

## All good, no evil in *Sound of Music* role

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Jacqueline Feldman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Variety is too weak a word for Lisa Howard's recent roles.

The actor best known for originating the role of Rona Lisa Peretti in "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee" on Broadway will play Mother Abbess in "The Sound of Music" at the Pittsburgh CLO Tuesday through July 31.

She last played Paulette in "Legally Blonde" at the Muny in St. Louis.

Before that, she wrapped up filming as sexy vampire Siobhan in "The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn," the eagerly anticipated next installment of the hit series.

So how does it feel to go from Gothic to girly-girl and monster to mother superior?

"You take one character at a time and start from scratch with each character," Ms. Howard said, laughing. The shift from Siobhan to Paulette, she said, "was night and day."

Evil is fun, but Ms. Howard especially enjoys the role of Mother Abbess, the character who sings such hits as "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" and "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?" This musical has been one of her favorites since childhood.

"I am a tad young for people who could typically play this role," she quipped. Ms. Howard is in her mid-30s and looks younger. "But you're in a nun's habit, so it doesn't really matter."

Besides, she could play the role forever. "Until I can't sing it anymore."

The show also will feature Jennifer Hope Wills, who last starred in the CLO's production of "Carousel" (2005), as Maria and Robert Cuccioli as Capt. Von Trapp -- a role he reprises from the last time the CLO staged "The Sound of Music" in 2005.

This is Ms. Howard's CLO debut and her first time in Pittsburgh.

"It feels like a really neat town," she said. An Akron, Ohio, native, she plans to travel home to see her parents on a day off -- when she has a day off. The CLO's crowded summer schedule gives actors one intense week of rehearsal time to pull each show together.

"We're pretty engrossed in what we're doing," she said.

It's a far different experience from the world of film, where scenes are shot in many takes. "The pace is a lot slower," Ms. Howard said of film. "It's a different world. It's an exciting world."

She was a "Twilight" fan and had read all four books in the series long before she landed the role of Siobhan,

"I thought it was cool just to get the audition," she said. "And when I got booked, I just about died."



Lisa Howard rehearses as Mother Abbess for Pittsburgh CLO

In the fantastical "Twilight" world, Siobhan is a vampire born in the year 1490 who leads the Irish Coven, a group of vampires in Ireland. To step into this otherworldly role was no small feat.

"You just have to keep in the back of your mind that they're not like real people," Ms. Howard said. "Twilight" vampires tend to stand still, economizing their motions. Vampires never fidget. "Their moves are very purposeful," she said.

"The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn" will be released in two parts, the first Nov. 18.

Ms. Howard's character will figure mainly in the second part, to be released Nov. 16, 2012. The "Breaking Dawn" films will be the fourth and fifth movies in the series, which began in 2008 with "Twilight" and is based on the best-selling book series by Stephenie Meyer.

Far from being mobbed with crazed fans, the movie set was tightly secured, Ms. Howard said.

But "Twilight" enthusiasts have reached her anyway, posting interviews, photo and video on fan sites such as [www.twilightguide.com](http://www.twilightguide.com), [en.twilightpoison.com](http://en.twilightpoison.com) and [twilightsaga.wikia.com](http://twilightsaga.wikia.com).

Ms. Howard, who just made her recording debut with a solo CD, "Songs of Innocence and Experience: The Music of William Finn," is unsure what the future holds. So, it's a good thing she's up for anything.

Her favorite roles have been Paulette, a stepsister in "Cinderella," also at the St. Louis Muny, and especially Rona Lisa Peretti -- She likes best to originate roles.

"I'm always looking for those new parts that I can make my own," she said.

Next, she'll originate another role in a new musical comedy, "It Shoulda Been You," directed by David Hyde Pierce, which opens Oct. 4 at the George Street Playhouse in New Brunswick, N.J.

She may put out another CD sometime -- "I love being in the studio," she said. She has gone to more film auditions recently, with her foot now firmly in the door.

"As an actor, all you can hope for is to keep working," she said.

For now, "The Sound of Music" is a good stop along the way.

"It's such a sweet show," she said. "I can't wait to see our run-through and the dress rehearsal."

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