

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MARY...



Mary O'Hara is in Town
Richard Hanna has Tea with the Lady Herself

Mary O'Hara is in Ottawa headlining the city's inaugural Northern Lights HarpFest with, "Travels With My Harp" her solo show. We are at Zoe's in Ottawa's posh Chateau Laurier for afternoon tea. Sitting opposite me, Mary looks to be in fine shape. Time spent in the African outdoors has given her a sun-kissed glow. Her hair, now a mane of honey blonde, along with her regal carriage, make her appear distinctly leonine. She sports an exquisite blue silk brocade jacket, a gift purchased by her nephew, renowned novelist, Sebastian Barry, while on a recent book launch in China.

RH: Folk Harp Journal ran a cover story on you last issue. What did you think of it?

MOH: I was very pleased. They got just about everything right.

RH: You mentioned during the show that you had a couple of near-death experiences while you were living in Africa, causing the audience to lean forward.

MOH: Waiting for it yeah...

RH: Then you changed the subject!

MOH: Yes, well it would have taken up too much time, I'd have to really refine it but this is what happened. Pdraig and I went down to the coast because, of course, there is no sea in Nairobi. I was driving the Land Rover. What we didn't know was this place we were approaching was a known accident spot, and, I saw coming toward us a big Lorry, and, they're not that wide the roads. I remarked to Pat: "I suppose he'll move aside." He didn't. Foolishly, I kept going and before I realized it, there was no sign telling you this was going to be a narrow

bridge, I suddenly realized it's a bridge! The Lorry went swiftly past us, we are now on the bridge on the two right wheels. In my inexperience, I overcorrected ending up on the left wheels then back onto the right wheels. The next thing I know, we are tumbling over, and, I remember Pat saying: "Ohhh!". I remember not experiencing any fear. It so happens that the drop was about fifty or sixty feet, and, because of prior accidents, all the barriers had broken down. As the Land Rover was turning over it fortunately got stuck in the front so that stemmed the impetus. Otherwise I would not be here to tell the story. So, we ended up upside down halfway down the bank with all these wild things around. Extraordinarily, we didn't suffer any injuries. I don't remember being unconscious, but, we must have been at some point,

because, we were now sitting up straight in an upside-down Land Rover. Everything had been compressed, obviously, when we landed on the roof. So Pat kicked out what was left of the front window and we got out. There was a young Masai herdsman. He saw it happening and came rushing up to assist. Some time later, while we were still there, a medic coming along from Mombasa heading for Nairobi, stopped to see what he could do to help. Do you know he recognized me? (Laughs.) He looked down and said: "In my estimation no one should have survived the wreck." I mean we were really blessed. Which brings me to the Baboon. RH: Did you say Baboon? MOH: Yes, how is your time? RH: I'm good.

A waitress approaches the table with an enormous cart full of teas.

MOH: I think I'll have some Lapsang Souchong.

RH: I'll have the same, thanks.

MOH: We were in the Masai Mara. We invested in a Suzuki because the Land Rover was a right off. It was only a few weeks later. We deliberately had an opening cut in the roof so that I could view the animals while Pat was driving. With us, were a young European couple. She was a colleague of Pats teaching at the Peponi school. Now, we had been out much longer than they had, so for us to see Baboons by now, was, you know, boring. There was quite a compact little group of them to the side, and, one massive,

"I have to tell you I have never known naked fear in my life before, and, I pray God it's not my lot to experience it again."

really giant fellow. He was obviously in charge. The other couple stopped in front of us to take a look. So this big one disengaged himself from the group, and, started trotting over to our car. I said: "Pat!". Pat said: "Sit down!". So I sat down. "Can you go on ahead?". "No, I can't move because John's car is landed in front of us.". The next thing I knew was he jumped up on the roof.

RH: The big Baboon?

MOH: The big Baboon! I am now cringing in the corner with him looking down at me, and, I'm going like this: "Go away, go!". Pat said: "Don't do that!", because his fear was that he would grab my hand. Next thing I know he jumps in beside me, in this Suzuki, no back doors, no side doors, no way out. So, I start grappling with it. Now, I have to tell you I have never known naked fear in my life before, and, I pray God it's not my lot to experience it again. I have never known fear like this.

RH: He grabbed you?

MOH: He had his hands on my shoulders, I was grappling with him and he was going like this in my face (She demonstrates.) "Hrumph! Hrungh!". So, there I was wrestling with this huge alien, you know they have very long bodies. He was higher than I am and from the depths, the very pit of my being, I said, and I meant every syllable: "Sacred heart of Jesus, I place all my trust in thee." Now, this is not made up. In that instant, he jumped up and backwards through the roof, no hesitation, and, that was that.

RH: Wow.

(Waitress places a pot of tea and a three tiered petits fours stand full of tiny

sandwiches, huge scones and cakes on the table.)

MOH: That was the very worst thing that has ever happened to me but it didn't put us off Africa.

RH: (Gulp.) Well, I'm crossing that one off my bucket list! I was thinking about the twelve years you spent in the monastery. The ancient Celtic bards were closeted for exactly that amount of time, living a life of meditation and study in spartan conditions. Do you see the parallel?

MOH: What do you mean?

RH: In retrospect, do you see that time in the monastery as gestational in terms of your growth as an artist?

MOH: I suppose every period in your life may be a school to the next one. All I knew was that this is what I wanted to do. The night Richard died, that is all I wanted to do, give the rest of my life to God, because, I wanted to get to heaven with him, that's what it is.

RH: In the past, regarding Richard's death, you have spoken of "blessings", many people might find that hard to accept.

MOH: Someone wisely said: "Every sorrow is a joy turned inside out.), and, I think it is how you interpret it. Pat says a wonderful thing: "Every obstacle is either a stumbling block or a stepping stone.". So, it's how you receive, God never gives us more than we can cope with. His ways are mysterious and infinitely loving no matter what the character of the situation you are in. I never lost the certainty that I was in the right place at the right time. And even coming out (monastery), although not without a lot of initial angst prior to the decision.

"I never lost the certainty that I was in the right place at the right time"

(Mary takes a tiny circular sandwich and sets about cutting it in half.)

MOH: Have this.

RH: I want you to have it, you're the one who has just been on stage.

MOH: Half each, I think that's best.

RH: Thanks. You went into the monastery with the intention of spending the rest of your life there, and, after twelve years you became very unwell. What was wrong with you?

MOH: I suffered serious migraines, sinusitis, and fibrositis.

RH: What is fibrositis?

MOH: An inflammation of the muscle fibres. In my case, of the neck and shoulders.

RH: Do you think these illnesses striking almost out of the blue were God's way of saying it's time to move on?

MOH: This is the way God works, using temporal earthly situations to get his message across.

RH: How much work does it take to be perform at the level you were performing at in your heyday?

MOH: It never stopped. I have this temperament, I'm a perfectionist. You aim at perfection, you'll never reach it. You should actually aim beyond your capabilities. You'll never get it but it doesn't mean you stop reaching. Does that make any sense to you?

RH: Oh yes, You know you will fall short but continue to raise the bar.

MOH: You don't sit back at any point. Can I offer you some grapes?

RH: Yes, thanks!

MOH: I think we should test one of the cakes. Should we (To the waitress)? We don't approve of them but we might have some. Why did we come here, anyway, as a matter of interest? It's elegant.

RH: I wanted to impress you. (Laughs)

MOH: Oh God I'm not easily impressed.

RH: Oh, well, you know, I thought either here or a greasy spoon.



Mary signing Books and CD's after Her Ottawa Show.

MOH: I think I would balk at the greasy spoon. I definitely would. Is this edible or is it just a decoration?

RH: It's chocolate. You said on a recent radio interview: "I have never felt the need to have music in my life."

MOH:No.

RH: Would you like to elaborate on that?

MOH:(Handing me a cheese sandwich.) It's simple, I've never missed it. People said that when I was in the monastery, they couldn't understand it. I've never had a need. I love silence, adore silence. Have you ever heard of the Hesychasts?

RH:No.

MOH: They were a branch of the desert fathers. They lived a life of silence. (Cuts and deposits half a cream cake on my plate.) Again untouched by hand. Look at that, this will kill us both. One of my favourite quotations is: "I see that you too have been wounded by the arrow of the love of silence.", and, of course, music is part silence.

RH: Indeed, the ancient Japanese saw music as an arrangement of silences interrupted by notes.

MOH:Isn't that interesting.

RH: You retired from singing in 1994. Why?

MOH: Like I've said, while my voice was still at it's best.

RH: Well, if your speaking voice is anything to go by, I'm guessing there is still a really good instrument in there.

MOH: Well, I wouldn't know because I never sing.

RH:(Laughs) But is it fair?

MOH: Oh, it's perfectly fair. I am mistress of my own life, and fate, and destiny, apart from the Lord, of course.

RH: You collaborated with your sister Joan on "The quiet Land of Erin".

MOH: We didn't collaborate. She walked up to me one day handing me the translation. I was only seventeen. She was a very good poet. She is Sebastian's mother.

RH: A truly beautiful song. I wept when I heard it.

MOH: Thank you. I hope it was my rendition, was it?

RH: Oh yes!

MOH: Yeah, cause it's to full of yearning and longing. She wrote some gorgeous stuff. There is another one of

hers I recorded, "Brigid Og Mhaile" (Young Brigit O'Malley), it's heartbreaking.

RH: My all time favourite of yours is Eibhin a Riun(Eileen Aroon). You took the most beautiful love song in the cannon, and made it unforgettable, a classic.

MOH:Mmmm.

RH: Your version is sublime, definitive.

MOH: Are you prepared to sign that? (Laughs)

(Padraig O'tool, Mary's husband, arrives.)

MOH: (Reaching for a cream scone.) Patrick, look Darling, we are eating all the wrong things.

RH: I was saying to Pat earlier that I was disappointed not to find the notation for Eileen Aroon in any of the five books you have released.

MOH:Not yet, it will be.

PAT: Number six, we have had several people asking for it.

RH: Oh, I have another gripe.The Quiet Land Of Erin in volume five has four flats!

MOH:Well, what's the matter with four flats? (Laughs.)

RH:I tune my Harp to E flat.

MOH: Don't! Go back, reorder your entire life.

RH: How should I tune my harp?

MOH: A flat

RH: A flat? But...

MOH: A flat! In A flat you have six keys at your disposal, so don't be deterred.

Mend your ways. Get out of E flat.

RH: BB King calls his guitar Lucille. Do you have a name for your harp?

MOH: No, just Briggs. I had a tennis racquet I called Euphemia, meant more to me than the harp in those days.(To Pat.) I'm shattering any kind of illusions

Richard may have had about me.(Laughs)

RH: Thats a good thing. So, do you ever sing now? In the shower?

MOH: No.

RH: In the Garden?

MOH: No.

PAT: Oh, you do occasionally. Come on.

MOH: Very, very rarely.

PAT: When we're traveling in the car she sings.

MOH: Very rarely...

PAT: She might sing for an hour as we're traveling in the car.

MOH: Darling, you have a glorious, most charming habit of exaggeration.

RH:(Swiftly changing subject.) Pat, you have a house in Ireland.

MOH: He has a flat.

PAT We have a flat on the Arran Islands.

RH: Do you both spend time in Ireland?



PAT Well, we only acquired this recently. It's great, we don't have to cut any grass or milk any goats.

RH: (Laughs.) Handy! Where are you headed off to next?

MOH: Ireland House on Friday in New York City. Two days later Boston College.

RH: Whats happening in Boston College?

MOH: Boston Collage has started housing my papers. They've already started an exhibition. It so happens that it is running

parallel with an exhibition of John McCormack, both running at the Burns library. Then we've been invited to Halifax for a big charity dinner to be the guests of honor. A message came saying all she has to do is look pretty and eat lobster, and, I said: "Well, I can do the lobster bit."

RH: Oh come now.

So, what has happened to your harp?

MOH: Boston College has the Briggs, the one I most used. I gave Sebastian the second

Briggs. His son, Toby, expressed a great interest in learning the harp and then I've kept one. It's a lovely Taylor's Harp. I've never used it professionally, but, now it's coming into it's own because I am going to be doing some more transcribing.

RH: Any indication of when we can expect volume six of your arrangements?

MOH: Not before night fall.

