

Lucy's Gift To TV

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Lucille Ball's comedic talent was her strongest show business suit, but behind the scenes, her gutsy, pioneering spirit helped the fledgling television industry come of age.

Miss Ball, who died April 26, 1989, at 77, helped to develop that enduring TV staple, the situation comedy, and with her former husband, the late Desi Arnaz, established one of television's first major independent studios.

Desilu became one of the most powerful forces in early television. Besides the "I Love Lucy" series, it turned out some of the top comedy shows of the 1950s and 60s, including "December Bride," "Our Miss Brooks" and "Make Room for Daddy."

Desilu, which had taken over RKO Studios, also produced successful action-adventure programs such as "Star Trek" and "Mission: Impossible."

As testament to their value as prime-time stars, Miss Ball and Arnaz signed an \$8 million, no-cancellation, two-year contract with CBS in 1953 — the largest in television history at the time and a figure scarcely touched today.

Technical innovations included using Hollywood's motion picture facilities and filming the "I Love Lucy" episodes for later broadcast — a bold decision that changed the face of television in the days before videotape. The technique still is used today.

Miss Ball needed an audience to be funny, recalled Harry Ackerman, who was CBS vice president for programming in Hollywood at the time.

"When she started the television show I insisted that she have an audience," Ackerman said. "Lucy was a great clown, but she could only work successfully in front of people."

The multiple-camera filming produced another dividend. "I Love Lucy" episodes were resalable as reruns and Desilu was the first studio to profit from program syndication. The various Lucy series continue to be seen in more than 80 countries.

Miss Ball and Arnaz divorced in 1960, and he sold the actress his share in the company for \$3 million. With a shrewd business sense, Miss Ball built it into a major TV production company and in 1967 sold it to Gulf & Western Industries Inc. for \$17 million.

The couple stopped making weekly "I Love Lucy" shows in 1957 in favor of monthly hourlong specials. In 1961, Miss Ball married nightclub comic Gary Morton, who became her executive producer, and she remained on television for another 12 years in the weekly "Here's Lucy" and "The Lucy Show."

"The biggest gamble she took was when she went on without Desi," said Michael Dann, then head of programming for CBS. "There was absolute amazement when she became just as big a star as before. In her career, that had to be her biggest challenge."