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MOVIES

Really living it up

Lauren Ambrose of 'Six Feet Under' is digging her work

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

Sometime, death is only the beginning. When the acclaimed HBO drama "Six Feet Under" passed on two years ago, star Lauren Ambrose found new life on stage, in film, on TV and in her personal life.

While pregnant last year, the 29-year-old actress made her Broadway debut opposite Mark Ruffalo in the Clifford Odets revival "Awake and Sing!" In January, she gave birth to her son, Orson. Last summer, she starred in Shakespeare in the Park's "Romeo & Juliet," which garnered Ambrose great reviews.

On Friday, she'll be seen as an ambitious graduate student who latches on to her writing idol (played by Frank Langella) in "Starting Out in the Evening." It follows a busy time when she gave a vocal performance as a "wild thing" in the Spike Jonze movie "Where the Wild Things Are," plays Jeff Bridges' daughter in the upcoming "A Dog Year," and taped episodes of the sitcom "The Return of Jezebel James" with Parker Posey.

"I don't think I will ever say 'I know what I'm doing,'" says Ambrose, who first gained notice in the 1998 teen comedy "Can't Hardly Wait." "Every job that I get, every time I start, I think, 'Okay, I'm definitely getting fired from this.' Because every actor gets fired *some-time*, and I haven't yet. So every acting job for me is like starting from scratch. It's an exercise in faith."

And an exercise in trust: Ambrose says that, thanks to an impressionable reading of "To Kill a Mocking-

bird" when she was 11, she has "a problem with authority." So how did Andrew Morgan, director of "Evening," win her confidence?

"Andrew is very passionate about his work, and this movie in particular," says Ambrose, who married her husband, Sam Handel, a photographer, in 2001. "I remember talking to him about it and he was weeping when talking about doing this film. I've noticed that the people who make the best movies are the ones who are really passionate."

Ambrose felt a kinship with her character, Heather, a young woman who is sort of a less-poisonous Eve Harrington: She woos editors, writers and others who can advance her desire to become a writer herself. (Langella's Leonard Schiller is an obscure, ailing writer she persuades to let her interview him at length for a thesis on his work.) But Heather doesn't try and take advantage of people's kindness so much as use their knowledge and utilize it.

In the same way, Ambrose used being a new mother to bring passion to the all-consuming love of "Romeo & Juliet."

"He's the real Romeo," says Ambrose of her son. "And I was able to use [pregnancy] and having a baby as Juliet. You use things in your life, and Shakespeare can hold all that."



Lauren Ambrose is a student in "Starting Out in the Evening."