

Long trek from Wicked Witch to 'Scandal'

UPS alumna Darby Stanchfield returns to tell how she went from poison apples in Alaska to ABC hit prime-time show

BY CRAIG SAILOR
Staff writer

The sixth-grade girls in the small Aleutian Islands fishing village of Dutch Harbor, Alaska, all wanted to be Sleeping Beauty in the school play. All, that is, except for Darby Stanchfield.

"I wanted to be the Wicked Witch," Stanchfield recalls. And an actor was born.

It's been a long road from Dutch Harbor to Hollywood — with a four-year stop at Tacoma's University of Puget Sound — for Stanchfield. Now one of the cast members of ABC's hit political thriller "Scandal," she returns Monday to Tacoma for a talk at her alma mater. The actress studied communications and theater at UPS in the early 1990s.

In the over-the-top "Scandal," Stanchfield, 42, plays Abby Whelan, the right-hand woman to Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington. Pope runs a public relations firm that solves problems for its political clients, most notably the president of the United States. Abby's moral compass seems to work better than most of the other characters on the show, who routinely double cross, lie and murder their way to power.

"Scandal," Stanchfield said, has changed her life.

"The show has been such a huge explosion of success. The most obvious change is that now I'm getting recognized. Just going to the grocery store people know who I am," she said.

Before "Scandal," Stanchfield could go almost unnoticed. "Did we go to high school together? You look so familiar. I would just

say, 'Oh, I have one of those faces! Now I get 'Oh, there's Abby from "Scandal,"' she said.

"Scandal" wraps up its third season Thursday.

Though "Scandal" is Stanchfield's most successful run, she's no stranger to television. She had a short story arc in season two of the AMC drama "Mad Men" and has a recurring role on the CBS military crime drama "NCIS." Her other credits are substantial: "Castle," "Jericho," "Burn Notice," "CSI: Miami," "How I Met Your Mother," "CSI: New York," "The Mentalist," "Private Practice," "Bones," "Nip/Tuck," "Without a Trace," and "Monk."

But in the beginning, there was the Wicked Witch — an experience that almost ended in disaster. During that sixth-grade play, a piece of the set fell on Stanchfield.

"It hit me square on the head. My mom came rushing in. 'Are you OK?' I didn't even miss a beat. I was in character. I was evil. I was there to put a spell on Sleeping Beauty," Stanchfield recalls.

Though she didn't know it at the time, it was that turn as the witch that turned her into an actress. "I really devoured that experience — that little play."

In Dutch Harbor, Stanchfield's father was a king crab fisherman. The small town is now a location in the reality TV show



Darby Stanchfield plays Abby Whelan on TV's "Scandal." Stanchfield will be in Tacoma on Monday to speak at University of Puget Sound. She studied communications and theater at UPS.

"Deadliest Catch."

"We had one gas station, one restaurant, one channel on TV, a roller rink for the kids, and a recreation center that would show movies on Sunday night," Stanchfield said.

"Because I literally grew up in the middle of nowhere, I spent my life pretending. My sister and I were always make-believing. I was acting before I even knew what it was called," Stanchfield said.

At age 16, Stanchfield moved with her family to Edmonds and then shortly thereafter to Mercer Island. In high school, she set her sights on UPS.

"I wanted to be out of the house but close to home. When I took a tour, I fell in love with the place,"

Stanchfield said of UPS. She was also attracted to the small size of the college and the school's curriculum. Drama, however, was not on her list.

"I didn't have the courage to say 'I'm going to be an actor. Who is going to take me seriously?'" Stanchfield said. "There was such disparity in where I came from and where I wanted to be. I just felt overwhelmed as a young adult."

Still, she crammed as much acting as she could into her life. She was in UPS productions and took acting classes in Seattle. Though she joined a sorority during her freshman year, she quit after a few months.

"I was really sorting out where I fit in and who I was.

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DARBY STANCHFIELD

When: 7 p.m. Monday

Where: Kilworth Memorial Chapel at the University of Puget Sound

Admission: Free but limited seating is available to members of the public not affiliated with UPS. Tickets for the general public may be available starting at noon Monday. To reserve, go to tickets.pugetsound.edu or call 253-879-3100.

Because of my upbringing, I was more independent, more of a loner. The theater in a way acted like a social group or a sorority.

"There is kind of a bubble when you are in college so I gained confidence there," Stanchfield said. But after she left UPS, she struggled for three years in Seattle, waiting tables, working secretarial jobs and taking small acting parts.

"That period spawned a deep conviction in me that I was going to be an actor," she said.

Finally, she auditioned for and was accepted into a master's program at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco — one of 22 who was accepted out of more than 1,000 who tried out.

After San Francisco, and seemingly countless actors before her, she made the move to Southern California to pursue her craft. She was in her 30s, which Stanchfield acknowledged

is old by Hollywood standards.

"I've never said, 'I'm not going to work because I'm too old.' I just don't go there," she said.

But what followed was one door slam after another for the next year and a half.

"I learned early on that you just can't take it personally. 'No' actually means 'not now,'" she said.

Then one day her agent called. She had been cast in an independent film adaptation of Oscar Wilde's "The Picture of Dorian Gray," shooting in Eastern Europe.

"When I got that call, it was just surreal. I thought I had died and gone to heaven," she recalls.

She made the film, released in 2005, with another then-unknown actor, Josh Duhamel. After that came the guest starring TV roles and commercials — more than 100 by Stanchfield's count. The commercials, Stanchfield said, paid her rent.

If Stanchfield's red hair looks familiar, you might have seen it in an Herbal Essences spot. She recently recounted her audition for the commercial on "Jimmy Kimmel Live." And yes, she is a natural redhead.

"Both of my parents were redheads. It runs deep in the family."

Stanchfield's commercial days are over — at least while she rides the success of "Scandal."

"Doing the talk shows and magazine photo shoots — all of that is new and exciting and fun. Hey, I'm just happy to make a living as an actor. But I pinch myself all the time. I can't believe it's happening."