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## STAGE

# Bidding adieu to Neverland

■ Cathy Rigby launches a "Peter Pan" farewell tour.

By Lynne Heffley, Times Staff Writer

As a teenager, Cathy Rigby was the first U.S. female gymnast to win an individual medal at the world championships and was a two-time Olympian; as an adult, a career shift into the performing arts has given her stage cred as the lead actor in nationally touring musicals and on Broadway, where she has starred in "Seussical" and two Tony-nominated revivals of "Peter Pan."

Now, although this amazingly fit 51-year-old — mother of four, grandmother of two — plans to continue her stage career, she will hang up her "Peter Pan" harness after one last national run. Her farewell tour of the show began Friday at the La Mirada Theatre for the Performing Arts, where Rigby and her husband, Tom McCoy, have been producing partners for 10 years.



Cathy Rigby  
(Annie Wells / LAT)

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**Peter Pan has become your signature role. Besides the athletic ability you bring to it, why do you think it's been such a good fit?**

I was brought up with such a drive to be perfect in gymnastics and in life; this is not about being careful. It really was a joy to get out there and push the envelope.

**You're 51 now. What about the physical challenge?**

I decided that I wasn't going to just step into rehearsal like I used to. I got a trainer for the first time in a long time. With flying and jumping around like a 10-year-old boy looming, I go to the gym every day now.

**How many times have you played Peter so**

far?

About 2,500. I always laugh at the frequent flier miles I have. Too bad I can't go anywhere with them.

**Why did you decide to hang up your harness?**

It's the 100th anniversary [of J.M. Barrie's play]. I thought it would be nice to go out that way.

**Will it be difficult to let go?**

Maybe this is a Peter Pan denial thing, which is so typical of him, but I assume that I will do something else and it will be just as magical and fun.

***What will you miss the most?***

Just being Peter Pan, and the children afterward, the joy that it brings on and offstage. For 2 1/2 hours you get to be a child again. I will miss the physical workout, the choreography, the flying. It's incredibly fun, like riding a roller coaster.

***The least?***

The traveling. I miss my garden, I miss just being at home. And when it's the eighth show of the week and your voice is a little raspy and you're really exhausted, I won't miss that.

***It's risky being in that harness. Have you had any close calls?***

Not life-threatening. I've banged into scenery and one time during rehearsal I did a nose dive into the 17th row. Fortunately, I didn't hurt myself.

***You first played Peter Pan in a 1974 production and didn't do your own singing. Then you spent several years studying voice, dance and acting. What motivated you?***

I think I was amazed that you have this different kind of muscle and you can make it better by practice. And when I started taking acting classes, I just fell in love with it.

***How did you and your husband, Tom, meet?***

I met Tom in 1981 when I was doing "The Wizard of Oz." He was in the ensemble. And then we did "Paint Your Wagon" with Gordon MacRae after that. It was really wonderful.

***Are any of your children pursuing acting?***

Three of my four kids are in this production. My 24-year-old son plays Nana and a pirate, my daughter Katie is a mermaid and an Indian, and Teresa will be one of the Lost Boys.

My gosh, they've traveled with me from the beginning and they know the show inside and out.

***What will life be like after Never-Neverland?***

I'd love to do some straight plays, maybe some television. I would really love to play Sylvia [the dog in A.R. Gurney's comedy of the same name].

I hope I can keep working as much as I would like to. If not, I certainly love being at home, enjoying my family and doing my thing here.

***In 1984, you went public with your 12-year struggle with bulimia as a gymnast and afterward and became an advocate for education about eating disorders. Will you continue that?***

Yes. I think as you watched the Olympics, you could kind of understand that the very thing that makes people great at what they do, that obsessive-compulsive need to be perfect, [can lead] them to do anything to stay thin and small.

***Tell me about the variety act you did when you were starting out in showbiz.***

I had a chance to open for Don Rickles in Las Vegas. The reviews I had been getting would say, "she sings great for a gymnast," so I did a whole thing about trying to figure out who I was as a performer. It was trial by fire, but Don Rickles was the sweetest guy in the world.

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