

The Full Marty



Marty Ingels, Shirley Jones:
Hollywood's Oddest Couple



March 4, 2000

By JOE RHODES

She is gone. Not just for the weekend or a few days on the road. But gone for good, or at least for the next six months, to a place of her own, a furnished condo in the San Fernando Valley where he will not be allowed to see her, or call her, or even send her a note.

It's for the best, their therapist says, the only chance to save a relationship that no one but the two of them has ever understood. A trial separation, that's all it is, and an amiable one at that. He still thinks of her as a goddess, she still laughs at every joke he tells. But, at the moment when Shirley Jones drives away from the blue-painted Beverly Hills home where she has lived for the past 40 years, Marty Ingels isn't thinking about any of that. All he knows is that she is gone.

"I just packed Shirley's things in the car," says Ingels, 64, a comic actor who was a television regular in the 1960's, a frequent talk show guest and star of his own sitcom (1963's "I'm Dickens, He's Fenster, co-starring John Astin).

His voice, on the phone, is still shaky with tears. "We cried and kissed and hugged," he says. "We've been crying for the last two days . And then we said goodbye."

They have been, for the last 26 years, Hollywood's oddest couple : America's straight-laced sweetheart - Mrs. *Partridge*, for God's sake! -- in love with a loudmouth clown, the kind of guy who would always put the

lampshade on his head and whoopee cushions on the dining room chairs. The question -- sometimes unspoken, sometimes asked out loud -- came up whenever they were in public together: What could she possibly see in him?

“The thing you have to remember about Shirley is that everywhere she goes, they sprinkle rose petals in her path. They adore her,” Marty says, “And everybody says to her, ‘Why did you marry that maniac?’ It’s because she needs someone like me. If she married someone who was just another version of her, she would bore herself to death.”

“I love crazy men, it’s as simple as that” Shirley, now 65, would say just weeks before the separation began. “I like unpredictable men, I like men that make me laugh. I like men that are bright and sensitive and not the run of the mill. But that also makes for problems.”

The problem this time, or at least part of it, has been Ingels’ decision to go public about his long-time struggle with his stepchildren, Shirley’s sons from her first marriage to Broadway star, Jack Cassidy -- Shaun, 42, the former “Hardy Boys” star and teen idol, now a successful producer and screenwriter, Patrick, 39, an actor and singer, and Ryan, 34, a set designer.. (David Cassidy, 49, Shirley’s Partridge Family co-star, is

the product of Jack Cassidy ‘s marriage to dancer Evelyn Ward).

Claiming that the children were intentionally trying to drive him and Shirley apart, Ingels went public with their dispute in a fashion that was outrageous even by Hollywood standards. When Shirley, who cherishes her privacy and had specifically told him not to turn their problems into a public spectacle, was out of town, he would invite news crews and busloads of tourists to gather on their lawn. With mariachi bands playing in the background, he would pose, wearing a top-hat with “Husband” emblazoned across the front, with his arm around a life-size cut-out of Shirley, a promotional item from her “Partridge Family” days. He would give the tourists t-shirts and candy and perfume that smells like chocolate. He let them pass around the Academy Award Shirley had won for Best Supporting Actress in 1960’s “Elmer Gantry.”

And then, in the midst of mugging for every camera he could see, he would talk about the most intimate details of his disintegrating marriage, blaming it all on Shirley and her kids, who he often referred to as “the stepchildren from hell.”

“The kids won’t speak to me, they won’t let me see my grandchildren (Shaun has 3 kids, Patrick 2) and I may be losing Shirley, too.,” he was saying, “Telling my story may be all I have left.”

We talked for hours in the den of their home, his sentences often tying themselves in knots -- part shtick, part rant, part introspective pain. The chaos of his personality was as visible as the incredible mess he'd made of the place, papers and magazines and pizza boxes piled on every surface, covering counters and tables and most of the floor. Shirley, at that point, had not moved out but, looking at the impenetrable clutter, some of it years in the making, it was hard to imagine how she possibly could have stayed.

The kids, he says, particularly Shaun, never really gave him a chance. From the time they first met him, they referred to him as "the goon," so unlike Jack Cassidy, who had died in an apartment fire, two years after he and Shirley were divorced. Cassidy, unlike Ingels, was charming and refined, but also distant and self-absorbed. Marty, on the other hand, came on too strong, too obviously desperate to win their affection and respect.

"They were beautiful and talented and they could charm your pants off," he says, "but they were spoiled Beverly Hills kids and here comes this Jew putz from New York suddenly telling they had to take out the garbage and feed the dogs and bring in the firewood They'd never had anyone do that before.

"For 25 years I took care of those kids. I was at every single high school game, every single parents' night, every rehab center and every

police station. I gave them money. I bought them houses. Maybe I'm not the best hugger and kisser, but I loved their mother and I wanted to be the best stepfather I could.

"But to them,, I'm the bad guy. They've accused me of everything except genocide, They accused me of stealing Shirley's money (which Ingels claims is nonsense because, for much of their marriage, he was earning more from his celebrity brokerage business -- serving as a middleman between various companies and the stars they wanted to hire for commercials and promotional appearances -- than she was from acting.) The accused me of undermining Shirley's career and of sleeping with everybody short of the Harlem Globetrotters. And for the last three years, they've told her that I am not welcome in their homes. They are basically forcing Shirley to choose between her husband and her children. And that's not fair to her."

(All three brothers were asked to comment for this story. None of them chose to respond.)

"I'm tired of my sons being bashed by him, " Shirley would say when asked about Marty's remarks. "I won't have them portrayed of villains. And I've told him (Ingels)that I won't abide it. I just don't want it in print anymore and what WILL cause a divorce will be if this fucking article runs.

“My sons are not the reason for this,” she continues. “The reason is the marriage itself. We’ve grown apart in a lot of ways.. I’ve become more set in my ways and he’s become more emotional, and he’s always been an emotional roller coaster anyway. It’s been difficult, but age does that to people.”

“Shirley has always said that if we could just be alone on a desert island, we wouldn’t have any troubles at all, “ Ingels had said, that night in the cluttered house. “We only have problems when there are other people are around. We go to a party and I end up telling jokes, dancing on the table, embarrassing her in some way. She always tells me not to try so hard, to stop trying to buy everyone’s love.

She told me once, she said ‘Martin -- she calls me Martin when she loves me -- I love everything about you, but I approve of nothing you do.’ She’s always whispering in my ear, ‘Think David Niven,’ and I try. I’m thinking David Niven, but Pee Wee Herman is what always comes out.”

--- section break

It is the night of their last public appearance together, a week before the separation begins. Fifty people have paid \$40 each to crowd into a small fluorescent-lit meeting room at the Beverly Hilton Hotel, for

a Learning Annex presentation of “An Unforgettable Evening with Shirley Jones & Marty Ingels,” where, among other things, they are supposed to “reveal their recipe for creating a successful relationship.” Shirley doesn’t want to be there, but Marty had signed a contract and insisted they had to go.

He comes out wearing the top hat, embracing the cardboard Shirley, just as he had on the lawn. “I welcome you,” he says, “to an evening with Hume Cronyn and Jessica Tandy.”

He schmoozes, he banter, he tells a few off-color jokes, even though Shirley had asked him not to. The room is decorated with blown-up tabloid headlines about the two of them and a photo from a recent performance of “Love Letters” they’d done together, where he’d held up a sign that read “Still Together” and she held up one that said, “Don’t Believe It.”

He talks about his neuroses, his shortcomings, his desperate need to be loved. He talks about how when his first marriage ended, he became agoraphobic, spending weeks and weeks unable to get off the floor. And he talks, unashamedly, about how frightened he is that, once Shirley leaves, he might fall apart again.

He finally introduces her (“Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Marty Ingels . . .”) and lets her have center stage. “How many times has he

embarrassed you already,” she asks the crowd, before launching into an hour’s worth of old show business stories, how she was discovered by Rodgers and Hammerstein on her very first audition, what it was like to work with Brando, and Sinatra, Burt Lancaster, Jimmy Stewart and Henry Fonda. She talked about the musicals that first made her a star in the mid 1950’s -- “The Music Man” and “Oklahoma” and, most of all, “Carousel.”

When she talks about Marty, she talks about their glorious past. How they’d met at an art exhibit on Michael Landon’s lawn in 1974, how for years they’d go back there, even after Landon died and the house was sold, to re-live the moment. She talks about his extravagant romantic gestures, the skywriters and the string quartets and the Valentine’s Day when he not only brought her a box of her favorite chocolates but purchased the shop itself.

“I’ve never lived alone in my life,” she would say when inevitably someone asked about the separation. “All my life, I’ve either been married or had roommates, so this is going to be a big, big thing.”

Ingels, by then, is standing right beside her. She looks at him, her eyes glistening, and touches him gently on the cheek. “Wouldn’t it be funny,” he says, “if she were the one to have the nervous breakdown.”

“I leave you with this,” he finally says. “Make a list of all the

thing that you don’t think you could live without. And then work it out so you know that you can walk away from any of them, knowing you’ll be sad, but that you won’t die. That’s what we’re gonna try to do.”

He calls a week later, on the night that Shirley Jones leaves him, not knowing if she’ll ever come back. There is, this time, no defiance in his voice, no bravado, no ranting, no jokes.

“At this moment,” he says, not even sure why he’s called, “at this moment, everything seems so black. Life is not easy. Whoever said it is easy, is wrong. Tell that person they’re wrong.”

And Marty Ingels, alone in an empty house, slowly hangs up the phone.

*Joe Rhodes is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.
©2007 joebo productions.*