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Anthony Edwards will be reviving his 'ER' role

By Bill Keveney, USA TODAY

ER's valedictory bows kick into high gear tonight with the return of Anthony Edwards, an original cast member who is likely to lead a wave of high-profile alumni visits during the NBC hospital drama's final season.

"It was very nostalgic. A lot of the biggest things in my life happened to me while I was on that set," says Edwards, who reprises his role as Dr. Mark Greene in the episode, "Heal Thyself" (10 ET/PT).

Greene's return comes via flashback; the character died of a brain tumor in the series' eighth season. In the episode, the current *ER* attending physician, Cate Banfield (Angela Bassett), remembers her son's treatment there a few years earlier by Greene, when he was in the advanced stages of his illness.

"I thought, 'How can we tie her into the origins of the show (and) make it feel like we've come full circle?'" says executive producer David Zabel, who wrote and directed the episode. He says Greene was "the heart and soul of the show."

John Wells, an executive producer since *ER*'s beginning, approached Edwards about returning. The actor liked the idea even more when *ER*'s studio, Warner Bros., agreed to donate \$125,000 to Shoe4Africa (shoe4africa.org), a charity that is building a children's hospital in Kenya. Steven Spielberg, whose Amblin Television is involved in *ER*'s production, matched that donation, and Wells contributed \$50,000.

During a trip to Kenya, Edwards told those involved about the contributions, and, he says, "they were like, 'Oh my God, Dr. Greene has come back to life to build us a hospital.'"

On the set, familiarity made the return easy for Edwards. Besides longtime crewmembers and Yvette Freeman, who plays one of *ER*'s original nurses, he was joined by two other departed regulars, Laura Innes (Dr. Kerry Weaver) and Paul McCrane (Dr. Robert "Rocket" Romano).

"It was as if I walked away and came right back," he says.

Other *ER* veterans, including George Clooney, visited the hospital set during Edwards' shooting days, Zabel says.

"It was kind of like a reunion party. ... This was a big one because it was Tony, and because it was the first one we did where it was, 'Wow! All the history is coming back,'" he says.

"We're going to do a few episodes later this season where we'll have that feeling, I think, again."

Does that mean guest visits for other *ER* stars, including Clooney, Julianna Margulies and Eriq La Salle, who were all present with Edwards when the show was a groundbreaking phenomenon that drew more than 30 million viewers a week? (This season, it averages 9.6 million viewers.) "I hope they do," Edwards says. "I had a great time."

The only confirmed returns are Noah Wyle's Dr. John Carter, another original character, for four episodes late in the season, and La Salle as the director of an episode, but Zabel says an appearance by anyone from the show's long run is possible.

"It's almost definite that there will be some other major characters coming back on the show."

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