



CCH Pounder The Definition Of Success

After interviewing internationally acclaimed actor-artist-writer-jeweller-gardener CCH Pounder, most recently noted for her award-winning work in FX Network's edgy ensemble Golden Globe®-winning TV drama "The Shield," I felt richer for having spoken with her.

Text Colleen Patrick

It's no accident her *Shield* character, Captain Claudette Wymms, maintains a moral compass against all odds; striving to be an honest cop despite being ostracized from her squad for not falling in lock step with the corrupt system that surrounds her.

Pounder played many "victim" roles early on in her career, but consciously changed that when she sensed a certain responsibility as a successful black woman artist to portray strong, knowledgeable and influential characters.

That decision created a significant change in her life and career.

Often Emmy®-nominated for portraying judges, doctors and other tough, forceful roles, her guest star quickly rose, along with her self-esteem and respect by the industry and public.

Strangers not only started to recognise her, they'd be deferential—because they had just seen her in a film or TV show as the intimidating lawyer, cop or national leader!

She started in theatre, a self-described "arrogant actress." Because of her elitist attitude and anger, she admits she made some critical career decision errors along the way—like not realising when she was given genuinely beneficial advice by insightful people who tried to help her, including the extraordinary Bob Fosse, who directed her in her first film, *All That Jazz*.

That was a while ago.

Today, as she has for many years, she makes decisions that enrich her as a person and as an artist. She might be known for her strong, hard-hitting, tough, intense dramatic roles, but in real life Pounder laughs easily and often. Her *joie de vie* is infectious.

She is grateful for her success and all she is capable of creating as a multi-talented artist; she sees the world as it is and works to make a positive difference.

Among several philanthropic projects, CCH Pounder and her husband, anthropologist Boubacar Kone, have built The Boribana

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Museum in Dakar, Senegal West Africa, and the Pounder-Kone Art Space in Los Angeles.

Pounder is the consummate storyteller, performer and entertainer. As you read my Q&A, please hear her engaging, undulating voice inflect heartfelt, thoughtful words with an impassioned whisper (*italics*), or a raised voice (CAPITALS) or a throaty chuckle (um ... I got nothing for that. But she often chuckles, delighted, when she tells a self-deprecating story). I’ll only demonstrate this in the beginning so you get the gist.

What do you love most about working with the camera?

Coming from the *theatre*, I didn’t realize how *much* the camera sees. In my second film (*I’m Dancing As Fast As I Can*), I played an *insane* woman and put *so much work* into my character. I saw Jill Clayburgh (acting) and I thought, “God, she’s doing ab-sol-utely NOTHING.” When I—*unfortunately*—saw the finished film, Clayburgh was *exquisite*. Her performance was *subtle* and HUGE in this ... tiny way. I, on the other hand, looked *beyond* INSANE! I saw myself and thought, “What. The. Hell!?” I *really* didn’t know what I was doing. In all that pain came a fantastic moment of learning. The camera sees your internal side. Almost what you’re thinking is enough. You don’t even need words. The camera doesn’t lie. When you’re faking it, it will tell you. It’s a great challenge to be incredibly honest with yourself and the character you’re playing.

How did Bob Fosse help you acclimate to the camera for your performance in your first film, *All That Jazz*?

I was so arrogant. When I went to read for Bob Fosse, I thought I was just supposed to show him a different accent from the Caribbean. When he suggested I do the film, I said, “Oh no, I prefer *theatre*.” I mean, I was totally insane! What was I thinking! I told him I’d never done film and didn’t know the difference. He sat at my side, they took mostly close-ups, and he literally directed me from under my armpit, telling me, “Why don’t you just turn the pages. Just look at them. Just try this. And that.” It was the gentlest, sweetest entrance into a medium that I knew nothing about. I wasn’t even aware of what a terrific lesson I was getting—and an enormous opportunity that I didn’t use again until I was forced out of the theatre by the freezing cold of Milwaukee (where I was contracted to a theatre). I needed to warm up so a friend got me to go to Los Angeles. Fortunately, I kept my SAG card (minimum payments) up so I arrived already in the union from (*All That Jazz*) years prior. I was not very bright in terms of

seeing my future. It was as if I needed to be whacked over the head!

Why such a separation for you between theatre and camera work back then?

In theatre, on Broadway, I could get the lead role one time, then back in the chorus the next, and be a triple threat (dance, sing, act), no problem. We (black performers) could see each other. At home, I can remember my mother calling from the kitchen, “Somebody turn up the television, there’s a black person on!” Just by the sound of the voice. It was so unusual, we would all dash to the television to see what they were talking about. And it was not necessarily an actor. It could have been a politician or whatever. But it was such a rare occasion. So you can imagine going from that—from not thinking about us being in television at all—to actually finding myself in the medium. It was pretty extraordinary for me.

How much has colour blind casting changed?

It’s moved up in stature. For instance, once the door was open to have a judge, a lawyer—that opened up a door. But it—I’ll say it—never had a family. It never related to anyone. It was always an autonomous character so that they didn’t have to worry about hiring more than one at a time and still filled their “quota.” There are now films with all black casts, some with one white character. Comedies. I don’t think there has been a black drama that has survived on television. The closest thing we have is “The Wire” with a predominately black cast. People (in Hollywood) will tell you to your face that there’s no market for that, that’s why we don’t do your film, that’s why we’ll pay you one-third the money. They are appallingly honest. People (decision-makers) make incredible decisions for the audiences. They constantly dumb us down to a sort of common denominator, thinking that so much is unacceptable and it’s really not true. Audiences want to see what’s new and what’s happening.

Tell me about the differences between working in TV and motion pictures.

I hope this is not because I come from a place that is economically strapped and therefore it has somehow grown into my soul, but I find motion pictures to be the most extraordinary waste of money—I think it’s squandered in squalor day in and day out. I don’t know how the whole thing runs, it’s just an observation point of view that I have. I see extraordinary waste. I find television efficient and speedy and also I have to give television kudos because that’s where we got in. Film is where they gave you the cameo. Television is where they gave you the role and you could run

with it whole hog. So for me it has such a completely different attitude. I simply can’t speak to you as an actor. I have to speak to you as a black person, a woman and an actor. Because it’s all these things that temper how you make a career.

It’s the reason I wanted to interview you!

First, television is a place I can work. Second, it’s a place where the work is the reward. And it’s a medium that has so far allowed me to develop characters that are not one-dimensional. Mind you, it’s taken me some years to do but this is the process that I’ve experienced.

How do you like to work with directors?

I’ve worked with directors who see pictures and they want to move you around like pawns in a chess game, because they’ve already sort of preconceived the entire story before they got there. And then there are directors who cast you and want to pull out of you new challenges. That is the director I like to work with. When I come into a job, I don’t come from a point of, “Oh, I hope I can do the job.” If you’ve hired me, then I come from the point of, “OK, how can we help this script come alive,” and I don’t even think of myself any more. I like the director who is completely into the story of the whole picture and not just thinking, “I have these great (lead) actors, and I’ll just have to shuffle the rest of them around.” I like that director to step back and elevate those other actors. If you got two or three good actors, the others are going to bring up their game for the most part. I like the director to take that time with them—I should say “us,” and elevate everyone’s game. Unfortunately there are those directors who let the story get lost in the shuffle.

What advice do you have for actors—actors of colour and actors in general?

There are some things a young actor (of colour) may not be able to figure out on their own—like the lighting may not be right for them. They have to learn that. Preparedness is one of the huge things I think is very important. I like to be prepared. Which basically means knowing what you’re going to say. Because it’s television, you don’t have to know where you’re going to go because that could change any minute. So that doesn’t matter. But certainly knowing the environment and really observing what’s going on, even if they’re not working. If they can visit and just see what the work area is like—I think it’s really helpful. Then once you’re in there it’s really important to understand it’s really about the story. In the end the most important thing you’ve got is the script. It’s really about the story—and you being part of the story and making it move

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and come alive. As opposed to, “I was fan-TAS-tic! I peed in that scene!” Well, fine but it doesn’t make the movie. So it comes to a place where even though we’re constantly separated—nothing to do with colour—separated from the big star, the secondary star, the third star, the fifth tier, blah blah blah. Despite that, it’s one of the greatest ensemble efforts that I’ve ever participated in—making a film. Everything—and everyone—counts. Mister (director Mike) Nichols was my best example of getting a role in which the person with two lines was invited to the table to read. He said, “We may never meet each other again, but we have this one moment at this table to hear this script all at once so that the next time we regroup you will understand so much better how you fit into the puzzle of it.” I always keep that in mind. That beyond doing what you were supposed to do in your scene—it’s

important to make sure that everybody in the scene got to do what they wanted to do to make it right. That’s not easy when people keep pushing who is more important than whom. Sometimes those people (big stars) don’t participate in your (character’s) life—the star might just descend into the scene—without rehearsing. I think the scenes could be much better than they were if they had participated—letting the script be king.

You say, “There is nothing impossible that someone who believes enough in themselves cannot conquer.” How did you learn to believe in yourself?

My parents gave me a good start. One of my survival tactics is knowing that the next day is going to be better. I’m a very hopeful, joyful person. I’m optimistic to a fault. I always try to find something good in people. I’ve always

made myself joyous. And I’ve always had tools to express myself. Actors can get frustrated when they can’t act and there’s no outlet. But I also draw, I sing in the shower, I keep doing (numerous) creative things that satisfy me. For me, it’s essential that I create. I’m a completely free spirit and pretty much do what I want to do. I found wonderful mediums in film and television and theatre, but if I’m not working I always move on to the other creative parts of me. It’s kept me happy.

It’s clear your personal and professional priorities are in the right place to keep your work in demand and for you to enjoy a happy personal life. Thank you. ■

For news and to listen to CCH Pounder’s CD, *Smoke*, please visit her website at www.cchpounder.com.