

ALAN ALDA

By Rip Rense

Alan Alda — the only human ever honored by the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences with Emmys for acting, writing, and directing — owes it all to burlesque. Well, a lot of it, anyway.

"I remember when I was nine years old and my father and I were rehearsing a sketch to do at the Hollywood Canteen," said Alda, reached at home in the pastoral bayside town of Willowbrook, New York, in the Hamptons.

"The little hints he would give me came directly from his experience in burlesque. He would talk about how to approach a moment in the

sketch, and he was dealing with it in the same way an improvisational performer would deal with it, which is often what burlesque comics would do. They had a basic sketch, and they would do jazz riffs around it."

Strippers, comics, straight men, raconteurs — this was the company Alda kept through much of a childhood spent on the road with his father, actor Robert Alda, on the burlesque circuit of the 1940s. Alan debuted on stage at the age of six months, a crying or sleeping "prop" in a high chair playing foil to funny-men with names like Hank Henry and Rags Ragland. A dubious tutelage?

Not to hear him tell it:

"When you think about burlesque comics," he said, "most people don't think about them as being disciplined and creative. You think of them as filling in time between the girls. But I look back on the way they would create a character in a sketch over a period of years, adding little bits to it here

and there. The development of a persona that was distinct and was original and had a uniqueness to it — that was *very* creative of them. . . . Not a bad model to have if you're trying to be good at your work."

Alda seems a modest, even self-deprecating person, but he wouldn't likely argue with the assessment that he has been good at his work. Best known as Hawkeye

Pierce in the beloved series, *M*A*S*H* (for which he won five Emmys in the show's 11-year run), the man has also won two Writers Guild Awards, three Directors Guild Awards, six Golden Globes from the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, and seven People's Choice Awards. For what many critics called his finest performance, in Woody Allen's *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, he won the D.W. Griffith Award, the New York Film Critics Award, and was nominated for a British Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor.

His acting achievements, of course, are well known. What is less

known is his decidedly unusual, and often difficult, childhood. Aside from growing up onstage, where for several years he found himself competing with a pig for his father's attentions (more on that later), young Alda had to contend with a bout of polio at age eight, his mother's mental illness, and being an only child.

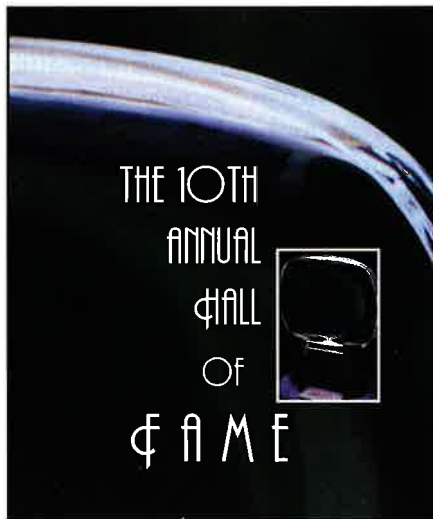
Asked to elucidate what was indelicately referred to as his "weird childhood," Alda merely exclaimed "How dare you!" and laughed.

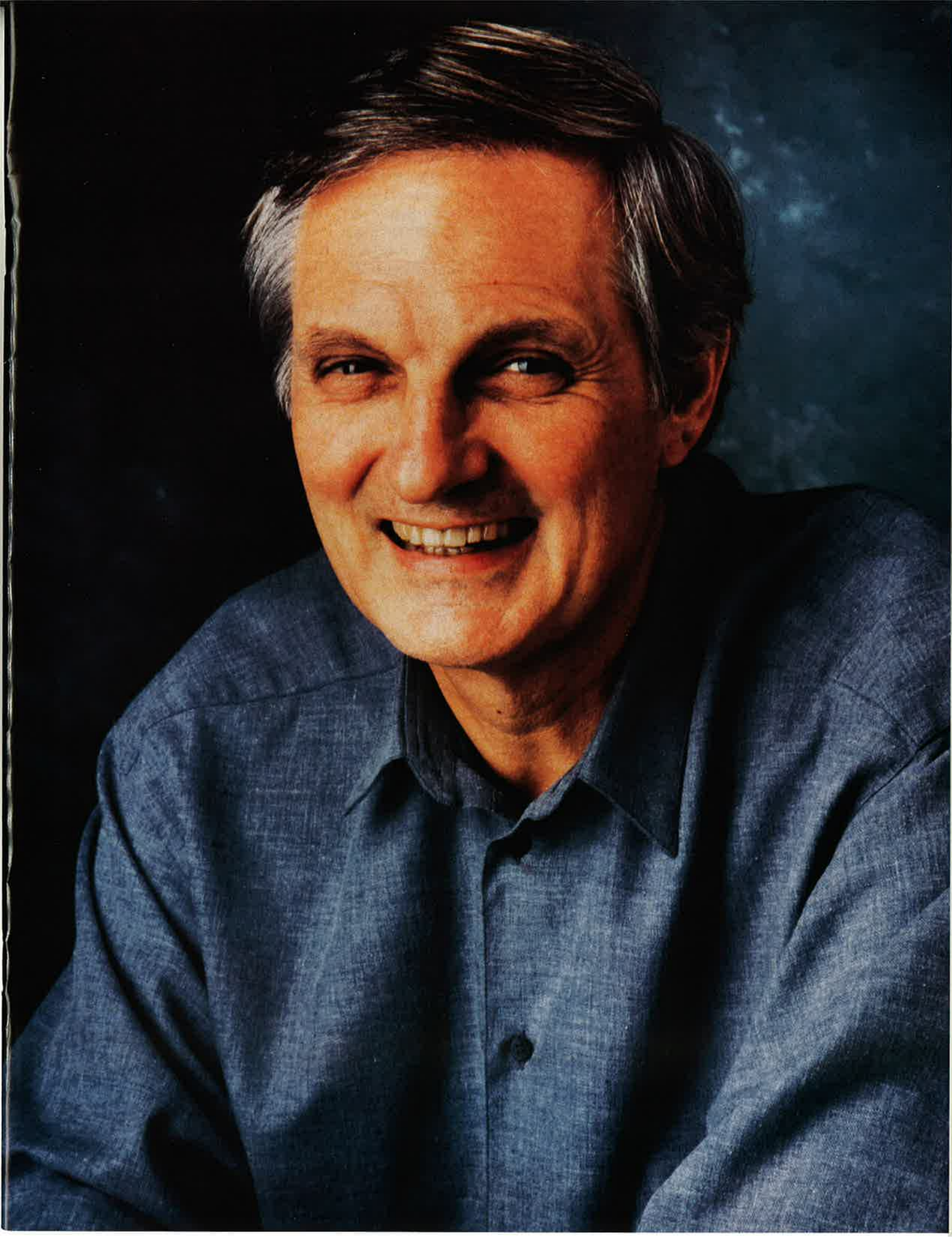
Asked how he managed to overcome trials of his youth and emerge well adjusted, he offered this:

"I *didn't*. I'm speaking to you from the top of the tower in Texas. There goes a nun!"

The answer, obviously, is in his lightheartedness. (He didn't get the role of glib, acerbic Hawkeye for excelling at sober drama.) In the spirit of indulging lightheartedness, well, what *about* that pig, Alan?

"The pig was part of a sketch where my father told fellow burlesquer Hank Henry that he was going out," said Alda. "And Hank said, 'Don't come back until you bring home the bacon!' And my father comes back in and says 'I brought home the bacon,' and he's carrying this pig. The pig is just this one sight gag. By the way, I don't consider that much of a joke. But apparently, in those days 50 years ago, they thought that was *hysterical*. It got a big enough laugh to warrant carrying that pig around from town to town for a year or two. I think I was jealous of it. The pig got more attention than I did in some cases, because at least the pig got to go with the actors. Sometimes I





got left with an aunt."

But not so often that theater didn't become the preoccupation of Alda's young life. He still clearly recalls pivotal thespian advice his father gave him before that Hollywood Canteen sketch. They were doing Abbott and Costello routines (Alan, describing himself as having had buck teeth and having been "very fat," did the Costello parts).

"Neither one of us realized, I don't think, that he was tying me in to an old tradition of steering by an internal compass," he said. "Oddly enough, that's almost the same direction I got from Woody Allen, 45 years later [in *Crimes and Misdemeanors*]. Woody almost doesn't give you any direction. But when he does, he says 'Don't say my lines the way I wrote them, that's very stiff and formal. Make it your own.'" Alda said. "The little direction my father gave me, was, I think, based on a similar thing, and went back to his working with burlesque comics."

Considering his upbringing, the next bit of fatherly advice Robert Alda offered — when 16-year-old Alan told Pop of his decision to pursue an acting career — is fairly shocking.

"My dad did pretty much the same thing I did with my kids. Two of them wanted to be actresses. What he did was to say, 'You really *shouldn't* do it' — and then he did everything he could to help me. Helped me get a job in summer stock when I was 16, a job in Rome when he was doing a play there — twice, when I was 18, then in my 20s. Well, I did that same thing with my kids. I discouraged them, then I wrote parts for them in *The Four Seasons*."

After the job in summer stock, Alda entered Fordham college with the goal of becoming a classical actor. His fondest ambition? To play Oedipus. From Fordham, he acted at the Cleveland Playhouse on a Ford Foundation grant, then went on to years of struggle in New York. Throughout his twenties, frustrating times of "making rounds" in New

York, Alda came to painfully understand why his father hadn't encouraged him to go into show business. During one lean period, Phil Silvers, and old friend from the burlesque circuit, helped him get a part in an "awful" off-Broadway revue. Eventually, he did land decent off-Broadway, then Broadway, and finally television parts (he was a regular on *That Was The Week That Was*). Married at 21 and a father not long after, Alda was 29 before he realized that Oedipus probably wasn't in the cards. It dawned on him, dramatically enough, right in the middle of a musical in Boston called *The Apple Tree*, directed by Mike Nichols. Alda



Alan Alda (center) in a stage production not long before he gave up his goal of becoming a classical actor.

found himself on stage in tights and fright wig, playing a caricature of a rock 'n roll singer. As he once told an interviewer: "They pulled this sheet off my head, the audience looked at me and laughed as I did my song, and I gave up something in that moment. I gave up a fantasy of being highfalutin' and settled for what it was in me to do, whatever I could do well."

He wound up nominated for a Tony Award for wearing that fright wig, and went on to his first movie role in *Gone are the Days* (a recreation

of his stage role from *Purlie Victorious*). Then came parts in *The Moonshine War*, *Jenny*, *The Mephisto Waltz*, and *Paper Lion*. It was shortly after being nominated for an Emmy for his portrayal of Caryl Chessman (*Kill Me If You Can*) that Alda accepted the part that most defined his career. No great story here. The producers of *M*A*S*H* simply called him up and asked him to play Hawkeye. Alda, ever conscious of the social value of his work (this is, after all, the feminist who spent 10 years campaigning for the Equal Rights Amendment) did have one concern.

"We had to postpone our final talk till the night before the first rehearsal, so I hadn't really agreed to do it until we'd had our talk," he said. "I was making a movie about the Utah State Prison called *The Glass House*.

That final talk was about an agreement that we wouldn't just do slapstick at the front. We would treat the war seriously. We would show that the war was a destructive force. When I realized that was what they wanted to do, too, we were fine and went to work the next day. I was concerned that we would do something like *McHale's Navy*, which would trivialize the experience of the people who had really lived through it."

Amazingly, what became the staple *M*A*S*H* moment — the operat-