



on a
ROLE

THE MANY FACES OF FRANKLIN OJEDA SMITH

by Tim Kelly



“Every road leads to a reckoning.”

The line belongs to Deacon Cuffy, Franklin Ojeda Smith’s recurring character in the critically acclaimed HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*. It could just as easily describe Smith’s life journey.

Smith, Stockton’s longtime professor of sociology and anthropology, was lying in a Philadelphia hospital bed during an ultimately successful fight with cancer nearly 12 years ago when he heard a voice in his mind. “Will you do it now?”

“Yes,” Smith said to himself, regarding the voice as that of a higher power. “If I get better I will certainly do it. Or at least try.”

“It” was Smith’s long-delayed passion for acting.

Dormant for 45 years since attending a performing arts high school in New York City, Smith regained his health and signed up for acting classes. An agent took an interest after watching him perform a scene from the classic film, *A Patch of Blue* in an actor’s showcase. After that came a seemingly endless series of auditions.

The rest, as the saying goes, is show-biz history.

Smith, who has been a Stockton faculty member for 38 years, began landing small roles that led to higher profile roles. To date, he has amassed 40 credits in a wide range of films and television productions.

In addition to “Boardwalk Empire,” which he describes as “the highlight of my career thus far,” Smith has appeared in the Disney hit feature film *Invincible*, as well as such TV blockbusters as *The Wire*, *Cold Case*, *Rescue Me*, *Nurse Jackie* and *Law & Order*.

His deep and rich voice, made additionally distinctive with its Gullah

accent, has helped him land additional work as a narrator and voiceover artist.

Now well into his 60s, Smith is performing a second act at a time when most of his contemporaries are slowing down. And the reviews have been nothing short of “smashing.”

“Franklin’s efforts to become a working actor are not unlike what I went through to make it in pro football,” said Vince Papale, whose personal story of going from sandlot rough-touch player with no college experience to the Philadelphia Eagles inspired *Invincible*. “Franklin is a guy who never lost faith in his abilities.”

Long before Smith considered an acting career, he believed his future would be in major league baseball. As a youth in the 1950s, the Sea Islands, SC, native moved with his siblings to the Bronx to live with his mother. There he became an ardent follower of the Brooklyn Dodgers, idolizing Jackie Robinson and the other stars of baseball’s first integrated team.

In school, a turn in the title role in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* gave Smith his first taste of acting success and encouragement from his teachers, who urged him to continue as a thespian. But Smith would have none of it.

“They may have given me the role because the old man was Cuban and I could speak Spanish,” he said. “I did enjoy it, and the teachers saw something in me.”

However, young Franklin believed he would be the next Dodger shortstop. With the city’s highest batting average, a slick glove and strong arm, such an aspiration didn’t seem out of line. Although he was acknowledged to be among the best

high school players in New York, opportunities for black players were still rare.

“When I saw that bonus money was being paid for (white) ballplayers to sign who didn’t have my talent—or statistics—I knew it was time to learn to be a student.”

He took an interest in psychology and received his B.A. in psychology from Hampton Institute where he was also introduced to civic service. The Civil Rights Movement was in full bloom and after Hampton Franklin joined the national Teachers Corps (a domestic version of the Peace Corps) and earned his Master of Urban Education from Springfield College and his doctorate in Sociology of Education at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst. He landed at Stockton in 1973 and has been a high profile faculty member ever since.

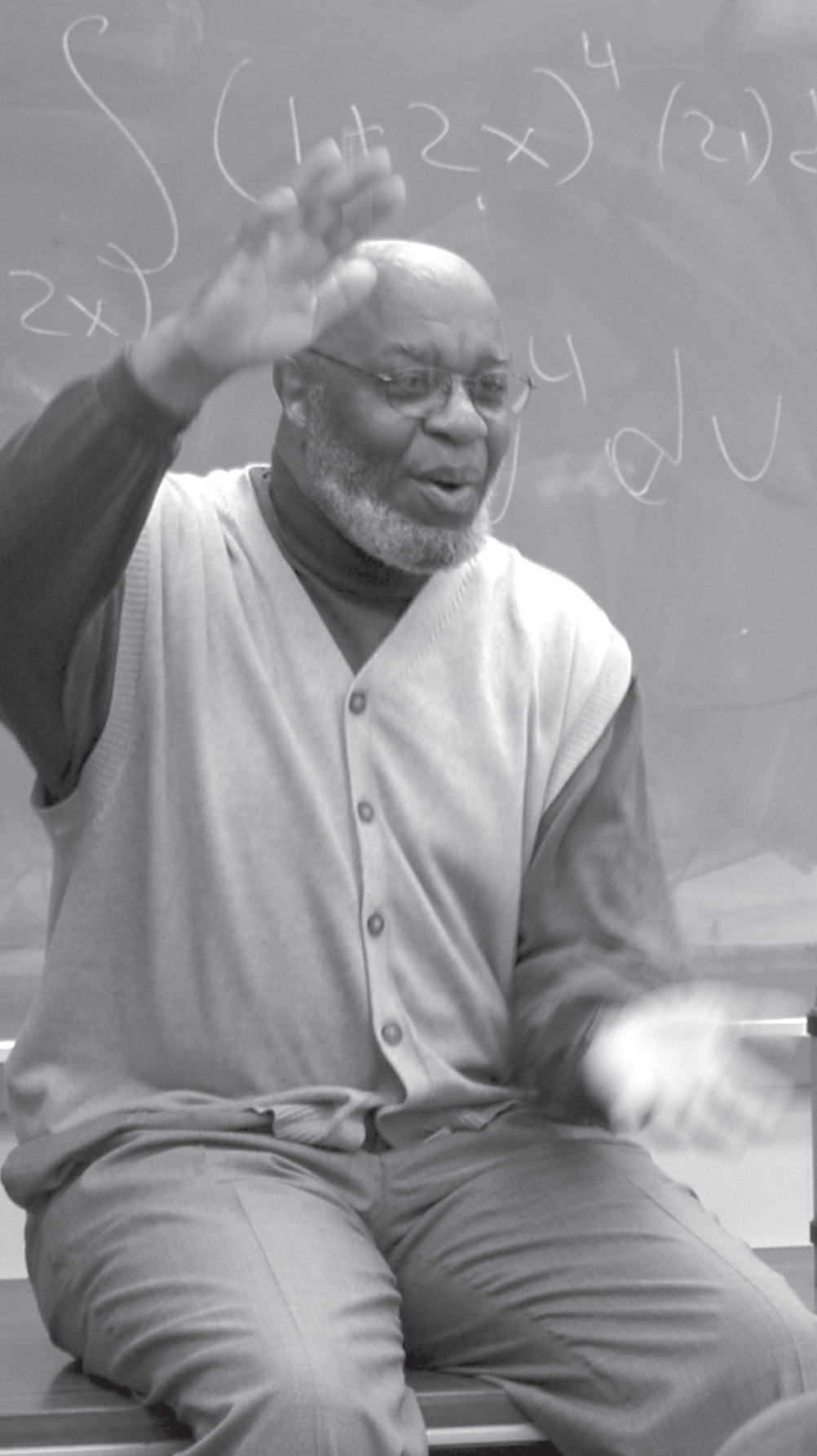
Smith established a reputation as an inspirational speaker. His ability to emote and connect with an audience led to keynote talks at high profile College events including freshman convocation and Latino visitation days.

Drawing from his experience has helped him develop as an actor, which included its start right here at Stockton.

“In researching roles, a background in sociology and psychology certainly helps,” he said. “I have played everything from a homeless person to authority figures like a judges, pastors, even a saint. My many years as a professor are probably most fundamental to all I’ve done as an actor.” Also helpful, says Smith, is a professor’s need to “project and communicate to the back of a large lecture hall.”

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His first adult role was here at Stockton in 1996, *Peridian*. Smith played an alien being from outer space for the CHEER Conference, a prejudice reduction program for elementary through high school aged students. He received further encouragement after playing the role of Troy in the play *Fences*, directed at Stockton by Pam Hendricks. He recalls that Dr. Ken Dollarhide, the Dean of Arts and Humanities at the time, told him “you have the talent to do this professionally.”

Still, acting success still did not come easily. Smith remembers numerous 14-hour days as an “extra” on the set of *Sex in the City* and *Jersey Girl* that yielded \$59 checks. There were also a few roles he would much rather forget. But Smith knew that each bit part, each failed audition, brought him closer to his goal to become a working actor.

“You do 30 (tries) to get one (part),” is the way he describes it. “You start out trying to get a credit and hoping to get a line.”

The lines did begin to come, as did more lines and more roles. In *Boardwalk Empire*, he once again drew from his rich storehouse of life experiences to bring Deacon Cuffy’s personality to life on screen.

“My grandfather was a preacher and I have always been a student of the history of Atlantic City,” he said. “I am familiar with the role of the black churches in Atlantic City’s rise as a resort. That certainly has allowed me to become comfortable with the scripts and for me to bring something to the series. It is an honor to be part of a production that draws new attention to Atlantic City.” 