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# LIVING

Down to Earth fun from Mars

BY MARTY HUGHLEY | THE OREGONIAN

All those long months in the frozen north, the seemingly endless bleak midwinter. A husband preoccupied with his work. And no one else around to talk to but the help, who all are elves. It's a rough life being Mrs. Claus.

Or at least so we're told in "Surabaya Santa," a song by the Broadway tunesmith Jason Robert Brown, in which the jolly gift-giver's wife gets tired of spending Christmas alone, threatens to call a divorce lawyer and vows to escape his "Santa claws."

"Imagine if Mrs. Claus was a cabaret singer," Susannah Mars said as she introduced the song in her show "Mars on Life: The Holiday Edition," which opened Friday at Artists Repertory Theatre.

But we don't have to imagine. Because Mars is a cabaret singer, one who has such sterling gifts that she makes even a fairy-tale desperate housewife vibrantly,

hysterically real. Throwing herself headlong into the anguish of her character, Mars effects a tart accent and a bitter attitude:

"So on your way, Nick

"Shalom, Nick

"Don't feel the need to hurry home, Nick

"Should I want comfort in the cold and bitter storm

"I've got the elves to keep me warm"

"Surabaya Santa" is the comic high point of Mars' wide-ranging seasonal celebration, a performance that makes the show a worthwhile evening even for those with the most severe allergies to Christmas cheer. But it's hardly alone here as a shining moment of Mars' skill and appeal.

Retooled from its initial run

It's not just the voice that draws us in, though. Mars presents a non-denominational, multilingual (she sings passages in French, German, Arabic and Hebrew) look at the season, but never just to be politically correct or more broadly marketable. Instead, by stitching such a wide array of music and tradition together with recollections of her own life, she points us to an appreciation of the many connections we have with one another. So, by virtue of her Jewish mother, Tom Lehrer's "Hakukkah in Santa Monica" (the top vote-getter in an online song survey conducted before she and director Grant Byington assembled this year's show) is at home in the company of "It's Christmas Time All Over the World"

Even better, she doesn't fall prey to sappy sentimentality or to easy cynicism, but pokes gentle fun at familiar foibles such as overeating (a hilarious new six-song segment with tributes to Sara Lee, cookies, hot chocolate...) and undershopping. When she takes a turn toward the poignant, the effect is subtle yet clear, as in a version of Irving Berlin's war-time war horse "White Christmas" that reminds us what a balm nostalgia can sometimes be, or in the newly commissioned "Holiday Letter," which lets the bittersweet truth leech through the sanitized pages of the annual family update ("just the highlights/no tears").

Suffice it to say, holidays on Mars are anything but bleak.

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OWEN CAREY

Susannah Mars gets soulful in the second edition of her cabaret celebration "Mars on Life: The Holiday Edition."

ABOVE |  
Susannah Mars camps it up as a disillusioned Mrs. Claus as part of her cabaret show, "Mars on Life: The Holiday Edition." OWEN CAREY

## Show review |

For a second year, "Mars on Life" pokes holiday madness