Alumna Phyllis Smith entertains millions as Phyllis Lapin on the hit TV comedy ‘The Office’

A slice of Americana: photo book documents carnival life
“I had a 12-inch television up until a few months ago, and just recently I got a big one, so I’m really enjoying my TV,” Smith said. “One thing is that high definition isn’t very forgiving. Every little thing shows up. We have good make-up people who help cover up stuff.”

Long before her star-studded days of pushing paper in Scranton, Pa. (where the show is set), Smith grew up in the south St. Louis neighborhood of Carondelet. She was bitten by the bug early and began dance classes at age 7. “My dad worked hard for every dollar that we had in our family, and my parents told me if I wanted to take dancing, I’d have to make the arrangements myself,” Smith said. “I can vividly remember pulling a stool over to the kitchen cabinet and getting the phone book down to call and set up my lessons. That’s where my mother knew I was serious.”

She first took ballet, and then ended up adding tap, jazz and modern dance to her repertoire. Smith was teaching classes by the age of 13, and later worked with professional companies in St. Louis. While pursuing a dance career, Smith decided to work toward a degree. She attended Forest Park Community College and then transferred to the University of Missouri-St Louis. “My heart was always in dancing and performing,” Smith said. “But I knew my parents really wanted me to get an education, and I realized they were right. I thought I could be a good teacher since I already had experience as an instructor.”

Smith graduated from UM-St. Louis in 1972 with a bachelor’s degree in elementary education. She said she had a positive experience at the university, but she decided to continue dancing professionally. That decision took her to California. Smith was part of a touring dinner theater that featured a “funny” vaudeville burlesque show for many years. She eventually got the opportunity to work with the Mercer Brothers, a song-dance-comic duo that performed for more than 70 years. “Bud and Jim Mercer had this great comic act, and I used to sit backstage and listen to them,” Smith said. “I went in with John Krasinski, who got the role of Jim, and another actor who was reading for the part of Dwight. We did a scene, and when we left the room, people were laughing. I thought, ‘Well, what’s that about?’”

Smith was asked the next day to read the parts of Jim and Dwight, but little did she know the director was auditioning her for a role of her own. The next thing she knew, Smith received a call from the show’s wardrobe department, and that’s when she knew she’d been hired. “No one ever came and asked me if I’d like to play the character of Phyllis Lapin,” she said. “Of course I would have been interested, but I never went into my job as a casting associate wondering if there was a role for me. I think, again, by osmosis I had been honing a craft I didn’t know I was honing.”

Adapted from the cult-favorite British series of the same name, “The Office” first aired in March 2005 in the United States. The pilot episode featured four additional characters (Phyllis, Angela, Oscar and Creed) that the British series didn’t include, and all four actors use their own first names on the show. “There weren’t even any guidelines or specifics given to my character,” Smith said. “It’s just developed as we’ve gone along through the seasons, and it’s still developing.”

Now in its fifth season, “The Office” has changed a bit since the early days. Smith said during the first several episodes, the director had everyone sitting at their desks for as long as 12 hours at a stretch because he hadn’t yet decided who would voice what’s that about?”

“The Office” airs at 8 p.m. CDT Thursdays on NBC. Visit http://www.nbc.com/the_office/ for more information.

Phyllis Smith

By Linda Tracy

SMH 06-29-08

Ike more than eight million other Americans who regularly tune in, Phyllis Smith has a standing date with a television on Thursday nights when she watches “The Office.” But unlike most viewers, Smith sometimes sees the sitcom with the show’s cast by her side. It’s just a Hollywood perk for Smith, who plays mild-mannered Dunder-Mifflin customer sales representative Phyllis (Lapin) Vance on the NBC hit comedy.

“I think Phyllis Lapin, the character, is a little more than eight million Americans who tune in. She is very kind and understanding and she does a job that most people don’t know about. But those who do recognize her for it, and they do, really appreciate her.”

Smith said there are a variety of people who approach her, from teenagers to grandmothers. “I don’t understand why the 13-year-olds are so tuned into it, and hopefully the show won’t prevent them from ever wanting to work in an office,” she said with a laugh. “But I think people who watch the show can identify with the characters in some shape or form, and that’s part of the draw to it. I just hope it continues, because it’s a pleasure to work with such a great cast and crew.”

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NBC’s Emmy-winning comedy “The Office” features St. Louisan and UM–St. Louis graduate Phyllis Smith, who gets big laughs on the show as the placid, but peculiar Phyllis Lapin.