Alumni

Chairman of the Boardwalk

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Maria Rabinky

About 40 men are seated inside the Refectory, a banquet hall in the Union Theological Seminary. They wear 1920s-era tuxedos, mustaches, and enough pomade to grease a fleet of Model Ts. Some have gathered at a head table occupied by the actor Steve Buscemi. It is, for a few hours, March 17, 1920 — the first St. Patrick’s Day of Prohibition.

Standing near Buscemi is Edward McGinty ’06SOA. On this day, McGinty is a SAG actor, playing a ward boss named Aloysius Boyd. But his primary role in HBO’s new dramatic series *Boardwalk Empire*, based on Nelson Johnson’s book *Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City*, is off-camera. McGinty, a third-generation Atlantic City native, is also the show’s head research adviser, charged with reconstructing his hometown’s history one period-perfect scene at a time. From the city skyline to the appropriate degrees of auburn rust on boardwalk signs, he is the gatekeeper of all salient historical details. And he has plumbed his own family history along the way. The real-life Aloysius Boyd was a fishing buddy of his grandfather, and his father, Edward McGinty Sr., worked as a page boy at the very boardwalk hotel where much of the show takes place.

“There’s a running joke that no matter how obscure the fact, Ed will know it within five minutes,” says Terence Winter, the show’s producer. While the cameras roll inside the seminary, Winter is seated inside his trailer, parked at 120th and Claremont Avenue, watching a freshly cut preview for *Boardwalk’*s pilot, which was directed by Martin Scorsese. “Honestly, I think this job was Ed’s destiny,” Winter says as his TV screen fades to black. “We couldn’t do it without him.”

Destiny? Perhaps. In 2008, McGinty was living in Los Angeles, after touring the festival circuit with his SOA thesis film, *Morning Fall*. He had cofounded the alumni networking group Columbia University in Entertainment, when in late spring, his classmate Ben Odell ’04SOA called to tell him that Winter was working on a show about Atlantic City, and that he’d told the producer, “You *have* to meet my friend Ed.” (Odell, it turns out, knew Winter from coordinating an SOA master class in 2002 featuring Winter and *Sopranos* actors Edie Falco and Steve Schirripa.) McGinty quickly launched a campaign to win the job he knew he was born to do. After months of calls, e-mails, and sweat, he met Winter at an L.A. diner, armed with a huge shopping bag stuffed withphotos and books about his hometown. “I realized you have to brand yourself in this business, and I decided I was going to be the Atlantic City Guy,” says McGinty. Winter agreed.

On the Sunday following the seminary shoot, McGinty visits the boardwalk set in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, kept secure by locked gates and a security guard. The weather has a seaside feel this afternoon — mist, light rain, hazy clouds — that makes the scenery all the more convincing. It’s as if a slice of the Jazz Age Atlantic City boardwalk has dropped from the Brooklyn sky.

For McGinty, the verisimilitude that he’s helped create holds a deeper significance. “When they were building the set, I did feel we had done something pretty special,” he says. “It was like the ghost of my grandfather was standing next to me on the boardwalk. That felt good.”

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