

The Unexpected Artist

Mahershala Ali '96 You could say that 38-year-old Mahershala Ali owes his acting career to his grandfather. A gifted athlete from Hayward, Calif., Ali attended Saint Mary's College on a basketball scholarship. His grandfather told him, "If you graduate with a 3.0, I'll give you \$5,000."

This tempting proposition prompted Ali to defer Spanish his junior year and take an acting class with Rebecca Engle. That "amazing experience" sparked an interest in acting that resulted in a lead role in a Saint Mary's production of "Spunk," directed by Engle.

The young actor's transformation began. "I felt a peace during that period of time that seemed to give my life a defining purpose." In retrospect, Ali is surprised he didn't discover acting sooner. "My dad was in 'Dream Girls' and on Broadway, so I've been backstage most of my life."

After earning a degree in mass communication, Ali performed at the California Shakespeare Festival. Encouraged by SMC Professor Victoria Trostle to attend a graduate acting program, Ali auditioned for NYU's prestigious Tisch School of the Arts with hundreds of hopefuls and was one of the final 18.

The promising actor immersed himself in the craft for a grueling three years, and it paid off. When he graduated from NYU with an MFA, he had an agent and two lead roles already lined up. And he's been a working actor ever since, landing roles in such films as, "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button" and "Predators." He has also appeared in many TV shows, including "Crossing Jordan" and "Law and Order SVU."

His current project? "House of Cards," a new TV series starring Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright, that airs this February.

"I came to SMC wanting the fullest experience as an athlete," Ali reflected, "and left wanting to experience life as an artist and well-rounded person." While he hopes to take on meatier parts eventually, he has his eye on another life-changing role. "At some point, I'd like to have a wife and start a family, too." —By Lynn Armitage

