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.

Shawn wrote his first play and decided to get involved in the 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.”

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
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.’”

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.”

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.”

Shawn performing in his play Grasses of a Thousand Colors in London in 2009, with actresses Emily McDonnell, Miranda Richardson, and Jennifer Tilly.
that actors who have been trained properly can be heard in the
ect' their voices. Now, there are a lot of people who will tell you
the style of acting is more like film acting.” He elaborates: “In a
acting,” Shawn says. “We share an interest in an indefensible and
different from almost any play you are likely to see in a large theater.
I couldn't.”

way that I wish I could have done with my family, but

A View from the Bridge,
the scene. But when I go to

me and my brother and my parents, because I was

in

watch the scenes that happened in my family between

can't stare at

even cold way I can stare at a person in a play. And I

can't 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

see people changing in front of your eyes. The-

realistic 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

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 cas-
es it sounds like they're shouting, so I can't take the characters
too seriously. I grew up on movies and television [where actors


Shawn and Gregory strive to create a the-

atrical ambiance that

like unmediated reality. “Movies are called a
realistic medium, but you are not really look-
ing 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. The-

ater is potentially an incredibly thrilling me-

dium—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

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 somnambu-
lism of American life, mysticism and spirituality. “We
decided to do a film that would be talking heads, based on our-
selves,” 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

Still, consider the dedication embedded in a marathon proj-
ject: 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 Ibs-
ren'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 naturalis-
tic style, and make them seem as believable as kitchen-sink real-


“In a play, there's a certain amount of dog work—physical la-
bor—in delivering your performance to an audience,” he contin-
ues. “There's the performance, and then there is the 'UPS' aspect
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 cat-
egory; the UPS aspect
is just not there.”

Gregory and Shawn

strive to create a the-
atrical ambiance that

feels to the audience

like unmediated reality. “Movies are called a
realistic medium, but you are not really look-
ing 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. The-

ater is potentially an incredibly thrilling me-

dium—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

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.

“Th...
Like saying, ‘Is this really true? Is it really true? I don’t think I’ve recovered from it still—I’m walking around every day on planet Earth—and then it turned out it was the norm! I don’t believe in toughening up children, exposing them to the brutal realities of life. The brutal realities of life have been a tremendous shock to me. Obviously, I am not a mature adult. I have 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 brutality 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 heat 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 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.)

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 Conf’s 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.”

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...”
FAMOUS COMEDIAN, “DANGEROUS” PLAYWRIGHT

(continued from page 39)

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.”

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.