

CRISTINA'S WORLD

The star of Virginia Opera's upcoming production of *Carmen* is a down-to-earth diva with a voice that's destined for stardom.

BY LEONA BAKER

CARMEN IS A BITCH.

And I mean that in the nicest way. The tempestuous Spanish heroine of Georges Bizet's beloved opera, based on the novel by Prosper Mérimée, is the kind of bitch we hate to love. She's gorgeous, she's strong, she's passionate, and she eats men like a wild animal on the rebound from Weight Watchers.

Fortunately Cristina Nassif is nothing of the sort. The 29-year-old Maryland-raised soprano, who'll sing the lead role in Virginia Opera's upcoming production of *Carmen*, is strikingly beautiful, make no mistake. Her angular Mediterranean features and extravagant mane of long, dark curly hair match the gypsy aesthetic to a tee. And her passion for her art and for life are abundantly clear from every moment you spend in her presence.

But she's so, well, *nice*. She laughs easily. She's warm, friendly and genuinely down-to-earth. Her self-deprecating and sometimes goofy sense of humor is utterly disarming.

When I tell her she seems the antithesis of the diva stereotype, she throws her head back with delight, claps her hands together and says "Yes!"

"I think everyone's got a little diva in them," she explains. "I'm a diva, but I think you can know what you want, know what you need...but you don't need to be...well, there's just a right way to be and I try to be that."

I should clarify that Nassif will most likely take issue with my catty characterization of Carmen. She clearly sees herself in the iconic temptress's redeeming qualities.

"I know people think of her as heartless, but I don't think she's heartless. She cares very deeply about so many things — about freedom in particular. You know, she's not one to lie about her feelings. She tells it like it is and that's life."

This is a role Nassif was literally born to play. Her mother is Spanish mezzo-soprano Cristina Herrera de Nassif. Her parents met when her father, a West Virginia native of Lebanese descent and a doctor in the Air Force, was stationed in Spain. She was raised in a musical family with four siblings in a house that was saturated with sound.

Virginia Opera audiences will remember Nassif as Violetta in last season's much-talked-about production of *La Traviata*. Her career was jumpstarted, in fact, when Virginia Opera Artistic Director Peter Mark took

her under his wing as part of the company's "Spectrum Resident Artist" program. She'll return to close the Opera's season as Nedda in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*.

The following are excerpts from my conversation with Nassif. We spoke in the quiet of the "Maestro's Lounge" at the Harrison Opera House where rehearsal began for *Carmen* last week.

You grew up in a musical household. Is this what you always knew you wanted to do for a living?

My siblings and I, we would make this pact to not have anything to do with music when we were growing up because our parents were always trying to get us to watch opera and none of us really thought that we were going to end up doing this. I'm the only one that I guess was crazy enough to make a go at it, but you know, we all grew up playing piano and various instruments....I thought I was going to be a teacher or a pediatrician. I just love kids.

Was it mainly classical music in your house or was it all kinds?

In our house it was mainly classical music, Spanish music, a little bit of Arabic music from going to masses and stuff and going to reunions in my dad's hometown, but mainly opera for me. I mean I grew up loving everything else, don't get me wrong...Now I listen to whatever's on. I mean, in my car I'm playing Coldplay. And I just got this soundtrack from

Walk the Line that I just can't get away from. I love it.

The role of Carmen is one that, perhaps more than any other opera heroine, really has a life of its own outside of the opera — especially for Spaniards, who really identify with this character. How important is it for you to get her right?

It's amazing to get to play a character whose inner fire and temperament is so much like your own, so I'm just going to have a ball delving into that part of the character. She's smart, she's funny, she's witty...That's not really answering your question, is it? [laughs]

It's very important for me to get to play this role. It's hard. I mean they are big shoes to fill.

What's your working relationship like with Peter Mark?

I have had an incredible time with him. He and I see eye to eye on, I'd say, almost everything. I couldn't ask for more — and I'm not just saying that, I swear. Doing *La Traviata* with him, I was so comfortable. I mean he literally just held me in the palms of his hands the whole time...he could feel when I needed rest, this being such a big role and he gave me room to interpret to use my instincts. He watched me so carefully. On any given night I could have done anything and he would have followed me. And he did. I think the relationship between a conductor and an artist is so important.