

ups that makes light of the romantic misadventures of young adults, and the monthly Laugh Tank, the space launched a political comedy series, *Laughing Liberally*, that went on national tour and played Town Hall, a 1,500-seat venue in Times Square. “The Tank was the first place that I felt at home onstage in New York,” says Baratunde Thurston ’99, a stand-up comedian and author of *Better Than Crying*:

“Something is always off-center at The Tank: the physical layout is off-center, and so are the performers and audiences.”

*Poking Fun at Politics, the Press & Pop Culture*, who has performed there many times, as well as with *Laughing Liberally*. “You see actual art happening on that stage. The audiences are into it and they want you to push it; I did 9/11 jokes there much earlier than other venues. Something is always off-center at The Tank: the physical layout is off-center, and so are the performers and audiences.”

Bell, on the cinematic side, has booked a monthly series of screenings by the New York-based Harvard Film Group, led by Barney Oldfield, A.B.E. ’79, C.A.D. ’82. One documentary filmmaker screened a film running two projectors at once with a live band improvising against the images—“something you wouldn’t be able to see elsewhere,” says Bell. Last fall, James Toback ’66 showed his 2001 feature *Harvard Man* and discussed it with the audience afterwards. “Screenings followed by talkbacks work well here, because it’s not just a performance space, but a community space and social space,” Krebs explains. “It’s part theater, part lounge.” (Indeed, The Tank sometimes takes out temporary alcohol licenses for larger events with, for example, cabaret formats.) Bell adds, “Often, noncommercial cinema will engage or challenge the audience in unfamiliar ways, so having the director here enables them to appreciate the work in ways they might not have been able to.”

The Tank’s founders got a break at the

O P E N B O O K

## He Was on to Something

**Educator** James O. Freedman ’57, L ’60, who died in March of last year, was president emeritus of Dartmouth College and of the University of Iowa. In his retirement in Cambridge,

he was president of Harvard Magazine Inc. One learns in the just-published memoir of his early years, *Finding the Words: The Education of James O. Freedman* (Princeton University Press, \$29.95), that when a student he competed to be this magazine’s “Undergraduate” columnist, but the editors passed him over. In a book-jacket blurb, Stanley N. Katz ’55, Ph.D. ’61, of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, characterizes the Freedman of those days as “a bright and ambitious young Jew trying self-consciously to break out of small-town New England to achieve greatness.” Of this memoir, Katz writes: “This is really a book about books—how beautiful they are, and how the examined life cannot be lived without them, since they have been the mirror in which Freedman learned to see himself.”

**A**nd so, driven by ambition and a compulsive intensity, frightened by conflict, tormented by self-doubt, hindered by a sense of inferiority, afflicted by depression, imprisoned by inhibitions, shadowed by shame, longing for praise and approval, I entered Harvard hoping to find my place in the world, with each of these characteristics forever shifting as it bumped against another, at once hurtling me forward and

life I told V.S. Naipaul that I wished I had known at 20 what I knew at 60, he replied, “But then life would not be a quest. That is the very meaning of life.” Naipaul’s statement is similar to an observation made by my friend James Alan McPherson, who, in a seriously intended play on words, once wrote, “The purpose of life is to search for the purpose of life.” For Naipaul and McPherson, life is a question answering a question.

Does that imply, I wondered as a freshman, that although life may have a purpose, we may not be able to discover it? In his novel *Let Me Count the Ways* (1965), Peter De Vries has a character say, “The universe is like a safe to which there is a combination. But the combination is locked up in the safe.” Others believe, however, that life has the purpose with which we endow it by our actions—by the work we do and the love we express, by the values we follow and the dignity we confer upon others. For these people, life flowers into purpose when we achieve the fullest realization of what Milton called “that one talent which is death to hide.” I believed from the start that Harvard was about searching for the purpose of life. “To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be on to something,” I later read in *The Moviegoer* (1960) by Walker Percy. “Not to be on to something is to be in despair.” I did not appreciate, however, just how long that search would take and how consuming it would be.



FROM THE BOOK

Freedman, in his high-school yearbook

holding me back, in confusing, contradictory states of satisfaction and pain.

I was, however, sustained by my sense of destiny. To have a sense of destiny is to have a conviction about the purpose of life. Confronting that sense, forming that conviction is a part of what a liberal education is about. When in later