

ONSTAGE

Just one of the guys

ISABEL LEONARD

Opera's 'It Girl' transforms herself for the COC's *La clemenza di Tito*

By DAVIDA ANDER

A lone figure stands centre stage, caught in a thin band of vertical light. Overcome with emotion, the woman lets out a wail, sans microphone, which echoes to all four balconies of Toronto's Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts.

It's just four days before opening night of the Canadian Opera Company's *La clemenza di Tito*, and mezzo-soprano Isabel Leonard is nearly unrecognizable in the role of Sesto — her long black hair pulled beneath a short wig, her ankles hidden behind bulky boots and her slim physique masculinized with baggy, royal blue Roman garb.

A few weeks earlier, a much more casually dressed Leonard is eating sushi in downtown Toronto, chatting about preparations for her highly anticipated COC debut in Mozart's final opera, and her current reigning status as opera's "It Girl" (at least according to *W* magazine).

"I really try very hard to allow myself to just fall into whatever character I'm doing at any given moment," the 30-year-old says. "Especially with a new character, I try to let it evolve. I try to let things come to me as I'm going through the text to try and not overly inform myself with too much fluff."

It's hard to believe that rehearsals for *La clemenza di Tito* only began at the start of January, and that in one month, Leonard has fully transformed into the love-struck young patrician with the help of director Christopher Alden. Caught up in his love for Vitellia the empress, Leonard's Sesto is swayed to betray and attempt assassination of his friend, the benevolent and forgiving Roman Emperor Tito.

For Leonard, embodying a male role is less about taking on stereotypical male traits and more about getting to the heart of a character's struggle — in Sesto's case, choosing between his passion for Vitellia and his loyalty to Tito.

"Instead of overriding my system with, 'Oh my gosh, do I look like a man right now?' I just try to get inside the head of my character," Leonard says. "Hopefully what I'm thinking is masculine in its very essence."

The New York City-born Leonard is currently riding

a wave of wide acclaim; she was called "the whole package" by the *Washington Post* and "fresh, effervescent and lovely" by *The New York Times*. Since graduating from Juilliard, the former ballerina has eagerly jumped from role to role, starting with her Metropolitan Opera debut in 2007 in *Roméo et Juliette*. Along the way, Leonard gave birth to her son Teo, and — now two-and-a-half — he travels with her from city to city.

"I'm completely jealous of the nanny and my son, because they're getting to do all these fun things," Leonard says, adding that since her arrival in Toronto at the beginning of the year, she has barely explored the city between rehearsals and quality time with her family.

Despite the difficulties of a pressing schedule, though, Leonard says it's the variance of each performance that keeps her coming back to the stage.

"It's a world unto itself. It's an interesting place because some nights there can be so much improvisation in a way," says Leonard, who some Toronto opera fans may remember from

"I really try to allow myself to fall into the character I'm doing"

her Metropolitan HD broadcasts, including Robert Lepage's production of *The Tempest*. "[Sometimes] things are coming to you as you're singing that may have been different than all the weeks prior."

After her run with the COC,

Leonard will begin a recital tour, performing in Indiana, Boston, San Francisco, Atlanta and New York. Later, she will make her debut as Blanche in *Dialogues des Carmélites*, an opera she performed in as a chorus member during her Juilliard freshman year. Finally, her season will take her as far as Japan's Saito Kinen Festival, where she will perform the title role in *L'enfant et les sortilèges* and *L'heure espagnole*. Yet even with such a hectic schedule, for Leonard, it is the little things that still stand out for her.

"We just found out today that the conductor and I have the same birthday, which is rare," she says with a laugh, before finishing her sushi, and heading back to rehearsals.

National Post
dander@nationalpost.com
@david_aander

La clemenza di Tito runs until Feb. 22 at the Four Seasons Centre in Toronto. For tickets and more information, visit coc.ca.



It's not over until she sings! Isabel Leonard has been praised as "the whole package" by the *Washington Post*.