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.

“Ji 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 eight-hand woman to Olivia Pope, played by Kerry Washington. Pope runs a public relations firm that solves problems for its powerful clients, most notably the president of the United States. Abby’s social clout 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 thing is that now I’m getting recognized when I go to the grocery store among people who 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 it, oh there’s Abby from ‘Scandal,’ ” she said.

“Scandal” wraps up its third season Thursday. Though “Scandal” is Stanchfield’s most successful role, 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,” “Ivy,” “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 at the beginning, there was the Wicked Witch of the West, a character 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 mother was rushing in. ‘Are you OK?’ I didn’t even miss a beat. I was still on my line. She was there to put a spell on Sleeping Beauty,” Stanchfield recalls.

“Because I literally stood up in the middle of nowhere, I spent my life pretending. My mother and I were always make-believing, I was acting because I knew what it was called,” Stanchfield said.

“Because 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 remained so as much acting as she could while a student 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.

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