

LANDING ON HER FEET

Not your stereotypical starlet, Glee's LEA MICHELE prefers reality TV to nights on the town and calls kissing Ashton Kutcher "child's play."
JOE YOGERST talks to her about Broadway, Barbra and being different

TONIGHT IS THE night for anyone in the music business – the eve of the Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. But rather than flitting in and out of the glam parties scattered around town, Lea Michele Sarfati – to use her full name – is having a quiet dinner with her father, who's visiting from New York. And in case you think that's an aberration, consider that the previous weekend, the paparazzi snapped Michele emerging from a Beverly Hills salon with none other than... her mother. That says a lot about who the woman who plays the geeky femme fatale Rachel Berry in *Glee*. Specifically, that she would rather spend time with her family than the Hollywood elite she has slowly but surely become a part of since the global hit television series first aired three years ago.

I catch up with Michele at home on Saturday

afternoon, between the *Prestige Hong Kong* photo shoot and the impending dinner date with her dad. Her publicist has scheduled just 20 minutes of interview time. But she blows that out of the water right away: "Take whatever you need," she says casually, taking matters into her own hands in the manner of someone in their 40s rather than just 25. That's probably because she's been in showbiz longer than many performers twice her age, literally in the spotlight since she was eight and landed the part of Young Cosette in the Broadway production of *Les Misérables*.

She hasn't stopped working since then, with a string of Broadway hits including *Ragtime*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Spring Awakening*. It was the last that fashioned Michele into a household name, at least among stage buffs. It was a musical that proved that Broadway wasn't just for old fogies and show-tune aficionados, that brought

PHOTOGRAPHY / DARREN TIESTE
STYLING AND CREATIVE DIRECTION / PARIS LIBBY
MAKE-UP / FRANCESCA TOLOT FOR CLOUTIER REMIX
HAIR / JOHN D FOR TENFOLD TALENT
MANUCURIST / JENNA HIPPO FOR TRACEY MATTINGLY
PHOTO ASSISTANTS / ANDREW RYAN AND GREGORY THOMAS
STYLING / ESTEE STANLEY
STYLING ASSISTANTS / KATHY LAM AND LONI POLKEY
LOCATION / SOWDEN HOUSE, LOS FELIZ, CALIFORNIA

BODYSUIT: DOLCE & GABBANA
SHOES: CHRISTIAN LOUBOUTIN



DRESS: ZAC POSEN
RINGS: SANDRINE CLAYTON

teenagers and twentysomethings flocking to the theatre. And that caught the eye of producers in other media, in particular in television.

Pundits were wondering whether *Glee* would survive, let alone morph into a runaway hit. Fictional musicals on prime-time television had a sad history, most notably the crash-and-burn of *Cop Rock* and *Viva Laughlin*. Not so with *Glee*. With Michele at the helm of a young and extraordinarily talented cast, the show about a dysfunctional high school glee club prospered from day one. The show's on-air triumph spilled over into a hugely successful concert tour, a string of platinum cast albums, two Grammy nominations and an incredible run of 152 singles on the Billboard Top 100 chart – the most in Billboard history.

Michele is expanding her horizons, cultivating a solo music career and big-screen opportunities. Last year she made her feature film debut opposite heart-throb Ashton Kutcher in *New Year's Eve*, and Hollywood is abuzz that she will reprise her role of Wendla in a movie version of *Spring Awakening*. And Michele lent her soprano voice to the title character in the upcoming animated film *Dorothy of Oz*.

Perhaps most remarkable of all, Michele has been able to achieve young diva status without attracting undue attention from the showbiz press. She had a long-term relationship with Broadway actor Theo Stockman that fizzled out last year, but otherwise she manages to avoid the gossip rags. That could have something to do with her calm demeanour and low-key lifestyle. Like Rachel on *Glee*, she perseveres in her own quiet but steady way, racking up the props and stealing hearts.

Watching Glee, I always wonder how you cram all of that singing, dancing and dialogue into one week.

Each episode takes eight days. Ten if it's a longer, heavier episode. And we generally work about 17 hours a day. Within a day you can be doing one or two or three hours of shooting, filming, dancing and recording. Basically I try to explain to people that creating an episode of *Glee* is like jumping out of an airplane and falling to the ground – you learn your lines, you record your songs, you learn your choreography and we somehow land with our feet on the ground.

Each one is like a mini movie. It's incredible.

For sure.

Is it as much fun as it looks?

Absolutely. If I weren't having fun, because the work is so hard, there's no way that I could do it. It's incredibly challenging and it's incredibly taxing. But if it wasn't fun, I don't think that there'd be any physical way that we could get through how difficult and strenuous it is sometimes.

After shooting all week, are you guys pretty much sick of

each other or do you hang out off set?

We have sort of bonded together in a way, like what we've been through no one else can really understand. We have this incredible connection as a cast. We're sort of inseparable. If we didn't get along the way we did, I think you'd be able to see it in these episodes. The fact that we are such a family, I think that transcends, and I do think that is one of the reasons why the show is as successful as it is.

Is there ever any tension on set?

No, people can try to make up as much drama as they like, but the truth is that we really are the happiest family.

Who are your favourite guest stars?

Everyone is so fantastic. We have such great people who come on. I mean, it's like everyone that they pick is so fantastic. I had such a great time with Gwyneth [Paltrow], though. She's such an awesome person. I can't believe the fact that I've had the opportunity to work and sing with Gwyneth Paltrow. She is definitely up there as one of my favourites.

And you had Ricky Martin last week.

Yeah, he's great. I've known him for a very, very long time. We unfortunately didn't have a lot of work to do together. But he's one of those people that I just call the perfect *Glee* cocktail – they just have all of the right things that make them perfect to being on *Glee*.

Was the part of Rachel Berry written specifically for you, or did you have to compete against other actors for the part?

Both, actually. It was written with me in mind. [Show creator] Ryan Murphy and I met in 2007 and he went on to write the show afterwards with me in mind for Rachel. There weren't any other girls in the final round that I was up against, but I still had to audition for the studio and network by myself. I was lucky that I was really the only one, but I still had to prove myself.

Do you have time to watch other TV shows?

Of course! It's all that I really do with my free time, because I work so much and I'm not really a big going-out girl. I don't go out and I don't do stuff like that, so for me if I'm not

outside spending some time with friends over a nice dinner, I'm generally home watching television because it's just the best way for me to wind down from my day.

What are your guilty pleasures when it comes to TV?

Oh my gosh. Anything reality [laughs]. I will literally watch anything, from *Hoarders* to *Say Yes to the Dress*. Anything like that. I just think

“I CAN'T BELIEVE THE
FACT THAT I'VE HAD
THE OPPORTUNITY TO
WORK AND SING WITH
GWYNETH PALTROW”

that sort of mindless entertainment really will get your mind off anything that's going on in your life.

Turning to films, what's the latest on Spring Awakening? Is there going to be a movie version?

I'm really not quite actually sure. I know that it's something that has been a passion project of [director] McG's for a very long time and it has been for me as well. I adore him and I adore the role and the movie. If it actually happens and they want me, then I would be honoured to do it. I just haven't been quite sure of how much of a reality it is yet. But I'm game for anything.

You made your feature-film debut just a couple of months ago in New Year's Eve. What was it like working with Ashton Kutcher?

He's so great. I think that what people don't know about him is how intelligent he is. Not just like smart, but like *really* smart. I had to go home and brush up on my politics and everything current that's going on so that I could keep up with them because he's so well read and so well informed. He was also just so helpful with me in being comfortable and just helping me out, being that it was my first film.

Everyone's been talking about “the kiss” in that

movie – you and Ashton. How many takes did you guys have to get it right?

That was actually the first scene we did. It was day one of shooting. The first thing I did was that scene. We didn't do it too many times. Garry Marshall is a very fast director, so maybe we just did it a handful of times.

Were you nervous about doing that scene?

No, I come from Broadway [laughs]. I've done a lot of things. That's child's play compared to some of the stuff that I've done.

Movie-wise, is there anything new on your plate?

I have an animated movie coming out this year called *Dorothy of Oz*. I'm really excited about that. I'm just right now trying to wrap up this third season of *Glee* and make sure that it's really good, and over my summer hopefully I'll be able to line something up before I start season four.

Does it come as a surprise that people now consider you a sex symbol? That you're appearing on things like Maxim magazine's “Hot 100” girls and similar lists?

Actually, I didn't know that I was until you just told me. That's awesome! That's really cool. I'm a role model to a lot of young girls who watch *Glee* and it's important for me to remember that in my daily life and in the roles that I choose right now. For things like that, I think that it's an honour. I still sort of don't see myself in that way. But why not? I think it's really cool that people see me as being that kind of sexy person. I see it as just sort of a side of me.

In an interview two years ago, you described yourself as being an “unconventional beauty.” Could you elaborate on what you meant by that?

Well, I just feel that the way I look isn't what people would categorise as the typical beauty. I've grown to really love that about myself, that I don't look like everyone else. I think it's what makes me *me*.

Not looking like everyone else wasn't an issue on Broadway. But was it when you first came to Hollywood?



SHIRT, JACKET AND TROUSERS: GUCCI
SHOES: DOLCE & GABBANA

*“CREATING AN EPISODE OF GLEE IS LIKE
JUMPING OUT OF AN AIRPLANE AND
FALLING TO THE GROUND”*

OUTFIT: ALEXANDER MCQUEEN

OUTFIT: TOM FORD
BRACELET: ROBERTO CAVALLI

Yes, for sure! I was definitely never considered sexy before. The great thing about *Glee* is that it has opened up so many doors for me to just show people that true beauty, inner beauty and whatever uniqueness your external beauty really is, is accepted and is cool and is what makes you unique.

Who are your idols in showbiz?

I love Barbra Streisand. Everyone knows that about me. I think that she is incredible. I also love so many people...Meryl Streep. Right now I'm so in love with Michelle Williams. She's such a role model for me, especially coming from being part of a teen television show. She was on *Dawson's Creek* for so many years and then she made such an incredible transition to now being an Oscar-nominated actress and such a fantastic performer. She's definitely someone that I look up to.

You're also getting known for your charity work, especially on animal issues. How did you get involved with PETA?

I was just living in New York and went on to their website one day and said I would like to help and they contacted me. The point is that anyone can do it. I have such a passion because I adore animals so much. I've been working with them ever since.

What is your earliest memory of performing in front of people?

Well, the first time I ever performed was when I was eight years old and I was auditioning for a Broadway show [*Les Misérables*] and I ended up getting the job. I was lucky enough to get the first job that I auditioned for.

How did you prepare for that if you'd never done it before? You were just a natural at eight?

I didn't practice. I just sang a song for them and I got the job. Yeah, I guess I didn't really know that I could sing. And then when I did, I realised that I could, that I was born with it.

Is that something that you wanted or something your parents got you into?

No, they didn't have anything to do with it. My friend was auditioning for a show and I was a really kind of funny kid. As a joke I thought it would be really funny to go, and

my mom took me. We didn't think anything of it and I ended up getting it.

So you were an ordinary schoolkid during the day and on Broadway at night. Did you realise at that age how cool that was?

I loved it. I knew that it was special. And I knew that I wanted to continue to do it.

In your early years, was it like Rachel Berry in Glee – a whirl of constantly learning dance steps and song lines and going to auditions?

No...I mean, outside of school I was working. I worked continuously from eight until 14 or 15 on Broadway. I did two Broadway shows during that time. I had a few years off in high school and then I got my third Broadway show, which was *Fiddler on the Roof*. I was working so much outside of school that for my school experience, I really wanted to keep it as normal as possible.

So you had a fairly normal childhood?

If I hadn't had a normal childhood I don't think that I would've been able to continue working, continue on right now in my life. I think it's because I did have such a great, normal childhood it really helped me to be able to continue to work and want to work.

But you did have a sort of bipolar upbringing – mother and father coming from very different cultural backgrounds. Would you say you're more Italian Roman Catholic or Spanish Sephardic Jew?

I was really raised alongside my mother's side of the family [Italian Catholic], so I would definitely consider that I'm more connected to my Italian roots. But, you know, my whole family is from New York. My father's side and my mother's side, so I got to see everybody all the time and really got to be very connected with my culture and my background.

Do you have a wild side?

Do I have a wild side? Well, I do have 14 tattoos. But I also do come home every single night and watch reality TV with my cat. I'd say for the most part I'm a very outgoing person. I have a lot of energy. I love being around people. But I'm not wild in the sense of "going out" wild. I'm much more homebody. I'm much

more being in intimate places with people. I definitely say I am an outgoing person. I'm an energetic, spontaneous person. But the wild stuff...if it's there, it's private.

Is there anything about you that your fans would be surprised to know?

I think that people would be surprised to know how nervous I get when I perform sometimes. I did a huge arena tour this summer off all over Europe and I was nervous every night. It helps me do a better job.

So there's a "bad girl" lurking somewhere deep down inside of you?

I'm sure I could think of something.

Do you have time for a dating life? Or is it all work, work, work?

I was in a relationship for a very long time [with Theo Stockman] and I'm newly single now for the past couple of months and just enjoying taking care of myself and working right now at this point in my life.

Glee has made you a household name. But has it got to the stage where you can't leave home without being stalked by the paparazzi?

I think at this point, I don't ever let anything stop me from going anywhere. I think it's really random. Some days it feels like everyone in the world watches *Glee* and some days it feels like no one watches the show at all. So it kind of goes back and forth a little bit. But I think that for all of us on the show, our lives have definitely changed a lot.

Ideally speaking, how do you see your career playing out over the next five to 10 years or even longer?

Well, for the past five to 10 years I've had the opportunity to do a little bit of everything. I was on Broadway. I did an arena tour this summer. I did a movie. I did an animated movie. I'm on a television show. I've gotten to work for some of my favourite charities and do things that I feel like I'm making my mark in the world and for the planet. I have had a number-one song on the iTunes charts, sold thousands of records from the show. And my dream would be to continue to be able, as an actor, to do all those things. ■

*"DO I HAVE A WILDSIDE?
WELL, I DO HAVE 14 TATTOOS.
BUT I ALSO COME HOME EVERY
SINGLE NIGHT AND WATCH
REALITY TV WITH MY CAT"*

DRESS: VERSACE
SHOES: MANOLO BLAHNIK
JEWELLERY: YOUNNA