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Pepito's comedic legacy

Clown's 'Lucy' archive at auction

By Ben Baeder , Staff Writer

LA MIRADA – Tucked in a tiny back room in the basement of the Biola University library is a very strange collection.

It includes two bicycles a tiny one and a huge one. Sitting on a metal cabinet is a clown puppet so dusty that it turns a person's hands black just to touch it.

Filed in a cardboard box are records from a Catholic private school in Spain. Piled on shelves are yellowing newspaper clippings announcing children's theater productions.

The collection is the remnant of the estate of Jose "Pepito, the Spanish Clown" Perez and his wife, Joanne, who helped write the pilot episode of "I Love Lucy" and were some of the closest confidants of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz.

Old newspaper articles even claimed that Jose was once the official jester to King Alonso of Spain.

Now, everything the eccentric pair owned belongs to Biola University.

"It may not have been the biggest estate ever donated, but it was certainly the most unusual," said Adam Morris, the school's senior director of development.

The college also benefited from the donation of the couple's large Victorian-style house in Santa Ana, which will be sold.

But Biola officials hope they can also profit from the upcoming auction of Perez's items associated with Lucy and Desi, including letters and photographs addressed to the couple and the trick cello Lucy used in the show's pilot episode.

The items are scheduled to be sold at an auction called "Profiles in History" on Sept. 29 in Beverly Hills.

Other items will be kept at the school as part of the college's mass-media collection.

It was Joanne who, through a friend, approached Biola officials about donating the couple's collection to the school.

Jose, who was born in Spain and came to the United States in 1921, died in 1975. The couple had no children together. As Joanne's health began to fail a few years ago, she asked a friend about estate planning.

The friend had planned to donate to Biola, and Joanne wanted to do the same.

Morris was assigned to her estate, and the two struck up a friendship.

Every time Morris went to the house, he said, Joanne wore an evening dress, even in the middle of the day.

The 5-foot-tall, 80-pound woman regaled him with

(Staff Photo by Keith Durlinger)

Photos of Jose Escobar "Pepito" Perez and his wife Joan Perez were left with their estate left to Biola University by his wife, Joan Perez. Perez, known as Pepito the Spanish Clown, wrote the pilot for "I Love Lucy" that never aired. Pepito and His wife Joan Perez are shown in a performance photo at left.

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(Staff Photo by Keith Durlinger)

Items used by Jose Escobar "Pepito" Perez during his vaudeville acts were donated to Biola University by the estate of his wife, Joan Perez. Perez, known as Pepito the Spanish Clown, wrote the pilot for "I Love Lucy" that never aired.

stories about the early days of Hollywood.

Jose, who looked a lot like another Spaniard, Julio Iglesias, was a clown and vaudeville performer who was introduced to his wife at the old Grauman's Chinese Theatre by Charlie Chaplin, so the story goes.

Jose was an actor, and Joanne was a contortionist and dancer who also played piano.

Through Jose's vaudeville act as a pantomime and clown, he met Lucille Ball, and, later on, Desi Arnaz. The couples became fast friends.

It was Jose who helped write the pilot episode for "I Love Lucy," according to old newspaper clippings stored with the collections. He worked with Lucy to hone her crazy expressions and

bombastic gestures.

He also wrote a few skits Desi and Lucy used on a tour to convince television producers that Desi was a good enough actor to star in the show with his wife, according to Biola officials.

When the show became a hit, Pepito appeared on it several times, riding his tiny bike across the stage. He and Joanne owned a boat they kept near Newport Beach and used to take movie stars, including Clark Gable and Alan Ladd, on fishing trips. He had small parts in at least five movies, according to the old newspaper articles.

As Jose got older, he got fewer acting gigs. The couple started putting on children's plays, using students from Joanne's dance school as actors.

Jose, a painter, would create elaborate stages and displays, and Joanne would handle the choreography.

Even after Jose died, Joanne kept teaching dance into her old age in studios she and Jose had built on their Santa Ana property.

"People said she could do the splits until she was 90," Morris said. "She never had children, but she loved them so much, I think she kind of surrounded herself with them."

Joanne Perez died in April 2004 at age 96, Morris said. Her house was left messy and disorganized. Things were piled everywhere.

Cataloging everything she left behind "was an overwhelming job," said Gary Araujo, Biola's manager of trusts, investments and estates.

"You have to go through all of it. There might be 90 sheets of scratch paper with stock certificates stuck in the middle of the pile," he said.

One person who combed through the chaotic house opened a drawer to find a barely used box of cutlery with a letter inside signed by Lucille Ball.

"The house was packed with history," Morris said.

While Biola is an evangelical Christian university, Joanne did not claim to be a "born again" Christian, or even to have any special interest in the Christian faith, Morris said.

"She was drawn to our school because of our morals," Morris said. "She wanted the money from her estate to make 'good kids,' was the way she put it."

But the donation came with a caveat: It had to be used by Biola's radio, television, film and journalism department.

"She wanted the money to stay in performance," Morris said. "We're not sure exactly how we're going to use it, but we know what she meant."

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