The truth about Alan Alda

'M*A*S*H' actor candid in memoir, real life

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(CNN) -- Alan Alda is doing this celebrity memoir thing all wrong.

For example, on Page 74 of his new book, "Never Have Your Dog Stuffed (And Other Things I've Learned)" (Random House), he writes rapturously of meeting a woman named Arlene.

Within a few pages, they're taking walks in Bronx Park, stealing time from Alda's military service at Fort Benning, Georgia, and getting married. The book is 224 pages, so you wait for the other shoe to drop: petty arguments, ugly affairs, divorce.

Nothing. They've been married for 48 years.

Then there are the tales about his fellow actors, such as the "M*A*S*H" crew with which he spent 11 years.

William Christopher, who played Father Mulcahy, "was studious, translating ancient Greek during his breaks." Harry Morgan, Col. Sherman T. Potter, "kept us laughing in a way only he could." Loretta Swit (Margaret "Hot Lips" Houlihan) and Larry Linville (Frank Burns) "were able to play scenes of comic passion in so many ways that I wondered how they did it without repeating themselves."

OK.

And his own career? Alda, 69, has been nominated for three Tonys; he barely mentions them. His experience as an Oscar nominee (for "The Aviator") earns a bemused couple pages, mostly so he can tell a joke on himself. He spends more time on his "Scientific American Frontiers" hosting than his "West Wing" role, more on his woodshedding than his success.

Indeed, what emerges in the book is a genuinely thoughtful, modest guy -- which is also what emerges on the phone.

"I only put in the stuff that had an impact on me," he says in an interview from his New York office.

He tells a story about "The Apple Tree," a mid-'60s Broadway play directed by Mike Nichols, which resulted in a Tony nomination for Alda. But what he recalls in the book is wondering where his career was going.

"The story I tell about standing under the silk shroud in 'The Apple Tree' and my career had come to nothing so far, and then realizing that I was looking at it wrong -- instead of thinking about what I ought to be doing, I should be thinking about what I'm
on January 28, 1936, in New York

Family: Wife, Arlene (married 1957); children Eve, Elizabeth and Beatrice


TV work includes: "M*A*S*H" (1972-83), "Kill Me If You Can" (1977), "And the Band Played On" (1993), "The West Wing" (2004-present)

Tidbit: Was considered for the role of President Bartlet in "The West Wing"; now plays a presidential candidate, a senator. Has also played senators in "The Aviator" and "The Seduction of Joe Tynan."

"I couldn't have written [this book] 20 years ago. I couldn't even talk about it 25 years ago. I not only wouldn't talk about it in public, I had friends I wouldn't talk about it to," he says.

As she grew older, his mother exhibited increasingly erratic behavior. At least once, when Alda was a child, she tried to stab his father; later, when Alda was an adult, she tried to escape from a moving airplane.

He acknowledges it's taken him years to get over his anger -- and his shame.

"I had to be able to laugh about it," he says. "I couldn't laugh about it when I was 12, but I can laugh about it now."

He and his father, who eventually divorced his mother, never addressed her illness directly. "He knew there was something wrong, but there wasn't even a name for it in those days," Alda says.

Yet, he adds, his mother gave him great strength. She could be full of fun, he writes -- during his experience with polio she was tireless in treating him and was always supportive.

"When I thought about it, she had given me a tremendous amount of confidence, because she tried really hard to be as good a mother as she could," he says. "And did a good job despite the fact that she was so incapacitated."

"It takes awhile to calm down and get compassion for someone who's that close to you and that irrational."

Indeed, Alda has used his acting career to gain insight into himself and others -- particularly his most famous role, that of Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce on "M*A*S*H."

Alda almost didn't take the role; he was worried that "the show might become nothing more than high jinks at the front," he writes. Reassured by producers Gene Reynolds and Larry Gelbart, he signed on, only to find that he couldn't figure Hawkeye
Alda plays presidential candidate Arnold Vinick on "The West Wing." It wasn't until the first shot of the first episode -- after initial rehearsals -- that he let himself into the mind of the free-wheeling surgeon.

"No matter what part you play, you have to make use of yourself. The idea is not to let it show," he says. "That's the best acting there is."

The drawback, he continues, is that "people thought I was Hawkeye." Alda tried to keep some perspective on fame -- he flew back to the East Coast to see his family regularly, and took very different parts in other works, such as a TV movie about convicted rapist Caryl Chessman and the film "The Seduction of Joe Tynan."

But there were still strange incidents. Some were lighthearted, such as the child who saw him in a restaurant and asked, "How did you get out of the TV?" Others were starker: Suicidal people wrote him letters, asking for help. And when the show first became popular, Alda suffered from nightmares that a man was choking him.

'Golden time'

He's blunt about such experiences in "Never Have Your Dog Stuffed." In fact, the title came from a tragicomic incident in his childhood. Alda's dog Rhapsody suffered a painful death after eating a sharp bone, and Alda's father suggested to his inconsolable son that the dog be taken to a taxidermist. Unfortunately, the taxidermist got Rhapsody's expression wrong, and the family couldn't bear to look at him.

By the other end of the book, Alda is facing his own death because of an intestinal obstruction. He's in a remote part of Chile with "Scientific American Frontiers," and there's a chance he won't survive.

Even in such a dire situation, Alda kept his sense of humor. After the local surgeon described the surgery, Alda replied, "Oh, you're going to do an end-to-end anastomosis."

"How did you know that?" the surgeon asked.

"I did many of them on 'M*A*S*H,' " Alda said.

Alda survived, of course, and has since become a Republican presidential candidate on "The West Wing," a bullying senator in "The Aviator" and a desperate salesman in Broadway's "Glengarry Glen Ross." After his near-death experience, he writes, he's in "golden time."

"I think," he says in the interview, "I'm able to let go a little more and do things I aspired to do all along. ... I don't quite know why."

"It sounds too neat," he adds, "but something did change."
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