

Adam Lambert's Early Theater Years Give Him 'American Idol' Edge



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Lambert's childhood theater mentor recalls how the natural performer got his start.

By Gil Kaufman



Adam Lambert

Photo: Michael Becker/ Getty Images/ Fox

There's a really good reason why **Adam Lambert** looks so comfortable on the "American Idol" stage: He's been there almost his entire life.

Not the *actual* "Idol" stage, but ones like it. The 28-year-old began his theater career at the Children's Theatre Network (now known as the Metropolitan Educational Theatre, or MET2) in his hometown of San Diego when he was just 8-years-old.

"He came in as a little squirt, maybe a third-grader and stayed with us through his teens," said Kathie Urban, the non-profit theater's executive producer, whose late husband, Alex H. Urban, was the first to spot and nurture Lambert's budding talents. The organization, which runs four children's theaters in Southern California, accepts aspiring young thespians with no auditions and puts on two to four full musicals a year.

"My husband was good at recognizing young talent and when he did he poured more of himself into those kids," said Urban. "There's a sparkle and a passion you see in the young people [like Lambert] that's in their eyes and body language, where you can tell they want to please you, and you can see they get a joy and excitement from doing it."

Over an eight-year stint at the children's theater, Lambert started out in the chorus of "You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown," then graduated to the lead in "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." He starred as Huckleberry Finn in "Big River" and played both male leads in "The Secret Garden," which the theater produced after the Urbans saw the show on Broadway and Alex immediately thought of casting Lambert.

“I think he was always very comfortable in his skin and with who he was,” Urban said. “On the stage, he always had great confidence. He was very focused and directed at what he wanted to do and being the best and excelling. ... I absolutely believe he was born to perform. He had that talent as a young man, and it just grew and grew as he grew up.”

Though “Garden” was vocally challenging, Kathie said her husband was confident Lambert could handle it. And once he hit the stage, she recalled, the reaction was, “Oh my God, we had tears in our eyes.”

The theater holds its young charges to a high standard, and Urban said Lambert always seemed very comfortable being on stage and loved doing the shows, which required him to sing in a variety of musical styles while honing his acting skills as well. And though he’d probably prefer she not mention it, Lambert was so versatile that he even played Peter Pan in a production, flying around the stage in a rigging for a part that’s typically reserved for a woman with a much smaller frame.

Urban said that lots of performers who appeared on Broadway and in national tours, have graduated from her program, but Lambert is by far the most famous alumnus they’ve produced so far. Given the wealth of experience Lambert soaked up under the tutelage on the MET2 stage, Urban said the jump to “Idol” was a natural one, even if not everyone initially agreed.

“I know in the beginning, there was talk about how he’s too musical theater and too over the top,” she said. “And every week, I had to disagree, because I think his musical-theater background has helped to make him the incredible performer he is — and have the physicality onstage that’s necessary to engage and audience.”

Perhaps she’s a bit biased. OK, she’s admittedly *way* biased, but Urban thinks Lambert’s finely honed talents are going to help him get to the winners’ circle.

“I think there are some very talented young people in the running on ‘American Idol,’ ” Urban said. “But Adam’s whole physicality and his ability to draw you in and just everything he does — just exudes performance and entertaining ... and that’s what I feel some of the other ones don’t do. And his personality just beams of who he is.”