

No stage fright for Stanford safety Michael Thomas

By Elliott Almond, Mercury News

The budding thespian in Michael Thomas made a cameo during Stanford's season opener against San Jose State.

After an obvious incompletion, the free safety pranced around the field with the ball in his hand as if celebrating an interception. He wanted officials to review the play so Cardinal teammates could get a breather.

The referees ignored the theatrics, and Thomas trotted to the sideline with a trademark smile.

"I thought if I came up with the ball they'd at least review it," said Thomas, captain of the Cardinal's vaunted defense this fall and a newcomer to Stanford's theater scene last spring. "I don't like to flop like you see in some soccer games, but I wanted to put it in the officials' hands."

The senior, who will help lead sixth-ranked Stanford against UCLA on Saturday, might have failed his screen test on that day, but he has been getting rave reviews for his performances in the secondary -- not to mention on the stage.

A star quarterback at Nimitz High in Houston, Thomas converted to free safety when he got to Stanford in 2008 as part of a program-changing class that included Andrew Luck.

Then-coach Jim Harbaugh had told Thomas, "Other schools want you, but I need you."

He needed Thomas to help turn the Cardinal's once-soft defense into one of the country's most feared units. Three years later, Thomas earned honorable mention all-conference honors while ranking as Stanford's third-leading tackler

Advertisement

with 61 stops. He's tied for third in tackles this season with 13.

Coach David Shaw calls Thomas "an overall nuisance to a receiver." But the coach mostly appreciates how he commands respect. "Michael is a talker, he's infectious and when Mike gets going, he gets a lot of the guys going."

And that's not just on the football field.

Last May, Thomas decided to tackle a new role in a student production of the play "Killer Joe."

Thomas scored the lead in Tracy Letts' 1993 dark comedy about a trashy Texas family living in a trailer after hearing about auditions in a drama class.

His way-off-Broadway portrayal of the sinister Joe Cooper has brought the kind of praise Thomas typically gets from football.

"He's a natural," fellow actor Rachel RoseFigura said.

But the theatrical debut had a hitch. Known for bruising tackles that could lead to an NFL career, Thomas wasn't sure he could dig deep enough to depict the menace of his character.

Thomas is such a nice guy that "it was virtually impossible for us to get him to play the role of a psychotic, evil character," said Dylan Rush, a former Cardinal wrestler who produced the play for a senior project.

Thomas sought counsel from his parents, who are Houston immigration lawyers. Sometimes you have to step out and become a different person, they told him.

"I just used that," Thomas said. "By the time it was time to perform on the stage, I was in a whole different zone."

"I was Killer Joe."

Fellow actors were all the more impressed when learning Thomas' only previous credit was a small part in a high school production of "Winnie-the-Pooh." He landed the role while taking a theater class to satisfy a state requirement for fine arts.

In the sixth grade, Thomas also wrote, directed and acted in a play about Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Jackie Robinson.

"I hope he's not so good at football that he doesn't get a chance to pursue acting," RoseFigura said.

Although performing on the field is a priority, Thomas has something brewing in a cinema class this fall. "I can't talk that much about it right now, but don't be surprised if you see a film production come up," he said. "That's all I will say."

Director Joel DuBray also has some new roles in mind for the player who attracted a majority of the football team and coaches to the Roble Theater for "Killer Joe" -- a show of support that Thomas greatly appreciated.

STANFORD FOOTBALL CLIPS September 29, 2011

DuBray wants to work with Thomas again because of his approach to the craft. Thomas, who majors in sociology, used his football experiences to prepare for his role. He was the first to memorize his lines and never arrived late for rehearsal. He didn't want to be the reason the play failed.

DuBray, a senior drama major, recalled how Thomas saved a scene by picking up the dialogue after an actor dropped a line.

It was the kind of reflex that Cardinal teammates are used to seeing from Thomas.

A running quarterback, Thomas gained 1,000 yards and scored nine touchdowns as a junior and had 548 yards and three scores as a senior at Nimitz.

His school played Luck's Stratford High, so the Cardinal teammates got to know each other years ago. One of Thomas' most vivid memories is getting stuffed by Luck while trying to make a layup on a fast break.

"I'm going up, and all I see is a big shadow coming above me," said the 5-foot-11 Thomas, who played point guard. "I'm, 'Oh, no, it's too late. I'm already in the air.' I try to lay it up, but he just smacks the ball into the second row."

Upon seeing the 6-4 Luck smiling after the play, Thomas knew exactly what to do: move on to the next act.