Famous Comedian, "Dangerous" Playwright

Ubiquitous on film and TV, Wallace Shawn writes plays that pack the house—with 20.

by CRAIG LAMBERT

THOUGH INTERNATIONALLY RENOWNED as a "character" actor in comedy roles, in real life Wallace Shawn '65 acts deliberately, thoughtfully, and with a native New Yorker's intensity. Both a playwright and stage actor, he has been one of the busiest performers in contemporary film and television, with no fewer than 135 credits since 1979, when he played Diane Keaton's ex-husband in Woody Allen's film *Manhattan* and was in Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz.* The next year he appeared in Louis Malle's *Atlantic City,* beginning a film relationship that would continue in *My Dinner with André* (1981) and last for the rest of the French *auteur*'s career. Shawn has worked with directors ranging from James Ivory (*The Bostonians,* 1984) to Rob Reiner (*The Princess Bride,* 1989).

He's made scores of television appearances on programs ranging from *The Nanny* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* to *Sex and the City, Desperate Housewives, Family Guy, ER, The Daily Show,* and *Gossip Girl.*

Then there is his playwriting. Shawn does not take things lightly, tackling his projects with a seriousness that might inspire awe. He has written only five plays since *Marie and Bruce* (1979), which will be re-staged this March off-Broadway at the New Group's Acorn Theatre on West 42nd Street with Marisa Tomei and Frank Whaley in the title roles. Shawn's stage works include *Aunt Dan and Lemon* (1985), *The Fever* (1990), and *The Designated Mourner* (1996), which was also filmed with Mike Nichols and Miranda Richardson reprising the lead roles they took in the play. His only new play since *Designated Mourner* has been *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* (2008). Between plays, he usually takes a few years off or, he explains, "I would be repeating myself."

Shawn wrote his first play and decided to get involved in theater in 1967. ("One of my favorite people growing up was very upset when I started writing plays," he says. "She said, 'Wallace, you would have made such a wonderful judge!'") Though acting has become his livelihood, at the outset he wasn't interested in a performing career. But he felt that as a playwright he should learn something about acting and so took nine months of classes at the HB Studio in Manhattan. "Technique, scene study, voice, movement, speech, and singing," he recalls. "If I had known I would become a professional actor and make a living at it, I probably would have been ambitious—I would have learned fencing, gone to the gym, lost my speech defects. I'd have studied Shakespeare and today I'd be trying to get someone to let me play King Lear. I've acted more than an awful lot of people who went to drama school. But on the other hand, if someone today said, 'I think you *should* play King Lear,' I'd feel that I've never studied it and I don't know how to."

On the TV teen drama *Gossip Girl,* Shawn appears as the lawyer Cyrus Rose, the stepfather of one of the privileged Upper East Side private-schooled girls who anchor the series. "When they want me for an episode, I'm overjoyed, jumping for joy," Shawn says. "I very much enjoy being an actor—I love it. If the project is not fun, it's less fun. But I've been very lucky. When I was more popular I had the opportunity to turn down more things, the ones that were sickening. Now, I'm not offered much, and not offered much that is sickening. I'm a known quantity in some ways and people don't imagine me in certain things. What comes easiest to me is natural comedy, so I did some wonderful sitcoms: the *Cosby Show, Murphy*

Photograph by Jared Rodriguez

Brown, Taxi—that suited me very well. *Clueless*—the movie and a year of TV episodes—I think I did a pretty good job in all of those."

Though Shawn's comedic acting has made his face familiar to millions, his plays are much less well known. They aren't light comedies, but disturbing works that challenge audiences, and he considers them his most important creations. In a 2009 review of *Grasses of a Thousand Colors*, the *New Yorker*'s theater critic, John Lahr, called Shawn "...a singular American talent who had been marginalized in his own country. In the United States, Shawn, as a playwright, is a relatively unknown quantity without an artistic home; in England, his works, which prey on both consciousness and conscience, are published under the rubric of 'contemporary classics.'"

Gregory calls him "Our very finest playwright and one of our greatest character actors. I do not know, except for Molière, of a great playwright who is also a great actor."

André Gregory '56, the theater director, actor, and playwright who has been Shawn's friend as well as professional collaborator ever since they first met in 1970 (when the *New Yorker* writer Renata Adler, A.M. '66, a mutual friend, arranged for them to meet), has directed him in two of Shawn's own plays and in Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. Gregory calls him "our very finest playwright and one of our greatest character actors. I do not know, except for Molière, of a great playwright who is also a great actor." When Gregory was in London to direct *Grasses of a Thousand Colors*, British critics and theater people told him that they regarded Harold Pinter, Arthur Miller, Caryl Churchill, and Wallace Shawn as the four greatest contemporary playwrights working in English. "There's always a strong frightening element in his plays, about the shape of things to come," Gregory says. "*The Designated Mourner* was about someone like George W. Bush and his administration, although they weren't here yet. *Grasses* is about the destruction of the environment. Wally has a clarity about whatever the dangers are that are coming."

ROBBIE JACK/CORBIS

Shawn performing in his play *Grasses of a Thousand Colors* in London in 2009, with actresses Emily McDonnell, Miranda Richardson, and Jennifer Tilly

Playwright and author Robert Brustein, founding director of the American Repertory Theater and senior research fellow at Harvard, agrees that Shawn has written some of the best plays in America, and calls *Marie and Bruce* his masterpiece, but notes that Shawn "doesn't jump to mind when you think of our 10 best playwrights" because each one of his plays is different from the others. "He's elusive," Brustein says. "It's so hard to identify him—he hasn't developed his own distinctive and unique style. I don't know why he isn't more respected, because his work is as intelligent as anything being written today."

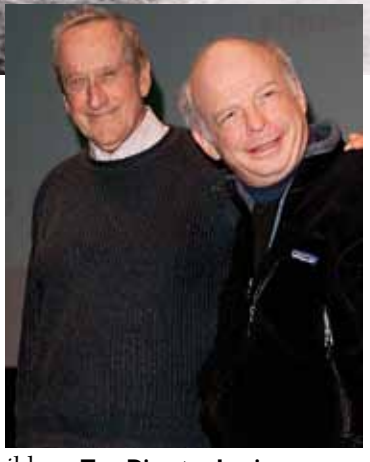
For Frank Whaley, a seasoned stage, film, and television actor who will play Bruce in *Marie and Bruce* this spring, Shawn "is overlooked in general, and it's completely unfair. There's nobody like him. He talks about things that are usually shied away from—in *Marie and Bruce*, the way people really feel about each other, the gritty truth, the gnawing facts. Nobody else writes that way, and the language is really juicy. There are 100 other people who write like David Mamet, but no one else writes like Wally." Whaley feels that *Marie and Bruce* "is dangerous for an actor. It's a huge challenge. These are not what one would think of as likable characters, and they are in the death throes of their marriage. It's something you can jump into and not know what you're going to find when you hit the pool; for an actor, that's hard to come by these days." Gregory calls *Marie and Bruce* "one of the most moving and harrowing plays about the relationships between men and women. I'd compare it to Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*."

Shawn himself suggests that the quality of his audience matters more than its size. "I have a little coterie, mostly people I know personally, whom I have persuaded to look to me in the same way that society as a whole would look to Philip Roth or David Mamet, or any other respected author," he says. "To me, these people are 'the public,' and they actually *are* eagerly awaiting my next work, although their friends and loved ones may laugh at them for that, and find it rather sad that they follow a false prophet." He notes that "there's a very large gap between my arrogance and the world's opinion of my work."

Still, consider the dedication embedded in a marathon project Shawn and Gregory began in the late 1990s. For 13 years now, they, with other players, have been rehearsing a new version of Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder,* using Shawn's adaptation of Ibsen's script. They have yet to perform it in public, though that may happen sometime this year. "André and I both like to take scripts [like *The Master Builder*] that are not written in a naturalistic style, and make them seem as believable as kitchen-sink realism," Shawn explains. "That's an exciting challenge.

"In a play, there's a certain amount of dog work—physical labor—in delivering your performance to an audience," he continues. "There's the performance, and then there is the 'UPS' aspect of *delivering* the performance. In a film there's just the performance. I'm a lazy person and don't particularly enjoy the UPS aspect, so in general, I'd rather be in a movie or on TV. But the stuff I have done with André is in a completely different category; the UPS aspect is just not there."

JOYCE RAVID/CORBIS OUTLINE



DARIO CANTATORE/GETTY IMAGES

Top: Director Louis Malle, Shawn, and actress Julianne Moore on the set of the film *Vanya on 42nd Street,* in 1993. Above: André Gregory and Shawn at a screening of their conversational film *My Dinner with André* at Lincoln Center in 2010

Gregory and Shawn strive to create a theatrical ambiance that feels to the audience like unmediated reality. "Movies are called a realistic medium, but you are not really looking at people, you're looking at a very specific selection of shots," Shawn explains. "Somebody else is telling you where to look—and not just *suggesting* it, but *enforcing* it. A play can be much more engrossing and exciting: you can actually see people changing in front of your eyes. Theater is potentially an incredibly thrilling medium—as close as you can come to being able to watch life. If we were, say, having dinner in a restaurant, it would be impolite—unthinkable, really—for me to stare at you in the focused, possibly even cold way I can stare at a person in a play. And I can't stare at *myself* because it is impossible. I couldn't watch the scenes that happened in my family between me and my brother and my parents, because I was *in* the scene. But when I go to *A View from the Bridge*, I can watch that family and observe them very closely in a way that I wish I could have done with my family, but couldn't."

The collaborations of Shawn and Gregory are different from almost any play you are likely to see in a large theater. Both men are drawn to "a sort of very small-scale hyperrealism in acting," Shawn says. "We share an interest in an indefensible and somewhat outrageous form of artistic activity: theater in which the style of acting is more like film acting." He elaborates: "In a large theater, the actors must either have microphones or 'project' their voices. Now, there are a lot of people who will tell you that actors who have been trained properly can be heard in the back row, without shouting the lines. And I concede that there are certain individual actors who can do that unbelievable thing. I'm just going to say that when I go to the theater, in most cases it sounds like they're shouting, so I can't take the characters too seriously. I grew up on movies and television [where actors speak in normal tones]—and I can't believe [theater] is real life, because in real life, people are not 'projecting' their voices, much less shouting. The type of theater we do really can't be done for a big audience. And you have to admit, it can't pay for itself. It can't be seen by thousands and thousands of people because there's a limit to how many times you can perform. So it's sort of indefensible, but if you happen to see it, you might admire it."

For their play *Vanya on 42nd Street,* Shawn and Gregory spent many months, spread over three years in the early 1990s, rehearsing Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya,* mostly in rented lofts; they eventually performed the play in an abandoned, rundown theater on 42nd Street in Manhattan. "We never intended to do it onstage," Shawn says. "Well, we *did* do it, but only for 20 people at a time. We acted the way we would have if there was a camera there." And eventually there was. As his final cinematic work, Louis Malle directed *Vanya on 42nd Street* (1994), a film of the theatrical production that Gregory directed; the screenplay was credited to Chekhov and David Mamet, with Shawn in the title role. "That's a performance of a different order from all of Wally's other performances," says screenwriter and lyricist Jacob Brackman '65, a friend of Shawn's since college. "His normal self-consciousness has completely receded and he becomes the character, the way actors are supposed to. I told Wally this, and he said, 'Louis tricked me.'"

One of Shawn's best-known turns is in *My Dinner with André,* in which he and Gregory play characters based on themselves. The movie memorably captures the two men's relationship on celluloid, distilled in an exhilarating 90-minute dialogue conducted over a meal, ranging across topics including experimental theater, the role of art in the world, the somnambulism of American life, mysticism and spirituality. "We decided to do a film that would be talking heads, based on ourselves," Shawn recalls. "The jumping-off point would be André's years of self-exploration and my complicated reactions to that. So we met with a tape recorder a few times a week for several months. We thought perhaps we could do a TV film, and had a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting—which was quite artistically adventurous at that time—to transcribe those conversations. The script took off from those transcripts and we memorized it and rehearsed it for many months. Before

the shooting we did three weeks of performances for audiences of 60 at the Royal Court Theatre in London. We tried to fool you, to make it look spontaneous. As with *Uncle Vanya*, all of that rehearsal allows you to achieve a certain spontaneity. It produces a type of acting I like to see. It feels natural. I don't like to see actors struggling. I like to feel that it is easy, and to see actors not tense, but relaxed."

"You're not aware of the unusual characteristics of your childhood until it's over and you can look back on it," Shawn says. He grew up on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the firstborn child of William Shawn, editor of the *New Yorker* magazine from 1952 until 1987. His brother, Allen Shawn '70, is a composer based at Bennington College; the two have collaborated on an opera. (Allen's twin sister, Mary, diagnosed with both autism and mental retardation, has been institutionalized since age eight; his new book, *Twin: A Memoir,* tells that family story and explores several issues it raises.)

William Shawn, a man of delicate sensibilities, became squeamish even at the mention of bodily functions, as Allen Shawn writes in his 2007 book, *Wish I Could Be There: Notes from a Phobic Life.* "Seeing one of Wally's early plays, like *Our Late Night* [1975], performed in the round with William Shawn seated in the front row, had Oedipal overtones," says Brackman. "Mr. Shawn was being subjected to this extreme material—like a three-page monologue on masturbation, the kinds of things that would never appear in his *New Yorker.* At the same time, he was being subjected to the scrutiny of his colleagues and subordinates at his son's premiere. It must have been an ordeal for him."

"I was raised very, very gently," Shawn says. "My parents did not believe in toughening up children, exposing them to the brutal reality of life. The brutal realities of life have been a tremendous shock to me. Obviously, I am not a mature adult. I have the mind of an adolescent—in my mind I am still 15 years old and trying to figure out what to do—and I am still shocked that things are rougher out there than they were in our living room."

A signal event took place at pubescence. "I went away to camp at age 13," he says. "I was so shocked to find that there were brutal people out there. I had never before encountered an adult who swore or used bad language. I thought this was a gallery of the most grotesque criminals gathered in a nightmarish hell—but they were regular folks! One day, one of the boys in my cabin left a can of soda pop lying around and when it came time for inspection, our cabin was marked down for it. The counselor in charge, an adult, instructed us to go and *beat up* that boy who had left the soda can out! I couldn't believe such a thing could occur on planet Earth—and then it turned out it was the norm! I don't think I've recovered from it still—I'm walking around every day saying, 'Is this really *true*? Is it really *like* this?'" John Lahr's review of *Grasses* quotes a powerful moment from *The Fever:* "What do you think a human being is? A human being happens to be an unprotected little wriggling creature…without a shell or a hide or even any fur, just thrown out onto the earth like an eye that's been pulled from its socket, like a shucked oyster that's trying to crawl along the ground. We need to build our own shells."

Shawn attended Manhattan's Dalton School, which at that time was "very progressive, bohemian." Progressive education continued at the Putney School in Vermont; being in the country was another shock for the New York boy, but Shawn fell "ecstatically in love with the landscape" and liked Putney's coed atmosphere ("I've never been happy in an all-male atmosphere and don't really like to be with more than two men if no women are present. Things degenerate.") and its practice of having students do farm work, including chores like mucking out the stable.

His father, who dropped out of the University of Michigan after one year, "had a very, very romantic view of Harvard," Wallace explains. The elder Shawn imagined Harvard to be like "ancient Greece…a place of learning where people selflessly did quiet scholarly work in this rustic, leafy landscape." Wally arrived in Cambridge in 1961 as a devotee of John F. Kennedy '40, filled with idealistic ambition to serve humanity, but on his first day in the Yard was rudely awakened by the *Crimson*'s *Confi Guide* to Harvard courses. "It mocked the learned scholars and openly derided scholarship in favor of taking courses that would be easy to pass—if you had to work hard, that was a *bad* thing rather than a good thing," he recalls. "And so many of the students seemed to be athletically minded young men who scorned the 'eggheads'—I was completely nonathletic myself. The way the boys talked about women was utterly flabbergasting to a student from Putney, which was founded by a very radical woman, Carmelita Hinton. It was as shocking as going back to a plantation where slavery was practiced. I'm happy to say that those were the worst years of my life; all subsequent years have been better. They say that old age is no fun, so something worse than Harvard may be looming in my future."

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Shawn concentrated in history, played violin in the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra, lived in Kirkland House with five roommates, and can recall going on only one date as an undergraduate. (Several years after college, he settled down with the fiction writer Deborah Eisenberg, who has sometimes acted in his plays; they have lived together since 1972, and have no children.) "I was a very, very unhappy recluse," he says. "I stayed in my room and read books." His history honors thesis, which took the then-innovative approach of writing a biography of an ordinary person of the early twentieth century, scored with one reader but got thumbs down from two others, one of whom wrote, "This isn't history, it is a little vignette or a *New Yorker* profile."

Nonetheless, he did attend his twenty-fifth class reunion despite a "Pavlovian response" to "terrible memories" in Cambridge—in much the same way, Shawn says, that he would be upset "if I visited the Pentagon. There are *(please turn to page 65)*

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creepy vibes coming out of there." Jacob Brackman recalls walking around Cambridge with him at that reunion. "Each gate, each street corner, or little square was the scene of some horrible humiliation or painful, wincing memory for Wally," Brackman recalls. "Things like, 'This is where I tried to say hello to [pianist] Ursula Oppens ['65] but she didn't even notice me.' And teenaged kids of our classmates kept pointing to Wally and saying, 'Inconceivable!' [a tag line made famous by Shawn's character, the criminal Vizzini, in *The Princess Bride*]—and that would make him wince all the more."

During three years in the 1980s that included travel to Central America, Shawn came to espouse leftist politics: specifically, an analysis of power, economics, and institutions perhaps best represented in the writings of MIT linguistics professor Noam Chomsky, whom Shawn interviews in his 2010 book *Essays.* His only partially autobiographical play, *The Fever,* explores this political transformation in a dramatic monologue. The protagonist—who relives a traumatic night spent in a hotel in an anonymous country wracked by civil war—struggles with his own complicity in the world's misery, his inner turmoil illuminating the contradictions of the affluent urban liberal.

"There was a point when I crossed over from being a regular liberal supporter of the Democratic Party to being a leftist, becoming less in the Arthur Schlesinger Jr. category and more in the Noam Chomsky category," Shawn says. "It had to do with understanding that I and the people I knew were actually involved in the story. There are certain writers who specialize in saying, 'Oh, my God, the terrible things people do to each other in South America! It's absolutely shocking!' At a certain point I was able to face the fact that—Wow, it was the U.S. Army who did that, and: a) it was *my* taxes that paid for them to do it; and b) they did it to preserve the status quo in which I am leading a very pleasant life. These things are happening every day because of me and my friends, and we're not doing anything about it. You have murder and torture going on—so, what does that make *us*?

"I happen to believe that the American elite has been a marauding monstrosity on the world scene in my lifetime," Shawn continues. "It has been unimaginably brutal in trying to preserve the status quo and unimaginably greedy in trying to bring the world's resources onto our continent. And unintentionally contributing to the possibility of destroying life on Earth, due to the damage that has been done to the environment by our way of doing business. Harvard's role is mostly to service and to perpetuate and to create that elite, even though many, many wonderful people, and people who have *fought* the status quo, have come through Harvard. I'm a devoted reader of Harvard class reports, and of course, many of these people who do great harm are totally charming and delightful human beings. I've written an awful lot on the topic of how it would be possible for charming and delightful human beings to do things that are very brutal."

NBCU PHOTO BANK VIA AP IMAGES

RON TOM/ABC VIA GETTY IMAGES

Top: Shawn on *The Cosby Show* in 1987, with Bill Cosby and Penni Penniman, and (above) astride a burro with actress Terri Hatcher for a 2005 episode of *Desperate Housewives*

His 1985 play *Aunt Dan and Lemon,* for example, is about an academic woman (Danielle, known as Aunt Dan), an appealing person whose idol happens to be Henry Kissinger '50, Ph.D. '54. The narrator of the story, Lemon, is a young woman who has been "horribly influenced by that delightful person," Shawn says, and she consequently has a "terribly sick, warped view of life." In Lemon's final monologue, among other disturbing things, she defends many of the Nazis' ideas. In a review of a 2003 production, Ben Brantley of the *New York Times* identified "...the play's extraordinary goal. That is nothing less than to make you experience sensually the allure of fascist governments and murderous regimes....Mr. Shawn is not so much setting up insidious political theories to be knocked down as suggesting how those theories can take root in susceptible minds."

In retrospect, says Shawn, "*Aunt Dan and Lemon* was making some rather radical points ahead of my own understanding of them. You could say I was deeply influenced by my own play, and driven to read more." Perhaps in a year, or a decade, the American theatrical audience will, like Shawn, catch up with his own work. "Very few people agree with me, but I feel I have a right to open the door to my own unconscious mind and walk in and see what's there," he says. "If I were someone who was respected, then everyone would agree I have a right—'Of course, he has a right—more than a right, an *obligation,* because what's going on in his head is going to turn out to be valuable to our society.' But in my case, other people are *not* saying that, except for a few cronies whom I have browbeaten into reinforcing my belief in myself. I try to pay back the world slightly [for my privileges] by occasionally saying things that could be truthful and might be well expressed in some of what I've written." Asked about an interpretation of one of his plays, he muses, "If I became a famous writer after my death...," and then breaks off before adding, in a tone that might be wry, sincere, ironic, or all three: "That *is* my plan." ▽

Craig A. Lambert '69, Ph.D. '78, is deputy editor of this magazine.