

**July 27, 2008****Film**

A Leading Role, With Room to Stretch

By KAREN DURBIN

EARLY one especially fine morning last month in Central Park, New Yorkers kept stopping to watch [Melissa Leo](#) shoot a scene for a movie called "[Veronika Decides to Die.](#)" There wasn't a lot to see, just Ms. Leo on a park bench trading lines with the English actor [David Thewlis](#), who, like her, is known as an actor's actor, which is to say, immensely talented and insufficiently famous. The movie, based on a Paulo Coelho novel and starring [Sarah Michelle Gellar](#), is an indie aimed for release next year. Ms. Leo does a lot of those, and her part is secondary. She does a lot of those too. But, she said later of the character she plays, "It's a pretty classic supporting role, with several scenes throughout and her own arc in the film."

That is larger than some of her parts, but her fans have long been hungry for more than a few scenes and the occasional arc. This week they are going to get it. Ms. Leo is, hands down, the unequivocal star of "[Frozen River,](#)" the first feature by the writer and director Courtney Hunt, opening on Friday. A drama with the plot and pace of a thriller, the movie is about a number of things, but they all revolve around Ray Eddy, an upstate New York working-poor single mother whose gambler husband has run off with the money she'd been saving for the down payment on a bigger, handsomer trailer home to replace the rusted hulk she's been raising their two sons in. Faced with a particularly grim Christmas, Ray decides to join Lila, a local Mohawk woman, in the dangerous but lucrative business of smuggling illegal immigrants into the

United States from Canada, across the ice-bound St. Lawrence River.

Awarding Ms. Hunt the grand jury prize for best feature at the [Sundance Film Festival](#) this year, [Quentin Tarantino](#), one of the jurors, said, “It took my breath away, and then somewhere around the last hour it put my heart in a vise and proceeded to twist that vise until the last frame.”

The women’s scary night trips across the ice in Ray’s beaten-up car could justify some of that hyperbole. But the biggest thrill for many fans will be watching Ms. Leo perform with enough room to explore one of the complicated, surprising women she’s so good at sketching in smaller roles. Ray is vulnerable to life’s punches, but she’s no sentimental construct. For one thing she’s a bigot, though not overtly — at least toward most of the people she and Lila shovel into the trunk of her car. But she’s furious at having to transport a Pakistani couple she suspects of being Muslim terrorists and soothes her conscience by treating them horribly. At the same time she embodies the almost invisible heroism of someone continually pecked at by poverty. She not only keeps going, but her dogged problem-solving concentration also makes it clear that the thought of quitting doesn’t enter her mind.

There’s also the weird pleasure of seeing how bad Ms. Leo is willing to look for the camera. Ray is old and haggard before her time, her gullied face framed by terrible hair, crimped and dyed a harsh, aging red with bangs that coil wormlike across her forehead but telegraph the message: I’m still trying.

“That was mine,” Ms. Leo said proudly. “Successful or not, Ray’s hair and mascara say that she’s a woman, and she cares to be pretty. It’s something she did in high school when she met her husband, and it worked then, so maybe it’ll work now.”

This may be Ms. Leo's first starring role, but she has been in 70 film and television productions since 1984, when she made her debut on the soap opera "All My Children." She's also packed in a substantial amount of Off Broadway theater. And the work shows no signs of drying up. So far this year she's done eight features, a short film and an episode of "[Law & Order.](#)"

The role that put her on the map, though, was in the groundbreaking NBC police drama "Homicide: Life on the Street." Always in man-tailored pants but sporting a curly, light-red mane halfway down her back, Ms. Leo's wry, sardonic cop, Kay Howard, was the squad's avenging angel. Ms. Leo appeared in 76 episodes from 1993 to '97, only to have network executives replace her with a series of more glamorous female characters. Fans still gripe about this on the Internet. At the time she issued a statement saying she was "surprised and saddened," adding, "There were not enough women like Kay on TV, and now there are none."

Her independence has deep roots. When she was 9, she and her mother moved from the Lower East Side to Putney, Vt., and eventually to London, where, at 15, she remained on her own to study acting for two years before coming back to get her high school equivalency diploma and enroll at Purchase College.

"My mom was a '70s mom," she said of her mother's willingness to let her stay in London. "She paved a road that no one had yet walked. To get the hippie out of certain characters is probably the most difficult thing for me. I was not a hippie by choice but by birth."

Ms. Leo, 47, has long lived in Ulster County, near Woodstock, N.Y., with her son by the actor [John Heard](#), and now on her own. She's a familiar presence at Woodstock's indie-oriented film festival, and is part of the loose network of artists, performing and otherwise, who have gravitated there.

She explains her résumé by saying, “I do the work that’s in front of me.” But when there’s a part that excites her, she goes after it. One of her most memorable performances was in [Alejandro González Iñárritu’s “21 Grams,”](#) in which she played the steadfast wife of [Benicio Del Toro’s](#) tormented ex-convict and former junkie. Even after submitting two taped auditions, Ms. Leo said, she probably wouldn’t have landed the role if she hadn’t offered to fly herself to California to audition in person.

That perseverance paid off with “Frozen River” as well. Not in the usual sense of a star attaching herself to an indie project in order to attract investors; she doesn’t have that kind of draw, she said, adding with a grin, “Maybe next week.” Instead, Ms. Leo agreed, as she has on other occasions with novice directors, to appear in a short film by Ms. Hunt, who was hoping to make a calling card to raise money for the feature.

“I didn’t realize she had a full-length script until after the short was finished,” Ms. Leo said. At which point enlightened self-interest kicked in. It took four years and a lot of bad meetings before the money was raised, and more than once Ms. Hunt nearly gave up. So Ms. Leo would call every so often and ask, “We still making our movie?”

The answer may have come slowly at times, but it was always, [“Yes.”](#)

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