

How Mary Martin Stays Young

ON AN UNSEASONABLY hot day last September, I sat in a Poughkeepsie, N.Y., theater watching the magic of Mary Martin at a technical rehearsal. Suspended on wires for her "Peter Pan" flying sequence, she zoomed high across the stage.

"Higher! Faster!" she called to the wire prop man, and he had to throw all his weight behind the ropes to keep her from hitting the scenery. Suddenly she sailed into the wings and failed to emerge. Out front, everyone gasped. Then she blithely reappeared. The impish musical-comedy star had held onto a guy rope just to give us a scare, and her laughter filled the theater.

For almost 16 hours that day, Miss Martin drove relentlessly through rehearsal.

"Good heavens," the sound manager whispered to me, "when will she drop?"

At 4:30 a.m., the rehearsal ended. Everyone else drooped with fatigue; only Mary Martin seemed fresh and high-spirited. Back at her motel, she consumed half a melon, two thick lamb chops, creamed onions, baked potato with sour cream and chives, half a small loaf of bread, India pudding, and coffee. She read a chapter from a book on philosophy and promptly fell asleep.

It wasn't hard to believe that this galvanic 45-year-old grandmother could embark, two days later, on a formidable five-month tour of 60 cities in 30 states with her one-woman show, "Music with Mary Martin." I recalled a remark once made by the blind Helen Keller after attending "South Pacific." Passing her hands over Mary's face, Miss Keller said, "You are the true spirit of youth."

What is the secret of Mary Martin's incredible energy, her remarkable exuberance?

On opening night, as she burst into song with her elfin grin and piping voice, her special kind of wonder soared over the footlights and I could sense her ebullience infecting the audience. At the end, people left their seats in a glow.

Backstage, I cornered Miss Martin in her dressing room. Up close, she is no glamour goddess. By Hollywood standards, her face is plain, her nose too large and her neck too thin, her chin sticks out, her figure can hardly compete with Brigitte Bardot's. But her radiant warmth and magnetism make you forget all that.

She looks at least a decade younger than she is. How, I asked, does she do it?

"I never even consider age," she said, in her flat Texas twang. "I'm 45 but I actually think I'm 19. I haven't ever let myself go past 19."

"One trick I have is to make myself not think of ugly and disagreeable things. I believe people dwell too much on the unpleasant. I seem to have an instinct for accepting my problems, dealing with them, and then discarding them."

"Maybe I keep young—in mood at least—because

I don't occupy my mind with the past. I have so many plans, so many ambitions to keep growing. My work, my family, and my home keep me busy 24 hours a day. I can't remember when I've been bored for a second."

To feel ageless, according to the Mary Martin credo, you also have to be an incurable optimist.

"I guess it's part of my nature to be a positive thinker," she said. "Rodgers and Hammerstein's song, 'A Cockeyed Optimist'—that's me. Take this tour we're doing. It would probably frighten me if I took time to think about it, but I don't."

"Last Saturday we returned from Alaska, where we warmed up our show. Before that tour started, there were so many complications that the trip seemed impossible. But I was confident it could be handled. I was just a cockeyed optimist. Well, our whole company did fly up and we put on 13 shows in nine days at 11 Army, Air Force, and Navy installations. We covered nearly 20,000 miles. Sure it was gruelling, but we did it."

I asked, "Where do you get all that energy?"

She rapped with both hands on her wooden dressing table. "I keep in good health," she said. "Like my mother, I must have a fantastic constitution. I remember once she had a gall-bladder attack and the next day she was on the go again. My theory is that I never get tired—just my body does. I lead a very disciplined life. Since last March, when I began preparing for this tour, all I've done is practice, eat, and go to bed by 8:30."

"I don't have to diet—I work too hard. I always weigh about 115. I love good healthful foods—steak, potatoes, salads, vegetables, desserts. But I never gorge myself. That reminds me, I'm starved!"

WHILE MISS MARTIN changed into street clothes, I turned to Richard Halliday, her tall, slim, handsome husband and personal manager.

"About Mary's buoyant youthfulness and good health," he said. "Up in Alaska, she was the only one in our troupe who didn't come down with a cold, have to take aspirin or tranquilizers, or go to the dispensary. And during the entire three-year run of 'South Pacific,' Mary missed only three performances."

"Someone once said that Mary doesn't need any mechanical apparatus to fly in 'Peter Pan'—she can fly under her own power, using old-fashioned zest for fuel. You can't fake pure joy, the kind that gets across to all types in an audience. I guess Mary's perpetual joy stems from her passion for the stage. The greatest thing in life is to love your work and keep at it until you're exhausted."

We were joined by Humphrey Doullins of Columbia Artists Management, who is supervising the Mary Martin tour. Doullins, who has worked with Lily Pons, Grace Moore, Gladys Swarthout,

She's 45 and a grandmother,
yet she has
the lively exuberance
of a teen-ager.
Here is her formula
for preserving
the spirit of youth.

by Theodore Irwin

