State, the Communist Party of California appointed her to the state’s Central Committee.

Former CP member, writer Rena Vale, who later became an anti-Communist investigator for various government bodies in Sacramento and Washington D.C., claimed that Ball had allowed her home to host new party members’ classes.

Unlike those forced to appear before HUAC in public and be humiliated or browbeaten, Ball was one of those “friendly testifiers” who was able to meet with committee investigators in private as a means of making a deal to save her career. She met with William Wheeler, a HUAC investigator, on September 4, 1953.

In *The Inquisition in Hollywood—Politics in the Film Community, 1930–60*, authors Larry Ceplair and Steven Englund write that “Lucille Ball donned her famous persona—the scatterbrained ‘Lucy Ricardo’—in order to wriggle out of damaging allegations about her political sympathies. Ball was spared a recital of names by her obvious apoliticism and obsequiousness—she swore that she was never a member of the Party but had registered as a Communist voter in 1936 to please her Socialist grandfather. She also swore that she had not cast a vote for a Communist candidate.”

And wriggle she did in her testimony: “I have never done anything for Communists, to my knowledge, at any time. I have never contributed money or attended a meeting or ever had anything to do with people connected with it, if to my knowledge they were. I am not a Communist now. I never have been. I never wanted to be. Nothing in the world could ever change my mind. At no time in my life have I ever been in sympathy with anything that even faintly resembled it. I was always opposed to how

my grandfather felt about any other way this country should be run. I thought things were just fine the way they were.”

No doubt much of this was untrue. Ball was known to be a Communist Party sympathizer and a reader of the *Daily Worker* in the 1930s. Her views, along with those of many others in the film community, might well have changed by the early 1950s. When she sold her soul to the devil in 1953, however, it inevitably meant that her art would never develop beyond a certain point. There is humor, even today, in *I Love Lucy*, there is also a great deal of regressive and conformist nonsense, which the forceful, energetic Lucille Ball of *The Big Street* (1942), *The Dark Corner* (1946) or *Lured* (1947) would not have had time for.

The pressures on popular actors in particular were enormous during the Cold War, and the Stalinists’ own Popular Front-pro-Roosevelt politics had rendered the Hollywood Left entirely unprepared for the onslaught. This does not make the “wriggling” any more attractive.

There are other historical and ideological issues. Desi Arnaz (1917–1986) came from an extremely privileged background. Kanfer writes that he “was the only son of a prominent and moneyed Cuban politician. Desiderio II was not only the mayor of Santiago, a major port city; he also owned three large ranches with scores of employees. Desi’s maternal grandfather was a cofounder of the Bacardi Rum company.”

However, in 1933, a mass uprising of the Cuban working class and rural poor led to the ouster of the hated Machado dictatorship, with power ultimately falling into the hands of political forces under the thumb of the military led by Fulgencio Batista, a future US-backed strongman. “Politicians who had been close to the president were marked for execution or imprisonment, and their lands were confiscated. Desiderio II was placed under arrest and jailed, but in the chaos of *la revolución*, Desi and his mother, uncle, and cousin escaped the newly empowered Batista police force.” (Kanfer)

Sorkin has Arnaz, in answer to Ball’s question as to why he came to Hollywood, assert: “The Bolsheviks burned my house down.” He is also given an opportunity later to denounce Lucy’s “Grandpa Fred” and his views. (Arnaz once declared that his wife “has never been a Communist, and what’s more, she hates every Communist in Hollywood.”)

As with the Hoover episode, Sorkin and, here, Bardem are incapable of shedding a critical light on these processes and conceptions. It would be perfectly possible from an artistic standpoint to present Arnaz sympathetically as a human being, while rejecting his social views, i.e., to dramatize and work through the contradiction.

Unfortunately, the talented Bardem plays this right-wing anticommunist in an entirely convincing manner, leaving his personal qualms to come out merely in interviews. Bardem told NPR, for example, that he was far from sharing Arnaz’s politics: “He [Arnaz] was a person who supported Nixon, for example. He was very against communism, as you can imagine. ... My family comes from a different background. My uncle [filmmaker Juan Antonio Bardem] was a very important ... figure of the Communist Party in Spain. ... My mom ... She was very active in the Communist Party. It’s not that I’m a communist, but I’ve been very outspoken against the extreme right that is raising up in Europe and especially in Spain...”

“And still, I adore him [Arnaz] and I loved him. We don’t have to cancel each other. We have to try to understand each other. And once I understood Desi Arnaz, I was madly in love.” This is not an artistically serious or principled approach. The unnecessary idealization of Arnaz on screen simply creates confusion.

Sorkin has talents, but he works within a film community still dominated and held back by anticommunism. Various reviews and news articles refer to Ball having been “slandered” by being called a communist! Capitalism, already hated by the vast majority of the world’s population, is in the process of discrediting itself with tens and hundreds of millions more. Writers and directors like Sorkin are either out of step or apologists for the existing social order.



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