

THEME SATURDAY, MARCH 3, 2007 theage.com.au

Nun So Deserving as Irish Prodigy

THEATRE: HARP ON THE WILLOW

By John Misto, at the Comedy Theatre, March 25 time 160 minutes. Martin Ball Reviewer

IRISH singer and harpist Mary O'Hara is something of a wonder. She came to prominence in the 1950s with albums and world tours. A star at just 18, she married the poet Richard Selig at 20, and was widowed at 21 with Selig's tragic early death from Hodgkin's disease.

The world became too much for Mary and, at the height of her fame she disappeared behind the walls of Stanbrook convent. She emerged after 12 years of seclusion, and resumed her successful recording career. She remarried and spent six years doing welfare work in Africa.

Clearly, if any life is worth telling, it's O'Hara's. Misto's 2003 play wisely avoids a linear biography. He sets the action towards the end of Mary's years at Stanbrook, when she is wilting from the strictures of convent life. Into this cloistered world, Misto brings Tyrone Kane, a drunken American whose Bronx accent reminds Mary of her husband. Kane is on a journey from grief and despair back into the wider world, and Misto neatly uses this to parallel Mary's return from isolation.

Misto's script is unnecessarily long and not always subtle — particularly the endless nun jokes. But under Andrew Doyle's assured direction and Martin Kinnane's effective lighting, the show achieves warmth and insight — and great humour.

Marina Prior is a wonderful Mary, and it goes without saying that her singing is enchanting. You might want a bit more drama and pathos, but that's not the tone of the show. The foil to the lead role, Christopher Stollery almost steals the show as Kane. His comic timing and delivery is terrific, and he handles his transformation and redemption with dignity and conviction. It's a very fine performance.

Lucy Maunder makes a great debut as the young Mary, singing with aplomb and bringing good emotional intensity. Tom Wren gets good range as the impetuous but doomed Selig.

It was something of a disappointment that Joan Carden was unable to perform as the Mother Superior, but Julie Hudspeth was able to reprise her role from the Sydney production — and she takes to it with glee. It's a clichéd character, and Hudspeth tends to ham it up, but she is very entertaining.

The evening finishes with a fine a cappella performance of Sydney Carter's *Lord of the Dance*, after which O'Hara reappears for a few minutes. It's a slightly surreal ending, a bit like Christ appearing in the upper room to the disciples — the audience wondering if she is real and if members, like the doubling Thomas, can reach out to touch her. O'Hara is real, still as graceful and vivacious in the flesh as her voice is on her recordings, and this show is a fine testament to her.