

FROM BU TO HOL

There's no business like show business. In what other line of work are people regularly told to gain weight, lose weight, whiten their teeth, Botox their wrinkles, cut their hair, grow their hair, and lose more weight? In Hollywood, people do a lot of things to get ahead, but the ones who make it know that what matters most is the work. Hard work, talent, and a stubborn refusal to quit make a recipe for success that is as reliable as any. The six BU alumni profiled on the following pages share all of those ingredients. They are actors, a director, a screenwriter, and a casting director who have made it in one of the toughest businesses there is. Their journeys started at Boston University; where they'll end is still to be determined.



MORE WHO MADE IT:
A SAMPLING OF BU ALUMS
IN HOLLYWOOD IS AT
WWW.BU.EDU/BOSTONIA.



THE STALWART

FEARLESS AND IRREVERENT,
ALFRE WOODARD STILL HASN'T
DONE WHAT SHE SET OUT TO DO

ALFRE WOODARD CAN GO ON A TEAR, AND WHEN SHE DOES, YOU'LL want to listen closely. Or step back.

One of her best rips is directed at the industry she's been a part of for more than thirty years. "This business is like organized crime," she laughs, when asked to describe the challenges of being an actor in Hollywood. "It's like the sacred and the profane. They take something sacred — your artistic sensibilities — and they turn it into, 'Let me see your teeth. Oh, you need some caps on those teeth. Lift up your skirt — let me see your butt.' If you're a guy, it's, 'Take off your shirt so I can see your pecs before I decide if you can play this psychotic serial killer.' It's insane."

PHOTO BY MICHAEL TRAVIS/FILM MAGIC

LYWOOD

SIX WHO MADE IT

Charismatic, unafraid, and flat-out funny, Woodard (CFA'74, Hon.'04) is a rarity: a mainstream Hollywood actress who remains passionate about her craft and confident about who she is. In an acclaimed career in which she's brought a commanding depth to parts large and small, Woodard has made a case for herself as one of her generation's most soulful and deeply committed actors, in work and in life. She is a founder of Artists for a New South Africa, a nonprofit dedicated to combating the AIDS pandemic and advancing democracy in South Africa, and she's given almost a year of campaign appearances to the presidential run of Barack Obama.

Woodard's success is evidenced by her accolades, her longevity, and her enviably full docket. She has won four Emmy Awards, for work on *Hill Street Blues* (1984), *L.A. Law* (1986), the HBO miniseries *Miss Evers' Boys* (1997), and *The Practice* (2003). She's been nominated many times, most recently in 2006 for her turn as the comically mysterious Betty Applewhite on *Desperate Housewives*.

She was nominated for an Academy Award for her supporting role in *Cross Creek*, in 1984, and has worked in films as varied as *How to Make an American Quilt*, *Passion Fish*, *Star Trek: First Contact*, *Scrooged*, *Crooklyn*, and *Take the Lead*.

In a cutthroat business, that track record is remarkable. Woodard says she's grateful for the steady work but not dazzled by it, and she's far from complacent. "People think they have an idea about me from the roles I've done, but that couldn't be further from the truth," she says. "You have to remember, those are the roles that I chose to do out of what was offered to me. I've been in L.A. thirty-four years, and I still feel I haven't done what I came here to do. It's like being a really inspired violinist and being told, 'OK, that's great. Now don't touch the other three strings, just use this one.'"

It was a hard concept to process coming out of a theater conservatory like Boston University's, where playing all four strings was not just encouraged, but required. At the College of Fine Arts she learned that the most important part of creating a character is letting go of your own. Acting, she says, is about "getting back to the point of neutrality, so that when you step into a character, you don't carry your own gait; you find that character's gait and timbre of voice."

Her training made her feel skilled, she says, not just gifted or blessed with charisma and great eyes. And skill is an important talisman, even in a whimsical industry. "What having the training does is that when you get the job, you know what you're doing," says Woodard. "You know that the work is the thing, not the parade, the endless reels of everybody living their life out loud fabulously. So when they aren't focusing on you, it doesn't devastate you, and when they are focusing on you, well, good for them, but you already know who you are."

And, more than many people in the industry, she does. "I have a full life because I have kids, and I do a lot of political work, a lot of social activist work. That's why I'm not crazy. I'm not sitting by a pool or a phone waiting for someone to want me. I've never done that. It's like, call if you have something for me to do, otherwise I'm going to be busy living."

It was the same way in college. "I wasn't the typical theater student who hung out only with theater people," she says. "They were my friends, but my college experience was with the nursing students, the theology students, the undeclareds. I've never been an *artiste*."

"I was a sort of a black nationalist hippie type," she laughs. "We used to say 'freaks' back then, and I was a freak. We would get together and put on wild plays in the rec room at 700 [Commonwealth Avenue]. It was like theater of the people."

It's a long way from Warren Towers to Hollywood, but she's as alive now as she was then to the joys of her work and to the overriding importance of a good story.

But at fifty-six, Woodard is growing impatient with Hollywood's limitations. "I'll tell you, I won't grow old in this business if certain things aren't opened up for me to do," she says, heading for another tear. "They started putting my Caucasian girlfriends out to pasture at forty. We don't get interesting before forty. I've had friends who were playing the mother of the guys who they were the love interest of when they started in the business together. It's smarmy."

Now she's laughing again and switching into higher gear. "Men with the gold chains and their shirts open lusting after young girls . . . I don't want to be sixty-five and not be able to say, 'You are stupid, and forget it,' while they're talking about whether somebody's butt looks right for them to play Susan B. Anthony. I don't want to do that, not when there are so many books to read, so many people to talk to, so much to learn . . ." **BARI WALSH**



Woodard in a scene from 2007's *Pictures of Hollis Woods*.

PHOTO COURTESY OF HALLMARK HALL OF FAME

THE BADASS

AFTER SEVEN YEARS PLAYING A BRUTAL COP ON 'THE SHIELD,' MICHAEL CHIKLIS IS READY TO SEE THE LIGHT



"I'm looking up the mountain again."

MICHAEL CHIKLIS (CFA'86)

IT'S HARD TO RECALL A MORE MESSED UP, BRUTALLY moral, predatory hero-cop on television than Vic Mackey. Michael Chiklis created the character on *The Shield*, now entering its seventh and final season on FX, and it is the defining performance of his career. Some weeks, watching the show leaves you as tense and coiled as Mackey is; other weeks, you come away exhilarated, but you don't know why, because there is little on the show to cheer about. Watching Mackey and his gang of above-the-law rogues gearing up to make a bad guy feel some pain, and feeling pumped about that, is as unsettling an experience as popular drama can offer.

Chiklis (CFA'86) knows how it is. Mackey makes him uncomfortable, too. The character so tramples the line between corruption and salvation that the line is no longer recognizable. The allure of Mackey, he says, is that his soul is still in play. "We all live in hope," says Chiklis. "And the only thing Vic *has* is hope. If he loses that hope — hope in his own redemption — then there's nothing else left for him."

"As long as we know he's trying to do good in some way, that he hopes for redemption, we'll forgive him all manner of evil deeds," Chiklis says, his familiar raspy voice surprisingly mild. "That's what the show does — it explores the question: at what point is the hero a villain? And, in this gray time we live in, how do we combat the real evil?"

An antihero like Mackey was made for these gray times. "There's something primal about the sense of protection he offers," says Chiklis, who is a thoughtful observer of the character who has won him an Emmy and a Golden Globe. "I've had women tell me they don't fear him, but they know that the bad guys do. He's a protector — that's alluring in a world where we're being made to fear things all the time."

Chiklis retooled his stocky frame for the role, dropping pounds and gaining muscle mass, but despite a powerful physical presence — he brings to mind a revving engine — he does most of his acting with his eyes. They glint cruelly, or flash in anger, and they can look wounded and sometimes fearful, and when they do, there's an openness that's utterly disarming. He says it was William Young, one of his theater professors at the College of

PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL CHIKLIS

THE DREAM CATCHER

CASTING DIRECTOR RONNA KRESS IS LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT MAN (OR WOMAN) FOR THE JOB

WHEN SHE BEGAN WORKING ON THE 2007 MOVIE *NATIONAL Treasure: Book of Secrets*, Ronna Kress had a key role to cast: the mother of the film's star, Nicolas Cage. Normally, a British actress best known for her impeccable portrayal of the queen of England wouldn't figure into a big-budget action film, let alone a sequel. But to Kress, a Los Angeles-based freelance casting director, Helen Mirren was a perfect fit.

"The conversation was, 'Who's a really attractive woman in her sixties who would be believable as Nic's mother and is a good actress,'" says Kress (CFA'84). "It just so happened that her march to the Oscar was starting right around the time that we were casting, which made it more difficult for us."

But Mirren was game. The day after winning an Academy Award for best actress in *The Queen*, she accepted the part. "She loved the adventure," Kress says. "We hit the jackpot in every way." Indeed, the film has been a hit, grossing more than \$215 million in the United States alone.

It doesn't always work out that way. Casting, it turns out, is not only one of the most important and unheralded aspects of moviemaking, it's subjective and personal. "That 'it' that an actor has is a really indefinable thing," says Kress, a former actress whose casting credits include *Moulin Rouge*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, and the upcoming films *Australia* and *G-Force*.

Kress makes her casting decisions, often in conjunction with a film's producer or director, based on instinct and her experience as an actress. She pores over cast lists, catches all the movies she can, soaks up a lot of television, and reads stacks of magazines. "I have a great staff, and they're on the Internet all day," she says. "You want to keep up with who's out there and what's going on. We'll have actors read for us for movies all the time. Maybe they're not right for one thing, but we'll remember them for something else."

One film that got it right was 2003's *Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl*. For the role of Captain Jack Sparrow, Kress and producer Jerry Bruckheimer wanted Johnny Depp, a movie star at the time but not exactly box-office gold. Disney was nervous. "They didn't really understand his performance," Kress recalls. But Depp's hilarious turn as Sparrow, with his kohl-rimmed eyes and slurred



RONNA KRESS
(CFA'84)

PHOTO BY PHOEBE SEXTON (COM'08)

Fine Arts, now retired, who taught him "the importance of letting your guard down. Bill and I had a conversation years after I left BU, where we talked about the fact that despite the changing landscape of this business, and even with celebrity and fame and all that, between 'action' and 'cut' you have to be open and available. You can't afford to close yourself off."

An actor's working life is filled with terrible insecurity, and the advice of another BU influence, Jim Spruill, a retired CFA associate professor of acting, has gotten him through some tough days on set. "It's all about tapping into what you have inside yourself, trusting your own instincts," Chiklis says. "I'd love to have a conversation with Spruill now, because doing TV, this show, it's all a trust exercise. With a film, you might do two pages a day, do a few takes of a scene. On TV, you're plowing through it, doing nine and a half pages a day. You just read them for the first time the night before. But you can't panic. You just do it. You handle it."

He immerses himself so deeply in his characters that people sometimes stop remembering that he's acting. Typecasting nearly stalled his career after *The Commish*, the series that made him famous in the early 1990s. He played Mackey's better angel, a tough but honorable police commissioner — a role that was written for an older man, one that he inhabited so fully that he spent years afterward convincing directors he was not middle-aged and tubby.

Now there will be another type to escape. "Now I'm just a badass," he says with a laugh. Mackey has brought him accolades and respect and helped him land one of the fantasy roles of his childhood, playing the Thing in the *Fantastic Four* movies. But Chiklis says he'll be ready to leave Vic's dark complexities behind. He's even talking about trying some period work.

After seven badass years, "I'm looking up the mountain again, lacing on the climbing boots. It's time to reinvent." **BW**

WATCH FOR: Michael Chiklis plays the U.S. secretary of defense in *Eagle Eye*, a thriller due this fall from director D. J. Caruso. The film stars Shia LaBeouf and Michelle Monaghan as a slacker and a single mom who are unwittingly caught up with a group of terrorists planning a political assassination.

speech, was a hit. “He really did create this iconic character,” she says. “You can’t imagine that movie without him.”

For the part of Elizabeth Swann in *Pirates*, Kress tapped a young British actress who was just showing promise: Keira Knightley. “*Bend it Like Beckham* was starting to get some buzz in the United States, and we pursued her early on in the casting process,” Kress says. Finding young talent is gratifying. For the 2000 film *Remember the Titans*, she cast Ryan Gosling and Kate Bosworth in small roles. “It’s nice when you have the opportunity to use these actors at an early stage in their careers, and then they continue on and pop,” she says. “That doesn’t always happen.”

Kress acted after college, but she began to rethink her career after years on the road and in New York. Once she landed work with a casting director in New York, she says, “I found a place where I could still be creative. I still was involved with actors, but I was actually making a living.”

She married and moved to California, where she worked for Marion Dougherty (“the grandmother of all casting directors — she started the business of casting”) and later for the casting director David Rubin. When Rubin closed his business, about ten years ago, Kress struck out on her own. Her first film as a casting director was Baz Luhrmann’s *Moulin Rouge*, and there have been more than twenty films since. This past winter, Kress was casting the eight superheroes for *Justice League of America* when the writers strike put the film on hold. She moved on to *G.I. Joe*, an action movie due out next year.

Kress has no regrets about her decision to leave acting for casting. She works with top producers and directors, who understand that casting is critical to a project, she says. Bruckheimer, for example, “always supports me in my search for even the smallest roles in a film. “I brought in an actor all the way from London on *Pirates* — he’s in Johnny’s crew, he has a parrot on his shoulder — and he never spoke,” she recalls. “It was just this brilliant face. We brought a lot of actors from London. That was a huge expense, but clearly worth it. Those faces made a big difference.” **CYNTHIA K. BUCCINI**

THE MAGICIAN

FILMMAKING IS A COLLABORATIVE ART FOR DIRECTOR GARY FLEDER

IN A PIVOTAL SCENE IN THE 2003 FILM *RUNAWAY JURY*, DUSTIN Hoffman and Gene Hackman face off in a men’s room during a tense court battle. The two actors had been friends since the 1950s, but it was the first time they had worked together. For director Gary Fleder, it was a career high point. “I remember the day we shot that,” says Fleder (COM’85). “I said to myself, this is as great as it’s going to get, to have these two legends going toe to toe, seeing that kind of friendship fuel their collaboration.”

That anecdote captures something essential about the filmmaker. By now he’s experienced enough to know that the glamour of Hollywood is mostly a myth. Making movies is hard labor, and he’s learned to value those rare moments of transcendence. He also values collaboration in all its forms — between actors on a set or between a director and his crew.

Take his friendship and his partnership with writer Scott Rosenberg (COM’85). They met during their sophomore year at BU and have collaborated ever since. When Fleder was in film school at the University of Southern California, Rosenberg wrote his thesis film. He also wrote Fleder’s first feature film, *Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead*, with Christopher Walken and Andy Garcia. Rosenberg writes for *October Road*, the television show they created together, which has finished its second season on ABC. And the two cosponsor a short-screenplay contest at BU’s annual Redstone Film Festival. “One of the great things that I realized at BU was the idea of how important partnerships are,” says Fleder, who is in the middle of postproduction on his new film, *The Express*, due out late this year. “It was a partnership that really got me my first big break, getting me an agent, getting me noticed in the community, in



Gary Fleder (COM’85) (left)

PHOTOS BY CHUCK HODES/UNIVERSAL PICTURES (2)



“You look for those moments of sheer joy.”

GARY FLEDER (COM'85),
ON THE SET OF *THE EXPRESS*

Hollywood. I think to make it in the business, you have to have talent, tenacity, and luck. I always felt that meeting Scott was part of my luck.”

Talent and tenacity helped Fleder build a directing résumé that includes *Kiss the Girls*, with Morgan Freeman and Ashley Judd, and *Don't Say a Word*, with Michael Douglas and Brittany Murphy, as well as a lot of television, including six episodes of *October Road*.

For a director with a strong track record in thrillers, *The Express*, starring Dennis Quaid and Rob Brown, is a departure. A drama based on the story of college football player Ernie Davis, who in the early sixties became the first African-American to win the Heisman Trophy, the film was “incredibly challenging and it came down to one thing — it lives and breathes and dies on being truthful.” The filmmakers he admires — Michael Mann, Martin Scorsese, John Cassavetes — all convey an essential truth, Fleder says. They have “found a way to bridge the gap between what is real and what is not real.” When you watch their work, “you really can't discern between what's real and what's not because they found the truth in the feel of the movie, the performances, the look of the film. It feels authentic. That's a word I go to a lot: it has to be authentic, emotionally authentic, visually authentic.”

As Fleder finishes mixing the music and sound on *The Express*, he's thinking about what comes next. He's developing *The Deep Blue Good-bye*, based on a novel by John D. MacDonald, for Fox. He's interested

in a bigger scale film, perhaps a fantasy. But he also wants to do another socially relevant drama like *The Express*, looking for that next moment of transcendence.

“Here's a truth: making films is very, very difficult,” he says. “It's physically demanding. It's incredibly demanding emotionally. It may sound like it's a lot of fun, but it's not exactly what you see on *Entertainment Tonight*. It's backbreaking work. And I think you look for those moments of sheer joy — working with a really amazing actor or something magical happening on the set between two actors. Or it could be the weather. All of a sudden some amazing sky comes into a shot, and you're like, wow that was worth it.” **JENNY BROWN**



WATCH FOR: Gary Fleder is developing *The Deep Blue Good-bye* for Fox. The film is based on the first of the twenty-one novels in crime master John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee detective series, first published 1964.



“I still live my life the way I’ve always lived it.”

EMILY DESCHANEL (CFA’98), ON THE SET OF *BONES*

THE OPTIMIST

EMILY DESCHANEL TAKES A CLEAR-EYED APPROACH TO WORK, FAME, AND HIDEOUSLY GORY PROPS

IMAGINE GOING TO WORK EACH DAY AND FACING FLESH-EATING BUGS, murder scenes, and decomposing bodies. As Temperance “Bones” Brennan, a forensic anthropologist teamed up with an FBI detective played by David Boreanaz on Fox TV’s *Bones*, that’s exactly what actress Emily Deschanel has to do. But the gore doesn’t faze her. “You just get used to coming into work and seeing decomposed human remains every day,” she says nonchalantly. “Instead of being grossed out by it, I have turned it into a fascination with the human body and the whole design of the skeleton.”

That pretty much sums up Deschanel (CFA’98): optimistic and upbeat. She’s one of those rarities, a native of L.A., and — perhaps even

more rare — a grounded one at that. Acting is a job, and a day on the set of *Bones* is just another day at work. Sure, she gets to hang out all day with a handsome coworker. Yes, she appears every week in homes across the country. Granted, there are fan sites springing up across the Web. But, she says, “I still live my life the way I’ve always lived it.”

At the beginning of her career, Deschanel had small parts in big films; her first role was as a paint-throwing fur activist in 1994’s *It Could Happen to You*. She had a minor part in *Cold Mountain* and played a receptionist in *Spider-Man 2*.

The Disney film *Glory Road* (2006) opened the doors for her to a starring role. After working on the film, she was recommended by a Disney executive as a possible lead for *Bones*. “So I met with Hart Hanson, the creator of the show, and Barry Josephson, the other executive producer, and the director,” Deschanel says. “I just remember Hart laughing at really-not-funny jokes I was telling, and thinking, he’s a really nice guy, because I’m not funny at all right now.”

Landing a good role is a highly competitive process (“they make you jump through hoops,” she says). She made it through the initial round and was called in to test for the role. “There was just one other girl who was testing, and she was reading with David Boreanaz and I walked in the room. It can be kind of awkward and weird, but you get used to doing that as an actor. You get used to testing and not getting roles. You go in and you do your thing, and then it’s not in your hands and you have to walk away as best you can.”

She got the part, but she had her doubts. “I didn’t know anything about forensic anthropology, and it seemed very limited. I didn’t think you could do a whole show based on bones.” Three years later, she’s learned she was wrong. The amusing procedural has her plunging stubbornly into the toughest of cases, with no shortage of plot lines. (The role is based on real-life forensic anthropologist and novelist Kathy Reichs, who writes the book series.)

Despite her relatively sudden fame, everyday life in her hometown is the same as ever. It’s only when she travels that she realizes how different things are. “When I visited my grandparents in Portland, Oregon — you just go grocery shopping and people call you Bones and Dr. Brennan. You don’t know how to respond to that. Do you say, ‘Yes’ or ‘Not really?’” **JB**

 **WATCH A CLIP:** Emily Deschanel handles gory body parts and romantic comedy smoothly. See her in action at www.fox.com/bones.

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOX

THE RISK-TAKER

FOR SCREENWRITER KRISTA VERNOFF, NOT ACTING IS THE BEST REVENGE

KRISTA VERNOFF WAS PERFECTLY POSITIONED TO make a splash in the theater world after earning a B.F.A. in acting at the College of Fine Arts, one of the top-rated conservatory programs in the country. Her family, friends, and classmates assured her that the next step was the New York stage. There was just one problem: she didn't want to be an actress anymore.

"I had a feeling that I really wanted to be a writer," says Vernoff (CFA'93). "But there was a lot of peer pressure, and people had this notion that I was probably just scared to go out into the world."

Scared? Hardly. To get to where she is — head writer and executive producer of the hit television show *Grey's Anatomy* — Vernoff took some big risks. She gave up acting, moved to Los Angeles jobless, and turned down a full-time staff writer position on a television show about serial killers. Later, she left a job at *Charmed*, a successful hour-long drama on the former WB network, when she felt the show's subtext had shifted from girl power to girls in low-cut shirts. For a self-described hippie who grew up "shoeless on Venice Beach" and had never really watched TV until she was writing for it, Vernoff is deeply aware of the influence her work has on viewers. She doesn't hesitate to advocate for her characters.

"There's a huge responsibility," she says. "You are influencing the minds and hearts of the people who watch your show every week. On *Charmed*, I didn't want to say to teenage girls, 'Your value is in your sex appeal.'"

Vernoff studied playwriting with Jonathan Lipsky, a professor in CFA's school of theatre, and found that she had a knack for creating funny, vibrant dialogue. Nonetheless, she gamely pursued acting after graduation. She performed in New York and in Portland, Oregon, all the while writing screenplays and pilots. She had no doubt that she could act, but eventually decided she was more interested in telling stories on the page than on the stage.

"I felt that I had proven to myself and to my family that I could do it," Vernoff says. "I loaded up my car and moved to L.A., put my headshots in storage, and never told anyone I was an actor."

She wrote spec scripts until she got an agent and worked on *Time of Your Life*, *Law and Order*, and the short-lived *Wonderfalls* before getting a three-year contract on *Charmed*.

When she left the show, Vernoff was dealing with the recent death of her father, and she put her energy into a play about her family. *Me, My Guitar*, and *Don Henley* helped vault her on to bigger projects — including *Surgeons*, the pilot by Shonda Rimes that became *Grey's Anatomy*.

After four seasons, Vernoff finds herself at the helm of one of TV's most popular shows, making sure that the plotlines she oversees live up to her standards. "At *Grey's*, we take the medicine very seriously," she says. "We are very careful not to make it up and offer false hope. Our rule is that the treatment or procedure has to have been successful somewhere in the world for us to put it on TV." That attention to detail has paid off: Vernoff was nominated for an Emmy for outstanding writing in 2006, for the episode "Into You Like a Train."

She's continued to take risks, leaving *Grey's* temporarily after the first season to produce the pilot she wrote in her first year in New York. And she's never really sworn off theater. In 2006, Vernoff staged her play at the city's 14th Street Y, with the *New York Times* calling it a "satisfying black comedy with six well-drawn characters." And in March 2007, she named her new daughter Cosette, after the character in *Les Misérables*. "I'm still a theater kid," she says. **JESSICA ULLIAN**



KRISTA VERNOFF
(CFA'93)

PHOTO COURTESY OF KRISTA VERNOFF