

THE PERILS OF LITTLE MARY SUNSHINE

THE 1962 UNIVERSITY OF OREGON USO Tour began with our company flying directly into the jaws of the notorious Columbus Day Storm, then was hounded from military base to military base by the shadow of the Cuban Missile Crisis, chased across the Pacific by Typhoon Karen, and finally came to a conclusion stranded in the fog at the San Francisco Airport. Undaunted by these challenges, the seventeen student-actors and Professor Horace Robinson, tour leader and director, presented twenty-six performances of the musical *Little Mary Sunshine* to both military and nonmilitary audiences in Japan, Korea, Okinawa, the Philippines, and Hawaii.

At the height of the Cold War, the USO (United Service Organization, which tends to the well-being of military personnel) developed a program enabling university theater companies to travel abroad to entertain the troops. It was good for the soldiers, who received a little taste of home, and it was, often, a life-changing opportunity for those students who were lucky enough to participate. In 1959, Robinson, head of the UO's University Theater, formed a company to tour the U.S. military's Asian Command with the musical *Wonderful Town*. Three years later *Little Mary Sunshine* was his second USO production to go to the Far East.

When we first gathered in Eugene to start rehearsals in early September 1962, Horace (for company unity he insisted we use his first name) gathered the cast together in the University Theater's Green Room. Here he described what was to take place during the four-month production. It was an inspired presentation designed to impress upon us the significance of what was being placed in our laps. Prophetically, he warned us that many difficult situations would emerge where we would be required to show stamina, patience, restraint, and even courage. When at last the meeting was over, he added with great humor, "I'm going to make sure you have fun on this trip — if I have to kill you!"

The musical *Little Mary Sunshine* first appeared off-Broadway in 1959 to rave reviews. Author Rick Besoyan called this parody of operetta "a musical spoof of the tall timber," in that it provided all



On the boat approaching Hega Hama

the necessary characters including forest rangers, Indians, and innocent young girls who just happened to be visiting the wilderness. Because of its comic treatment of military types and a bevy of attractive young women in its cast, *Little Mary* was the perfect musical to present to the troops.

When departing October 12, 1962, no one had any idea we were about to fly into the worst storm to hit the Pacific Northwest in recorded history. Within minutes of leaving Eugene we got hammered by turbulence and soon most everyone on our twin-engine prop plane was sick, including the flight attendant. For those of us who never had flown, we feared this might be a normal flight. This caused some concern about the 20,000 air miles still ahead.

The next morning we took off toward Japan on MATS (Military Air Transport System) with an overnight stop in Hawaii. Our Honolulu-Tokyo flight became lengthened to thirty-six hours because we had to stop at Wake Island to put out a fire in one of our airplane's motors. We were beginning to understand what Horace meant when he said anything could happen. Then it did.

We soon became aware of what seemed like an unusual level of activity at the military bases where we performed and were surprised to see our audiences attending the show in full battle gear, complete with helmets sitting in their laps. It was then we learned that what came to be known as the Cuban Missile

Crisis had placed the soldiers on high alert. Our performances went on mostly as scheduled but sometimes both our planes and buses were withdrawn at the last minute. With the world about to be blown up, a lighthearted musical was not among the military's highest priorities.

Our audiences averaged about 250 and were fairly consistent in their appreciation. The soldiers especially enjoyed the presence of our college-age women and freely laughed at the antics of the forest rangers and Indians. However, we did draw one



Cast's 40th anniversary reunion, 2002

1962 University of Oregon *Little Mary Sunshine* USO Touring Company

Leader and Director:
Professor Horace Robinson
Graduate Students: Ronald Coulter,
Priscilla Hake, J. Allan Phillips,
Vivian Tendollen
Seniors: Clark Santee, Jane Stevens,
Mikkel Thruston
Juniors: Woody Crocker, Paulla Bonnier
Sophomores: Linda Blodgett, Marian
Brown, Barbara Chatas, Karen Higgins,
George Lauris
Freshmen: Marva Dawley, Bill Hall,
Terry Thomas

hostile audience. Its members had just returned from survival training and remained quite, shall we say, primitive in their conduct. Catcalls and yelling of explicit sexual references were common throughout the performance. We just kept on singing, dancing, and grinning. After the show, fearing for our safety, the Army had a platoon of armed guards escort us back to our bus.

Next stop Guam—but before we got there Typhoon Karen flattened the island. Though skipping Guam was disappointing, we eagerly moved on to Okinawa. After a number of military performances in Okinawa—some taking place in missile silos—we herded aboard an old fishing boat and headed to the small island of Hega Hama. Here we staged the most memorable performance of the tour.

Hega Hama was so remote that the Japanese fishing families living there had never before seen a woman of any race other than their own. The island lacked a dock, so villagers waded into the surf to carry each of us ashore. Once in the village we sang Christmas songs with the children and then presented our play outdoors as a light nighttime rain fell. Robinson later wrote about this experience:

It was an eerie and memorable sight that I will always remember. A hillside filled with Japanese families, rain glistening on their heads and shoulders, as eighteen young Americans, well soaked by now, sang, and danced, and talked incomprehensibly about another life beyond the sea.

Our tour's final two stops in the Philippines and Hawaii produced more adventures, including a foiled plan by a group of soldiers to kidnap the cast's women. The Philippines provided us with our largest audiences.

A final performance at Pearl Harbor drew the curtain on our production of *Little Mary Sunshine* for the last time. We felt a great sadness about our USO tour ending but were very much ready to go home. Christmas was just a few days away and having shopped extensively in exotic ports that had not yet caught on to the value of a dollar, we were loaded with gifts for our families and filled with stories to tell. Boarding our Eugene flight in San Francisco, we were confident we would be home in just a few hours. At the moment we reached take-off position a

We had to stop at Wake Island to put out a fire in one of our airplane's motors. We were beginning to understand what Horace meant when he said anything could happen.

fog bank rolled in, causing the flight to be canceled. And so, staggering back to Eugene on a rainy all-night bus ride, the 1962 University of Oregon *Little Mary Sunshine* USO Tour came to a strangely quiet and nearly invisible conclusion.

—CLARK SANTEE '63

Clark Santee is completing a career as an independent producer of performing arts programs for television. He has directed broadcasts that range from opera, symphony, and ballet to rock, jazz, and country music. Since graduating from the UO in 1963, his USO experience led to military service as an Army television director, then to newly created public television, where he became active in PBS-related productions.



Clark Santee and Horace Robinson

A LIFE TRANSFORMED

ALTOGETHER, HORACE ROBINSON LED FIVE University of Oregon USO tours, but the *Little Mary Sunshine* company is the only one maintaining its camaraderie these many years later. We have held several reunions and cast members always try to see each other whenever the opportunity allows. The reason our company, unlike the others, remains close is not fully clear even to us. I believe it is due to the decisions Horace made in putting this group together.

Horace felt members of his first USO tour performed well and enjoyed traveling, but, lacking a sense of unity, they were unable to embrace the deeper benefits of such an experience. For the *Little Mary Sunshine* tour he was determined to "get it right." As a director he still wanted solid performers, but as an educator he wanted cast members for whom the experience would make a profound, lifelong difference.

My selection as a member of this company illustrates his intention. At the time I was easily the least experienced and most marginally talented person in the theater department. I had lots of energy but, lacking confidence in my potential, I was unable to provide myself any direction. In later years I asked Horace why, with all the University Theater talent he had at his disposal, he had selected me for the tour. He said, "Because I thought it would do you some good." As was often the case, he was right. His educator's ability to identify young people who were poised to have a "defining moment" in their lives enabled him to create a company so focused on mutual goals that the bonds formed during those four months together remain with us today. The USO tour gave me confidence and direction to the point where I count my selection for the *Little Mary Sunshine* tour to be "day one" of my thirty-five-year career as a television producer and director.

—CS



Snapshots from the 1962 USO Tour