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## From Mabel To Sonia, Arnaz Tied To Miami

April 28, 2006 | By Jack Zink Theater Writer

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Lucie Arnaz is having lunch at a sidewalk cafe when a couple stop and wave. Instead of gushing or seeking an autograph, they strike thumbs-up poses and thank the star for her efforts to save the Coconut Grove Playhouse down the street.

"That's been happening a lot," Arnaz says as the pair slips back into the pedestrian traffic. Arnaz became a rallying figure in recent weeks as a [financial](#) crisis erupted around rehearsals for the drama Sonia Flew.

"This is the theater's 50th anniversary, and this show is the season's grand finale. It was supposed to be the fireworks at the end," Arnaz says.

Instead, she's become a symbol of "the show must go on" spirit amid concerns over the future of the playhouse itself. When it appeared Sonia Flew might be canceled, she matched a \$50,000 donation from theater sponsor Bacardi. Producing Artistic Director Arnold Mittelman's family added another \$25,000. The total is enough for a two-week run through this weekend.

Coincidentally, Miami Beach's Jackie Gleason Theater a few miles away, which Arnaz and Tommy Tune opened 30 years ago, has a grand finale of its own next week.

The national tour of Mamma Mia! running Tuesday through Sunday will be the last of the Broadway Across America series shows there. In September, the musicals will follow other events into the new Miami Performing Arts Center. Although Cirque du Soleil made a bid to convert the Gleason for its use, that deal now looks unlikely and the theater's future is uncertain.

Early in their stage careers, Arnaz and Tune starred in Mack and Mabel, with a cherished score by Jerry Herman and a troubled book by Michael Stewart. The show flopped on [Broadway](#) in 1974. Two years later, Herman and producer Zev Buffman tried the first of many attempts over the years to turn the show into a hit (including one that just opened in London to mixed reviews).

Mack and Mabel opened at Fort Lauderdale's Parker Playhouse before [moving](#) to inaugurate the Miami Beach Theater of the Performing Arts. The city's old auditorium, made famous by Gleason's TV show, had just undergone a multimillion-dollar conversion to a music hall.

"We did this big whoop-de-do," Arnaz recalls. "But Michael Stewart didn't want to change anything in his [story](#), so we had to rely on doing the show-biz magic stuff to try to make it work."

Arnaz credits Vivian Vance, Lucille Ball's sidekick on several [TV shows](#), with advice that spurred her into theater. She began in summer stock before moving up to Broadway, where she won several critics' awards for They're Playing Our Song.

Arnaz still does concerts with that show's composer, Marvin Hamlisch, and her leading man, Robert Klein. There's talk of a possible original-cast revival. But just ahead, Arnaz will become the leading lady in Dirty Rotten Scoundrels on Broadway.

She's not likely to leave these current events in Miami entirely behind. She and husband Laurence Luckinbill have an apartment in Coconut Grove within walking distance of the theater. The cast rehearsed there while the playhouse was briefly shut down. Keeping the show on track also fulfilled her hopes of working onstage for the first time with her daughter, Katharine D. Luckinbill, who is a theater major at the University of Miami.

The good news is that the play was welcomed strongly by audiences last weekend, and reviews have been positive.

Arnaz has appeared in four shows in the past four seasons at the Grove. She said during an interview in early April that she'd come to think of the spring production as "my slot, the Lucie slot, to try out a new play."

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Mack And Mabel

The cast assembled for rehearsals in high spirits at that time, and Arnaz was having her best time at the Grove in years with the play. It taps into her own heritage, as did Once Removed three years ago. Melinda Lopez's drama is more polished, and won an award for its premiere in Boston two years ago.

"It's another one of those Cuban plays so I get my history lesson and find out an awful lot that I didn't know."

Father Desi fled with his mother to Miami in 1933. That's when Fulgencio Batista overthrew the provisional government in what was called the "Sergeants' Revolt." The Arnaz family's houses were sacked and torched.

The play's Sonia is sent to Miami at age 15 in 1961 during the secret Pedro Pan airlift early in Fidel Castro's regime. Katharine portrays the young Catholic girl in 1961 Havana. Lucie portrays Sonia in 2001, married to a Jewish psychiatrist in Minneapolis.

"One of the best things about this play is that the whole idea of Miami to me is a cross-combination of this wonderful Jewish culture and this Latin culture, and Melinda Lopez's play is about exactly that. So they live in Minneapolis; there are Jews in Minneapolis," she says, laughing.

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#### SONIA FLEW

The drama starring Lucie Arnaz is scheduled through Sunday but may be extended through May 9; call for update.

Where: Coconut Grove Playhouse, 3500 Main Highway, Miami.

When: 8 tonight-Saturday, 2 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Tickets: \$20-\$60; 305-442-4000, 877-642-7529.

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