

DAILY NEWS

Fostering kids' imaginations

Former boxer-turned-actor encourages homeless

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BY HALLEY BONDY

Thurman Scott hasn't had a vacation in 10 years, but he doesn't seem to mind the missed trips to island resorts or the down time in front of the television. "I'm not worried about what I don't have," he says. "I'm too busy with what I'm doing."

Scott isn't just busy. He's a blur of success and the embodiment of an ever-expanding résumé. Recognized in disparate fields from acting to teaching to business, Scott is in high demand wherever he chooses to excel. He has earned two Obies, he develops Hollywood scripts, he runs acting classes and he's a former boxing champ.

"I've never felt like I couldn't do something," says Scott. "Just give me the opportunity to try."

Scott has always found time to fight the good fight, not just ring opponents. He is the founder and artistic director for Builders of the New World, a creative education program designed for homeless children from Harlem aged 8-12.

Builders of the World, which was begun 14 years ago, is an 18-month program that takes place in Scott's nonprofit space, the Actors Theatre Workshop on W. 28th St. (www.actorstheatreworkshop.com).

The goal of Builders is to foster creativity and imagination in the 60 or so homeless children who stream in from Harlem shelters. With the aid of 35-40 mentors, Scott encourages the children to express themselves through art, writing, acting and various creative exercises.

"I encourage them to use their imagination," he says. "And the feedback is incredible. You learn more by teaching children than they learn from you!"

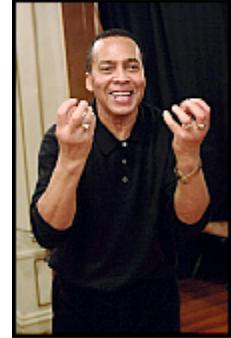
Some exceptional young minds have passed through the program. Scott recalls an 11 year-old homeless child who somehow formulated a plan to cure incurable diseases. "He had it all," Scott says. "He had formulas, he had meetings planned between the best minds in science from all over the world ... I mean, pharmaceutical companies have the same thoughts."

Builders earned Scott a Time magazine "Local Hero" position in 1996. Strwn about the Actors Theatre Workshop lobby are photographs of Scott shaking hands with the likes of Nelson Mandela, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rep. Charles Rangel.

"People see that I'm good at putting creative things together," Scott says. "To me, it's painful to see that these children have been told they have nothing to offer. Who are we to make children, or anyone, feel that way?"

Eileen Burke, a founding member and the Treasurer of The Actors Theatre Workshop, believes that it is this absence of condescension toward the children that has made Scott so effective. "He does not relate to children like they're lesser," she says. "He sees every human being as having tremendous worth."

Scott learned the value of imagination at a very young age. He was raised on a sharecropper's farm in North Carolina. Often alone in this rural setting, Scott allowed his mind to wander and ideas to germinate.



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Thurman Scott turned his experience as a boxer into a multi-faceted career in the arts.

"My story is not of this child who was raised on a farm," says Scott. "Because I felt like I was royalty. I watched the miracle of birth and all the elements of creation. It was just like a big production!"

He didn't know enough then about theater to consider it as a profession. He joined the U.S. Air Force as a young man where he became All Forces Middle Weight Boxing Champion. Surprisingly, his proficiency in the boxing would tie into his later acting career.

"People think of boxing as violent, but it's a discipline," says Scott. "When Muhammad Ali arrived for his fight night, was that not the same energy as the opening of a play?"

Scott decided to pursue theater while at a party in the Air Force, when he started choking on his drink. Inspired by tragic Roman death scenes, Scott decided to ham it up. "It was so convincing that everyone thought I was dead or unconscious," he says. "And one of the real generals told me, 'That was really profound what you did.' After that, I started to think about pursuing theater."

He left the Air Force and studied at the London Academy of Dramatic Art. He began his 30-year mentorship under the renowned Broadway actress Stella Adler, who died in 1992. "Stella was a genius," says Scott. "When I work on my techniques, I'm still listening to her teach me."

With Adler's encouragement and inspiration, Scott's acting credits skyrocketed. In the late '70s, Scott earned an Obie Award for his role in "Open 24 Hours" at the Actors Playhouse. His performance was so realistic that a reviewer, who Scott declines to name, leaped onstage and hit him on the head with an umbrella.

Apparently she was chastising his intense character, an African-American militant named Number One. "She was scolding me like 'Don't do that! Don't do that!'" he laughs, "She saw a person with a lot of passion and intellect, which frightens people."

During his formative acting years - in which he played every kind of role from Shakespearean to drag queen - Scott picked up directing, filming, writing, producing and business skills. He won another Obie for directing "Soldiers of Freedom." He is often the go-to guy for theatrical and film productions in crisis, and he often does it for free.

His longtime friend, Susan Royal, remembers how Scott rescued one movie that appeared destined for disaster. "A friend of mine was making his first full feature length film and one of his lead actresses dropped out," Royal says. "I called Thurman and told him the situation. He called in actresses, coached them and had a nice warm meal ready for my friend. He held the auditions. There was nothing in it for him. He just loves to help people."

Scott's affinity for charity work began in the early 80's when he mentored prisoners at Rikers Island, the Tombs in Manhattan, Attica, Women's State Prison and the ward for the criminally insane at Bellevue Hospital. When he dealt with these inmates, Scott reached back into his own experiences on the farm while relating to their solitude and boredom. He remembered how ennui can be a great, creative seed. "When people are incarcerated," says Scott, "they survive through their imagination because that's all they have."

His volunteer mentoring extended from there into schools and evolved into the Builders of the New World program at the Actors Theatre Workshop, which he founded in 1990. The Workshop also has a performance space and a classroom for acting and writing lessons.

Scott has no children, but he clearly has paternal instincts. "The world is my family," he says, "I feel empathy for all people."

Royal thinks that Scott would be a household name by now, if only he had the time to become famous. "If only he wasn't so busy being generous ...," she says.
