

## FEATURES



### LAUREN AMBROSE Goes Sci-Fi for Starz

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August 2011

“I think I would be a crazy person without it,” says Lauren Ambrose, reflecting on why she chose to become an actor. “I started doing theater when I was 13 and I remember feeling so excited being around all the people working there, making a living in a creative way. I wanted to live my life that way. I wanted to be creative in the world.” Ambrose is widely known for her sensational turn as the artsy and somber Claire Fisher on HBO’s smash series, “Six Feet Under” (2001-2005), but before she ever stepped onto creator Alan Ball’s revered set, she was already a veteran actor, having shared screen credits with Jennifer Love Hewitt, Kevin Kline, Joan Cusack, Neve Campbell, Matt Dillon, and Bob Newhart.

The constantly working actor and mom (Ambrose has a four-year-old son, Orson, with her husband, photographer Sam Handel) now co-stars on the new Starz series, “Torchwood:

Miracle Day,” a continuation of the popular British Sci-Fi TV series, “Torchwood” (a spin-off of the BBC drama, “Doctor Who”). “Torchwood: Miracle Day,” also starring John Barrowman, Mekhi Phifer, and Bill Pullman, follows the global investigation of an unnatural phenomenon where everyone in the world mysteriously stops dying.

In her youth, Ambrose attended the ACES Educational Center for the Arts in her hometown of New Haven, Connecticut, and spent summers studying opera and voice at Boston University’s Tanglewood Institute. Enthralled by the theater, she moved to New York City and began her professional acting career in Off-Broadway plays and doing TV stints on “Law & Order” (1992-1998), which led to her feature-film debut in Frank Oz’s *In & Out* (1997). These were followed by a more substantial role in the comedy, *Can’t Hardly Wait* (1998), five guest-starring roles on Fox’s teen drama, “Party of Five” (1999), and the lead role in the campy, cult-favorite, 60’s beach-party spoof/slasher film, *Psycho Beach Party* (2000).

It was in 2001 that Ambrose was cast — along with Michael C. Hall and Peter Krause — in “Six Feet Under,” which followed the turbulent times of the Fisher family as they faced a storm of emotional challenges while running a Pasadena funeral home. The critically acclaimed drama swept the television-award spectrum, winning nine Emmys, three SAG Awards, three Golden Globes and a Peabody Award, while earning Ambrose two Best Actress in a Supporting Role Emmy nominations.

Shortly after “Six Feet Under” wrapped in 2005 — with what many critics consider the most unforgettable series finale in television history — Ambrose returned to the New York stage, making her Broadway debut alongside Ben Gazzara in the Lincoln Center Theater production of Clifford Odets’ “Awake and Sing!” in 2006. She continued to perform in New York for the next few years, appearing as Juliet in a 2007 production of “Romeo and Juliet” at the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, as Ophelia in a 2008 Shakespeare in the Park production of “Hamlet,” and opposite Susan Sarandon and Geoffrey Rush in “Exit the King” at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway in 2009. That same year, she lent her voice to the monster, KW, in Spike Jonze’s feature-film version of *Where the Wild Things Are*. Ambrose also appeared on the big screen with Natalie

Portman and Lisa Kudrow in *The Other Woman* (2009), with Jeff Bridges in *A Dog Year* (2009), and with Paul Giamatti in *Cold Souls* (2009). More recently, she completed the upcoming big-screen comedy, *Wanderlust*, starring Jennifer Aniston, Paul Rudd, and Alan Alda, as well as *Think of Me* with Penelope Ann Miller, Dylan Baker, and "True Blood"'s Adina Porter. Ambrose takes some time with Venice to discuss her work and inspirations.

**Venice: When did you first become interested in acting?**

**Lauren Ambrose:** When I was growing up in New Haven, there was always a lot of theater around. Yale was very close, so there were things like Yale Rep around, and I would go and see a lot of plays. My dad saw that I was developing an interest in acting, so he started showing me his favorite movies, like *The Deer Hunter* [1978] and *Taxi Driver* [1976] and *Dog Day Afternoon* [1975], which were not very appropriate things for an 8-year-old girl to be watching. [laughs] During this time, I remember thinking, "This is what I want to do."

**Were you completely confident that you'd make it as an actor when you moved to New York?**

In a reckless, Juliet Capulet kind of way, I would have to say, yes. I was such a disaster in my late teens and early 20s. I didn't have any kind of backup plan and never really gave myself any kind of net. I left myself no other option. I just knew I wanted to make a living in a creative way and, by some miracle, it worked out. [laughs] I still feel like if they never let me be on "Torchwood" or "Six Feet Under" or be onstage in New York, I'd be in a community theater or in a closet somewhere doing theater for myself. I still may end up there someday. [laughs]

**What memories stand out when you look back at your time on "Six Feet Under"?**

I now realize how unique it was to have been in such an incredibly idealistic environment where people cared so deeply about the work. It was probably the closest thing to doing group theater I'll ever know because we all worked together for seven years. We saw each other every day. We lived close together. It was a true ensemble. I didn't go to college, so this was like college for me. I got to go to work and act with Frances Conroy everyday, which was incredible. She's connected to the heavens. Never has a false moment in any of her work.

**Your friends from "Six Feet Under" have continued to do great work on TV. Do you watch "Dexter" [with Michael C. Hall], "Parenthood" [with Peter Krause], or [Alan Ball's] "True Blood"?**

I do try to stay in touch with the people I've worked with, but I don't really watch any TV. I haven't even seen all of "Six Feet Under." [laughs] I always feel terrible when I see people who've been working and I'm not familiar with their show. But it's not personal. Watching TV just isn't really a part of my life.

**What do you like to do when you're not working?**

I like to make things, cooking, making my son's Halloween costume, planting a vegetable garden, reading, making music with my band (Lauren Ambrose and the Leisure Class). Finding creative, little projects to fill my life with, like [set designer] Christine Jones' "Theatre for One." Have you heard of it?

**I have not.**

It's a cool art project in New York where one performer performs a theater piece for one audience member. People in Times Square buy a ticket, wait in line and go in one at a time to watch a performance. I played a song that I wrote.

**What do you look for when you're choosing an acting project?**

I look for projects with people involved who I feel will inspire me. I also look for things that are different from anything I've already done.

**Like "Torchwood: Miracle Day"?**

Yes. I've never worked in the Sci-Fi genre before, so this is something very new for me.

**Are you a fan of the BBC “Torchwood” series?**

I had never even heard of “Torchwood.” I had no idea that it was such a huge, global phenomenon. When I signed on to do it, I started getting emails and phone calls from “Torchwood” fans from all over. And after talking with [creator] Russell T. Davies about the show, I started to realize why so many people love it. The show explores very big and interesting and philosophical and relevant questions. Every detail is considered.

**Jilly Kitzinger, your character on “Torchwood: Miracle Day,” is a ruthless PR woman looking to capitalize on the chaos created by eternal life. She is not a nice person. How did you prepare to play her?**

So much of it was the clothes. I think the person who does the costumes is such a big part of the acting process. I got to wear fancy couture dresses and have fancy bags that match the shoes that match the lipstick. All with big hair. [laughs] You can’t help but have a certain attitude when you’re wearing these heels and dresses and lipstick. It does something to a girl. It also helps to carry the BlackBerrys and iPads and iPhones and multiple devices. Jilly is a vicious woman who would step over you if you were dying to get ahead in the world. I tried to channel all the worst parts of all of the publicists or agents I’ve come across in my life. [laughs]

**Your work is beautiful to watch. And you nail every role I’ve seen you in. Do you study acting or do any kind of training to keep your chops up?**

I’ve never really had any formal acting training. I always feel like I’m taking a class or studying with every new job I take. I go out there and learn on my feet. Every job is a new experience, so I always feel like I’m starting from scratch. And I always think, “This is the one where I’m going to be found out and I’ll surely be fired.” [laughs] And then some miracle happens and it works out. And usually that miracle is all of the great people that are there who support and inspire me.

**If you were not able to work as an actor, how would you make a living?**

I don’t know! I’m so bad at everything else. [laughs] I’m interested in cooking and making things, so I’d probably make something. If I couldn’t get work as an actor, I think I’d be a baker. Same hours. [laughs] ▼

*“Torchwood: Miracle Day” premieres July 8th at 10PM on STARZ.*