

THE MANY FACES OF ETHAN HAWKE

The actor's long, freewheeling career has been a chart of his restlessness and his recklessness.

By John Lahr

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Hawke, at his home in Connecticut, in July. "If you want to live in the arts," he said, "you've got to dig in." Photograph by Nikola Tamindzic for The New Yorker

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On a chilly November morning last year, the sunlight a ribbon of gold on the rolling Virginia hills, Ethan Hawke, who would turn forty-nine the next day, ambled into a replica of Harpers Ferry in 1859. An armory and four short

streets had been constructed on the grounds of State Farm, a prison property outside Richmond. Hawke, already in full makeup and sporting a long, shaggy beard, was playing the flinty abolitionist John Brown, in “The Good Lord Bird,” a seven-part Showtime series adapted from James McBride’s 2013 National Book Award-winning novel. (The show, which premieres October 4th, is the first project that Hawke has produced, co-created, with Mark Richard, and starred in.) For his next scene, he was preparing to reenact Brown’s famous raid on the United States arsenal. Brown was hanged for this botched act of terrorism—an attempt to arm slaves and start a revolt—but it proved to be a tipping point, eighteen months later, for the start of the Civil War.

Hawke was at the end of a six-month shoot on the show, but his connection with Brown’s story had begun a few years earlier, in 2015, as he drove to the set of Antoine Fuqua’s remake of “The Magnificent Seven,” near Baton Rouge. In that film, Hawke played a Confederate soldier who didn’t want to fight anymore. In the scene he was shooting that day, a U.S. marshal (played by Denzel Washington) would say, “The war is over,” and Hawke’s character would reply, “It’s never over. It just keeps going on and on.” As Hawke ran through the scene in his mind, his car radio broadcast news of a legislative battle in South Carolina over the right to fly the Confederate flag in front of the statehouse. It struck him that the Civil War was, indeed, not over, an insight that coincided with one of the directors of photography asking him if he’d read the novel “The Good Lord Bird.” Studying Hawke, with his piercing blue eyes, angular chin, and slicked-back brindle hair, the D.P. added, “Read the book—you’d make a great John Brown.”

Hawke read the novel on set and couldn’t stop laughing. The picaresque saga, which is told more in the style of Redd Foxx than of Toni Morrison, addresses the barbarism of slavery through the faux-naïf eyes of Little Onion, a formerly enslaved boy disguised as a girl, who becomes witness to Brown’s rebellion. McBride’s impish tone is as incendiary as his subject, precisely because the humor highlights the surreal horror of slavery and the courage needed to survive it. Here is a Black American novelist writing about the nation’s greatest wound in an irreverent way that is “very dangerous in the current atmosphere,” Hawke said. On the other hand, he went on, “if you’re trying to teach people, or yell at them, you rarely change their mind. Humor can really effect change—it’s the greatest illuminator.”

Hawke, in his book “Rules for a Knight” (2015)—written for the instruction of his children—styles himself as a medieval knight searching for the holy grail of higher being. “A knight does not stop at each victory,” he advises. “He pushes on to risk a more significant failure.” John Brown similarly saw himself as a warrior for moral justice, and his righteous ideals make him a profoundly fascinating character for Hawke. “There is a mistaken idea that he was trying to save Black folks,” Hawke told me. “He was trying to save *us*. Seen through the eyes of a serious Christian, Black people didn’t need saving. The affluent white communities were the ones living in sin. Harpers Ferry was the great American trumpet sound.” He went on, “If people said, ‘Don’t you feel bad you got your own sons killed?,’ he’d say, ‘Someday, this country will be ashamed of slavery, and I’ll never be ashamed of my boys.’ I just loved that. I found it very inspiring. I don’t know how to wrestle with the violence of it, because I’m not a violent person. But I admire his ethics and his ferocity.” He added, “John Brown’s a lightning rod. He forces the question of violence versus nonviolence, like Malcolm X. That’s why we avoid talking about him. He fans the flames of white guilt.”

On the set in Virginia, Hawke ran through his lines, sitting on a barrel by the gates of the re-created Harpers Ferry engine house, where Brown’s ragtag army of eighteen held off about two hundred and forty militiamen and U.S. marines for thirty-six hours. Because McBride’s novel is narrated entirely by Onion, Hawke had to invent his own voice for Brown.

Channelling the stentorian delivery of his Texan grandfather, a nabob of local politics who spoke in paragraphs, Hawke found both a sound and a subtext for Brown, who, he decided, was always in dialogue with his Maker. That morning, Hawke was working up a prayer that he planned to improvise on camera, as a way of circumventing studio interference—a

technique he learned from watching Denzel Washington, when they co-starred in the 2001 film “Training Day.” “If they see the words in the script, they get scared and note you to death,” Hawke told me. “If you just improvise it, they think they are brilliant for hiring you.” As he rehearsed, he could see his breath. “Might we, Lord, as your humble servants, grab the beams of this engine house and pull slavery down on top of us? If so, Lord, grant me the strength of Samson,” he intoned.

By the time he had the speech formed, a hundred or so extras had filed onto the set with guns and horses. It was time to go to work. He thought about the fact that he was the first person to put John Brown’s full story on film. As he told me later, “I couldn’t believe that this moment of American history had been relatively untouched in cinema and that my heroes hadn’t already played this part. Jason Robards? Chris Plummer? Orson Welles? How did Paul Newman not get this part? I felt like the luckiest actor in America.”

Hawke’s mother’s family in Abilene, Texas—he was born in Austin—were Yellow Dog Democrats. His maternal grandfather, Howard Green, co-owned and managed the Abilene Blue Sox, a farm club for the Brooklyn Dodgers, and was one of the men who wanted to have Jackie Robinson on the team. Hawke’s mother, Leslie, whom he calls “a wannabe Eleanor Roosevelt,” juggled her work with social action, teaching at an inner-city school, joining the Peace Corps at forty-eight, and founding the Alex Fund, a charity that helps provide education for poor children in Romania. As a teenager, Hawke himself volunteered, under the auspices of the Episcopal Church, in Haiti, during the early days of the AIDS epidemic, and in Appalachia. When he was in high school, in Princeton, New Jersey, his mother took in two Ethiopian students; one of them, who went on to study computer science, was picked up by police for walking in Hawke’s suburban neighborhood. “That was a huge wake-up call for me,” Hawke said. “He got stopped by the cops constantly. I never did. I could have had a bag of marijuana in my pocket. All he ever had in his pocket was a calculator.”

While shooting “Training Day,” Hawke spent four months riding around Watts, listening to Washington talk about race in America and about Malcolm X (whom Washington had played in Spike Lee’s 1992 bio-pic); for Hawke, it was “a powerful education.” When he and his wife, Ryan Shawhughes, met with McBride, in January, 2016, to discuss turning “The Good Lord Bird” into a limited series, McBride could tell that Hawke knew the territory. “There’s dynamics of this whole race question that we could burn a lot of ink talking about,” McBride told me. “Ultimately, that would have been a waste of time. Ethan really understood what John Brown represented.” Hawke told McBride, “I’m not Brad Pitt. I can’t afford to option this novel for the money that it deserves.” But they made a handshake deal that allowed Hawke a year to come up with an adaptation. If McBride liked the script, they’d look for someone to buy it. “Basically, he gave me permission to write it for free,” Hawke said.

One afternoon in May, 2017, Hawke rode his bicycle from his town house in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn, to New Brown Memorial Baptist Church, near the Red Hook housing projects, where McBride oversees the children’s music program. He was going to pick up McBride’s notes on a rough draft of his script. Hawke wandered into the vestibule of the church. “Are you the guy who’s come to fix the air-conditioning?” the church treasurer asked. At that moment, McBride appeared and identified Hawke. “Last time a white guy was here was to fix the A.C.,” the treasurer said.

“Ethan looked like a white guy who just happens to be looking for a Coors beer,” McBride said. But he also saw a lot of John Brown in him. In the decades since Hawke made his name as a shy, baby-faced teen-ager in “Dead Poets Society” (1989), his face has become craggy, and he has achieved a full-blown, happy maturity as a rough-edged, raucous actor. “Brown had a gleam in his eye,” McBride said. “Part of him was just completely untamed. When he sat down with people, he was almost harnessing this madness within him. You get a little of that with Ethan. His antennae are always out, grabbing, catching every little bit of information. He’s an outsider. It’s not like he’s attempting to do it. It’s just that he’s at a

different radio station. He's operating on his own frequency."

Throughout his career, Hawke has consistently challenged himself to grow. He has appeared in more than eighty movies, predominantly independent films interspersed with Hollywood money-makers. He has directed four films, written three novels, and co-founded a theatre company. In the process, Hawke has been nominated for four Academy Awards (including two for Best Adapted Screenplay) and a Tony, for his performance, in Tom Stoppard's trilogy "The Coast of Utopia," as Mikhail Bakunin, the revolutionary Russian anarchist, whose bowwow personality resurfaces in the fulminations of Hawke's John Brown. The range of Hawke's roles—a romantic charmer (in the "Before" trilogy), a drug-addled Chet Baker (in "Born to Be Blue"), a guilt-ridden suicidal priest (in "First Reformed"), to name just a few—is also a reflection of his expansive empathy. "Acting, at its best, is like music," he said. "You have to get inside your character's song."

Hawke's shape-shifting has its origins in his powerful desire to engage his first audience: his parents. Leslie was eighteen when he was born; his father, Jim, was twenty. They'd met in high school in Texas and moved east after college. Hawke was four when they divorced, a breakup that sent Jim back to Texas, while Leslie and Ethan made their way to Vermont and, later, to Princeton. Alternating between parents, Hawke also alternated between personalities. For his mother, who put "a super-high value on intellectual pursuits," he said, he "played up the artistic, literary, conscientious political thinker." During his reunions with his much missed father, who became an insurance actuary and was a humble, conservative, deeply religious man, Hawke "affected a Southern accent," minded his manners, talked football, and was "a lot more religious." "I loved him so much," Hawke said. "I wanted him to like me. I was aware that I was performing for him. I hated myself for it." After a visit when he was sixteen, Hawke, arriving back at Newark Airport, stripped off his shirt and exited the plane bare-chested. "I can't find myself," he told his mother. "I can't find me." Recalling the incident, he added, "As I grew older, I realized that both personalities were just aspects of myself. I became very aware of the ability to shape your personality and do it honestly."

"Ethan was so extraordinarily accommodating," Leslie said. "He never asked for anything except your undivided attention." Hawke's protean energy was a kind of antidote to the anxiety of abandonment. Dissimulation was a family practice. "My mother and I were always pretending," he wrote in an autobiographical novel, "The Hottest State." "I was pretending to be a Texan, and she was pretending she wasn't." Hawke dubbed Leslie "the Lost Princess of Abilene." "She didn't seem to fit in anywhere," he said. He, by contrast, became expert at fitting in: "Football team, church youth group, Black kids, white kids, graphic-novel-reading geeks, theatre nerds, punk-rock girls, Deadheads—I was a good bullshit artist. I also didn't judge anybody."

The skills that acting requires—empathy, imagination, charm, surrender—were habits that Hawke developed from being with Leslie, for whom he was both son and companion. In a very real sense, he was dreamed up by his mother. As she shuttled him up and down the East Coast, bouncing between jobs—from department-store buyer to waitress to, finally, college-textbook editor—she threw herself into the task of making sure that his life was exceptional. "Patti Smith stole my life," Leslie joked to Hawke when he was a boy; she projected her own creative aspirations onto him. "I expected him to be better than most people, to accomplish more," she said. She chose his name, she told him, "because it would look good on a book jacket." Leslie supplied her son with music to listen to and books to read (including James Baldwin's essays, Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," and Thomas Merton's "New Seeds of Contemplation"). When Hawke was four, she took him to see Ingmar Bergman's subtitled "Scenes from a Marriage." (He couldn't yet read.) The film "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" was his fifth-birthday treat. Leslie read Pauline Kael's reviews in *The New Yorker* to him after such outings.

When Hawke was twelve, Leslie enrolled him in an after-school acting program at Princeton's Paul Robeson Center for the

Arts. He was immediately cast in a production of George Bernard Shaw's "Saint Joan," at the nearby McCarter Theatre, as Dunois's page. The serious adult conversations, the costumes, and the standing ovations captivated him. By the time the show had closed and he'd pocketed his thirty-six-dollar salary, Hawke was "all in on being an actor." He started going to casting calls, and within half a year, having beaten out, he was told, more than three thousand other actors, he was starring, with River Phoenix, in Joe Dante's "Explorers," a sci-fi film about two boys who build a spacecraft. "I thought God had found me," he said. He first learned that he was likely to get the part by overhearing his mother and his stepfather, Patrick Powers, arguing about the logistics. "She couldn't leave her job," Hawke said. "She couldn't let me go to L.A. What were we going to do as a family?" Despite her ambivalence, Leslie accompanied Hawke to L.A. for his final screen test. As their flight took off, she told him, "Remember, Ethan, this is just a lark! Nothing more, nothing less."

Hawke's initiation into filmmaking was exhilarating. Phoenix was charismatic, poetic, and serious about his work. The two stole their first pack of cigarettes together, found cocaine in a crew van, chased girls, and crashed Phoenix's father's motorcycle—slowing down the production until Hawke's broken leg had healed. "We were sure we were going to be movie stars," he said. "In my mind, I was Jack Nicholson." After the New York premiere, at the Ziegfeld Theatre, Hawke and Phoenix huddled unrecognized in the men's room, listening to the comments. "They were talking about what a piece of shit the movie was," Hawke said. "It didn't play more than a couple weeks." His confidence shattered, he blamed himself for the movie's failure. (He recalled hearing that a studio executive had said, "America has cast its vote, and Ethan Hawke is not a star.") To add to his humiliation, Phoenix was becoming famous; his next movie was "Stand by Me." "The envy was intense," said Hawke, who stopped going to auditions.

But a few years later, as a senior at the Hun School, in Princeton, playing Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams's "The Glass Menagerie," he rediscovered the thrill of acting. Hawke, who is a second cousin of Williams, rode the elegiac rhythms of the play's gorgeous lament. "I was aware of the full weight of Tennessee's play behind me," he said. "I had the sensation of completely disappearing—as if I was consumed by the wind and became wind. I could feel the whole room breathing in unison. . . . It was like a drug and that was the first time I'd used."

Hawke headed to Carnegie Mellon's School of Drama. "I wanted to get into college for my mom," he said. "When I got there, I realized I couldn't live for her. I was super anxious to start living my life." In his second week, he hitchhiked to New York to see the Grateful Dead. In his fifth week, a teacher pulled him out of class. "Are you high?" she asked. Hawke admitted that he was. "Then why are you here?" she said. It was the last theatre class he ever took. He'd heard that there were auditions in New York for a Peter Weir film called "Dead Poets Society." He decided that if he didn't get a part he'd become a merchant marine. The sun was not yet up when he got to the Pittsburgh bus station. "The only thing I remember is my mom on the phone crying," he said. "Then—I don't know if I've ever done this since—I got on my knees and prayed that I was making the right decision."

Hawke was cast in "Dead Poets Society" as Todd Anderson, the reserved teen who, in the heart-wrenching final scene, stands on his prep-school desk to salute his inspirational English teacher (played by Robin Williams). Very soon, he was besieged with offers, among them "White Fang," "Waterland," and "Reality Bites," which eventually made him a poster boy for Generation X. At eighteen, Hawke, nervous about Hollywood's bum's rush, moved to New York, where, a few years later, in 1991, he co-founded the Malaparte Theatre Company, an Off Broadway group that he helped support with his film work. In those days, Hawke's Greenwich Village pad was piled high with scripts. "They were movie offers. I hadn't seen anything like it. No one I knew had seen anything like it," the playwright Jonathan Marc Sherman, Hawke's close friend and a co-founder of Malaparte, said. Hawke may have hated Hollywood's urge to "put a dollar sign next to everything," but

fame was a live wire, and he found it hard to let go. “I don’t want to be a movie star and I don’t want not to be a movie star,” he wrote in his journal around that time.

Between acting projects, he wrote his first novel, “The Hottest State.” “Well, you’re not Chekhov,” Hawke recalled his mother saying after reading a draft, though she still encouraged him to publish it. “Get yourself reviewed, get criticized, live through it. And, when you get bad reviews, only the meek fail after that.” He said, “I got roasted for it. I remember my favorite review, in some underground paper, said, ‘Ethan Hawke achieves the impossible.’ I thought, Oh, I want to read this review. And it said, ‘He sucks his own cock.’” (Hawke’s subsequent novel, “Ash Wednesday,” from 2002, was reviewed favorably by the *Times*; a new novel, “A Bright Ray of Darkness,” will be published next year.)

In a way, Hawke, who was an indifferent student, got his education in public. “He’s always going, ‘O.K., what does this person have to teach me?’” Sherman said. On the wall behind his office desk, Hawke keeps framed photographs of the knights of his artistic realm, including James Baldwin, Dennis Hopper, Woody Guthrie, John Cassavetes, Paul Robeson, Neal Cassady, and Sam Shepard, at the grave of Jack Kerouac. “I saw Ethan as a guy who’d stepped out of a Kerouac novel,” the director Richard Linklater said of their first meeting, in 1993, after a production of one of Sherman’s plays. “He’s the extroverted Cassady, the mad-to-live crazy guy. He’s also the guy writing it down and taking it in.”

Over the next two decades, Hawke’s acting evolved the most in his collaborations with Linklater; Hawke has starred in six of his films. (He will also appear, as Ralph Waldo Emerson, in Linklater’s planned movie about the American transcendentalist movement.) When he met Hawke, Linklater was looking for “creative partners,” he said, “people I could sit in a room with” to rewrite the screenplay he was working on. The film had no plot and relied exclusively on the immediacy of the actors’ dialogue and their chemistry. The challenge for the actors was “to be brutally honest with themselves, with each other, and with the process,” Linklater told me. “Ethan was willing to walk that artistic tightrope.”

When he got Hawke and the French actress Julie Delpy into a rehearsal room for the first time, Linklater watched their interaction—“she had this I’m-the-worldly-European vibe; he’s the American puppy dog”—and thought, “Boom! I have my movie.” The script became “Before Sunrise,” the first part of Linklater’s intimate, boundary-pushing “Before” trilogy (which was made between 1995 and 2013). Together, the films chart the swings and reversals of a relationship, from chance meeting to bittersweet reunion to fraught marriage. Although they appear improvised, the movies were actually scrupulously written. Hawke and Delpy revised Linklater’s dialogue in the first screenplay (written with Kim Krizan) and co-wrote the second and third films, “Before Sunset” and “Before Midnight.”

Linklater’s storytelling method in “Before Sunrise” put new demands on Hawke’s acting. At the beginning of the first shoot, Linklater interrupted a scene. “You seemed like you were really moved by what you said,” he told Hawke. “Why?” Hawke said he’d been doing his “classic Elia Kazan thinking about acting” and using a private secret to fuel the scene. Linklater responded, “It’s good acting, but, in this movie, if I see you acting then I’m going to notice there’s no plot. And if I notice there’s no plot I’m going to get bored. We have to do something different. It’s a Zen exercise in letting real life be present. What I want is not your artificial secret. I want *your* secret.” To Hawke, this was a crucial lesson: “You are enough. Trust your beating heart.”

At first, Hawke was uncomfortable with the process and with how much of his personal life was seeping into the movie. But, gradually, he said, he learned “how to be present in front of the camera.” He emerged from the experience a more supple actor, with greater access to himself. “I never looked back after ‘Before Sunrise,’” he said. “I could stop imitating other actors. I guess it’s about breaking the mask we wear for the world and letting as much truth seep out of the cracks as possible.” Hawke’s darker truth is palpable in the trilogy’s final installment, “Before Midnight.” Hawke had gone through a

difficult divorce from his first wife, the actress Uma Thurman, and elements of the crisis found their way into the film. In the penultimate scene, the couple argue in a hotel room. She calls out his infidelity, and he calls her the “mayor of Crazy Town.” The characters struggle onscreen with questions that Hawke has said he was also facing in life: “How do you keep your innocence alive? How do you keep your sense of romance alive, your sense of joy?”

Linklater’s “Boyhood” (2014), which follows the coming of age of a son of divorced parents, was filmed over a period of twelve years, so that the passage of time became the plot. In the script, Linklater excavated his own past, as well as Hawke’s. (Hawke plays the boy’s father.) The two had a lot in common: both were Texan and raised in single-parent families; both had fathers who worked for insurance companies; both loved sports. “I was a child of divorce and I’m a parent of divorce. And it’s been a giant roaring dragon of my psyche,” Hawke told the *Guardian*. “You have to mine your own life. It’s just the only way you’re gonna stumble on anything real.” In “Boyhood,” he stumbled onto his father’s emotional truth. “Previously, I was looking at divorce through the eyes of a child, the victim—‘How come you weren’t there for me?’” he told me. “Then you see it from the dad’s point of view: ‘It’s hard to go pick you up at your mom’s house with the new boyfriend. Every time I see you and drop you off, it’s like picking a wound.’” A lot of the film’s father-son scenes were “ripped right out of my life,” Hawke said, adding, “My dad’s pain, my pain, our pain.”

“I got levelled in my early thirties,” Hawke told the *Guardian*, about his divorce from Thurman, in 2005. The pair had met while starring in the sci-fi bio-punk fantasy “Gattaca” (1997), and married when Hawke was twenty-seven, at a time when his world “felt out of control.” “I wanted to stop it spinning so fast,” he said. Joining forces with another rising star, however, didn’t slow the momentum; it sped it up. The couple, who eventually had two children, Maya and Levon, struggled to balance the duties of acting and family. “One person works, the other person doesn’t,” Hawke explained to ABC News. “Well, then somebody’s always out of town. I’m living in a hotel room taking care of the kids while you’re off on a film set six hours a day doing what you love. Do that for nine months and see what a good mood you’re in.” For a time, he stewed in his own sourness. His screen roles seemed to embody his self-loathing: a pill-head police sergeant, in “Assault on Precinct 13” (2005); a feckless son who robs his parents’ jewelry store, in “Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead” (2007).

Hawke retreated to the theatre, and immersed himself in plays by Shakespeare (“Henry IV,” “Macbeth,” “The Winter’s Tale”), Chekhov (“The Cherry Orchard”), Tom Stoppard (the “Coast of Utopia” trilogy), and David Rabe (“Hurlyburly”). “I dove into the discipline of training myself as an actor,” he said. “It’s hard to suck in a movie. There are so many people to help you—the editor, the cinematographer, the music, the sound engineers. But when you’re onstage they can hear the quiver in your voice, feel your concentration slip. The stage lacerates you. It exposes you.”

In 2001, while performing in Sam Shepard’s “The Late Henry Moss,” Hawke was gripped for the first time by stagefright, which he likened to “accepting a date with the Devil.” The feeling stayed with him and got worse after his divorce. Each time he stepped out of the wings, “it felt like walking into a moving propeller.” Part of what helped Hawke overcome the paralysis was making a documentary, “Seymour: An Introduction” (2015), about the concert pianist and fellow-sufferer Seymour Bernstein, who taught him how to take pride in the stagefright rather than pretend it wasn’t happening. Now, although the fear still looms “in the darkness of my mind,” Hawke said, he considers it “a friend,” albeit one “with a wicked, abusive temper.” “If you focus on the task at hand—the play, the words, the tone, the mood, the music of language—it ceases to be about *you*. You’re doing it for others,” he said, adding, “There is a tremendous confidence that comes from surviving it.”

In creative endeavors, Hawke believes, “the struggle is everything, the struggle makes everything.” Once, in 2013, after a performance of “Macbeth” at Lincoln Center, he was in the shower, and his daughter Maya, who was then fifteen, sat

knitting in a corner of his dressing room, when the play's director, Jack O'Brien, barged in. "How do you think it went tonight?" O'Brien asked Hawke over the edge of the shower stall. "Pretty good," Hawke said. O'Brien responded, "It's not good, Ethan. If you do the speech in Act III like you did the one in Act II, why the fuck am I sitting here? I already saw that speech. Where was the work we did?" He moved on to the issue of Hawke's mumbling delivery. "Is it 'If it were done when 'tis done,' or is it '*If* it were done when 'tis done'? Because if the word is '*if*' then I know we're talking about choice. Human choice. It's a big fucking idea." O'Brien started out the door. "You're not there yet," he said as he left. Hawke and his startled daughter looked at each other. "You're so lucky," Maya said.

In 2008, Hawke married Ryan Shawhughes, a month before their first daughter, Clementine, was born. Shawhughes, who had worked briefly as a nanny for him and Thurman while she was a student at Columbia University, "turned his life around," according to O'Brien. As well as managing Hawke's finances, she has collaborated with him artistically, co-producing "First Reformed," "Seymour," a film version of his novel "The Hottest State," and "Blaze," a 2018 bio-pic about the country singer Blaze Foley, which was Hawke's first major outing as a director. In 2011, Hawke called his mother to tell her that Shawhughes was pregnant with their second child, Indiana. As he remembers it, Leslie said, "Ethan, you're gonna go broke. You have so many children. You're crazy." She hung up and then called right back. "I take that back," she said. "The best thing that could happen to you and your children is you go broke. You need to keep your hunger alive. Have more children. Just don't stop making good art."

I met up with Hawke in early March for lunch at Rucola, a crepuscular Italian eatery in Boerum Hill. "A career is different than a job in that your inner life is connected to your work," he said. He admitted that his own freewheeling career had been a chart of his restlessness and his recklessness. "If you want to live in the arts," he said, "you've got to dig in. I would look at Warren Beatty and how carefully he constructed his career and just laugh. Beatty would make, like, one movie every six years and sit around and go to parties and develop material. That kind of preciousness of trying to get everything perfect before you act is not my style."

Whether writing, directing, acting, or producing, Hawke spends most of his waking hours thinking about storytelling. His productivity is unique among his acting peers. After lunch, we walked around the corner to his office, where he was preparing to direct a film adaptation (written with Shelby Gaines) of Tennessee Williams's lyrical political fantasia "Camino Real." Set in a barbarous Spanish-speaking backwater, the play is a paean to nonconformity, told, as Williams put it, "in the spirit of the American comic strip." Trapped within the town's ancient walls, various literary figures—Casanova, Lord Byron, Don Quixote, Madame Gautier—and Kilroy, a former boxing champ and eternal Punchinello, contend with illusion and desperation. In 1999, Hawke played Kilroy in a memorable production, directed by Nicholas Martin, at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, and the experience stayed with him. "It's like sticking your finger in an electric socket and having it shoot through the audience," he said. "The way Williams deals with iconography and sexuality and self-hatred and self-love—it's just the most incredible bit of performance I've ever had. I've been chasing that feeling and wanting to give it to an audience."

A big blue Xtracycle bike with seats for Hawke's younger daughters was stashed beside the front door, and his two dogs were sprawled like black and gold throw rugs in front of the gray sofa, where we sat and browsed through a bound collection of a hundred and thirty-eight collages that Hawke and his art director, Beth Blofson, had worked up for "Camino Real." A "sizzle book" is the usual term for such guides, which translate the director's vision for the production staff. But Hawke thought of it "more as a spirit guide," he said. "I call it Tennessee Williams's 'Book of the Dead.'" He paged through the collages, in which tawdry burlesque houses, caged showgirls with feathers, and nudes suspended in translucent bubbles

were juxtaposed with images of slapstick savagery. “It’s got to be decadent,” he said.

In 2014, he organized a reading of the play with Vanessa Redgrave, John Leguizamo, and others, at the Box, a downtown New York night club with a raunchy, offbeat vibe. When he talked about wanting to direct a film version of the play and recalled Elia Kazan’s dissatisfaction with his own direction of the Broadway premiere, Redgrave challenged him. “Kazan was brilliant. He didn’t figure it out. What are you going to do?” Hawke remembered her saying. To anchor the work’s surreal playfulness, he restructured the script in a way that allows for a collision of extremes, a fluid, subversive undertow that the cumbersome Broadway sets prevented. “You can’t make it one thing,” he told me. “Is it a dream? Yes. Is it Purgatory? Yes. No, it’s not Purgatory. It’s a fantasy. It’s life and it’s not life. The problem with film is it’s literal. But it can be done.”

Almost on cue, at the mention of Purgatory, Michael Daves, a mandolin player, and Dan Iead, a guitarist, appeared at Hawke’s front door for his next adventure, a run-through of songs for “Satan Is Real,” a bio-pic about the country-and-Western icons the Louvin Brothers—another Hawke project long in the making and now financed. Hawke had cast himself as the hell-raising, mandolin-smashing Ira Louvin, and his friend the actor Alessandro Nivola as the God-fearing, guitar-playing Charlie Louvin, in a story that chronicles the abrasions of the brothers’ final tour.

Hawke sat cross-legged on a table and, tipping his green-and-white Black Crowes baseball cap back on his head, began to warm up the lower register of his voice. The musicians filled in as he sang the Louvins’ dystopian anthem “Great Atomic Power”:

Are you ready for that great atomic power?
Will you rise and meet your Savior in the end?

“When you’re singing the verse, you’re singing in your character,” Iead told Hawke afterward. “There are two different vocal sounds, two different people singing.”

For a while, they discussed the Louvin Brothers’ different styles of performance. “I think it’d be good for you to practice singing the part, making the facial expressions and the body language just neutral,” Daves said. “Focus on what’s going on in the throat.” Hawke took out his cell phone and watched himself as he sang. Eventually, he looked at his watch. “I want to do this forever, you guys, but I made a three-fifteen appointment.”

After the musicians left, Hawke told me that the appointment was a call with the children of Joanne Woodward and Paul Newman, who had asked him to direct a documentary about their parents. On the phone, he swung into director mode, suggesting as a model the dual narrative of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s biography of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt—“another couple, that very rare group of people, who used their success to great ends,” he said. As he pitched his concept, he paced the room, emoting into the handset. After some discussion about story and budget, he got down to the details. “I don’t want to invest a year of my life in this and not have it be some kind of expression of what I want to do artistically,” he said. “My gut is we all want the same thing. You’re not scared of darkness. I believe if you ignore the darkness the light doesn’t matter, and if you ignore the light the darkness doesn’t matter.” At the end of the call, with both parties agreeing to send in the lawyers, Hawke spoke about the benefits of straightforwardness. “Good things happen to people who talk about scenarios,” he said.

The following day, at The Players club, a landmark nineteenth-century town house on Gramercy Park, Hawke convened a group of eleven actors and Jack O’Brien, the director, to do a reading for another project he was developing, “Texas Red,” an adaptation of “The Cherry Orchard” (with a screenplay by Jonathan Marc Sherman). Hawke arrived early and strolled

around the ornate rooms in a short-brimmed cowboy hat—he planned to play a Western version of the bumbling wastrel Gayev—inspecting the portraits of David Garrick, Helen Hayes, and other fabled theatricals that cluttered the walls. The eighty-one-year-old O'Brien was the first of Hawke's recruits to appear, trudging up the carpeted circular staircase.

Hawke and O'Brien huddled together to strategize. "I think our job today is to hear what it wants to be and what it sounds like out of these voices," Hawke said.

"Once people are totally in their skins, they'll say those things differently," O'Brien said. "More colloquial, much more resolute in terms of the extraordinary canvas Chekhov's given us."

Laura Linney and Bobby Cannavale—who would read the updated Ranevskaya and Lopakhin roles—appeared in the doorway.

"These losers," Hawke said, with a roll of his eyes.

"Who do I hug first?" Linney asked.

"We're all touching, right? 'Cause we're artists," Cannavale said. ("Social distancing" was still a couple of weeks away from entering the lingua franca of lockdown.)

When all the actors had assembled around a table, Hawke gave a brief preamble, recalling the 1992 Broadway production of Chekhov's "The Seagull," in which he and Linney had starred. "The worst reviews a human being could get," he said. "The review in *New York* was an argument about who was worse—me, Laura, Tyne Daly, or Jon Voight. We were all pretty goddam bad." O'Brien asked who was responsible for the failure. "Well, it wasn't Chekhov," Hawke said, and rode the laugh into an explanation of the genesis of the current screenplay, which involved a 2009 production of "The Cherry Orchard," directed by Sam Mendes, in which he'd played Trofimov. "The audience wasn't getting it," Hawke said. "I felt like, God, if they really understood how much he's talking about race, poverty, class." The night after Barack Obama was reelected, in 2012, Hawke and Sherman discussed the idea of transposing the play to Texas, as a way of making the politics come alive for a contemporary American audience.

When the reading was over, O'Brien stood watching Hawke as he thanked the actors for their work. "Who else of his generation is doing this?" O'Brien said. "He's not wasting his time."

One day in April, Hawke piled his family into the car and set off from their house in Connecticut to visit John Brown's birthplace, in Torrington, a few miles away. "There was something hard about the pandemic happening right after I completed this role," he said. "I couldn't move on. The more I learned about John Brown, the more I enjoyed talking to him in my head." The uprisings across the country in the wake of George Floyd's death made it easy for Hawke to keep talking to Brown. "I can hear him cheering those protesters on," he said. "He would not have been as gentle as they have been."

When he was starting to work on "The Good Lord Bird," Hawke visited Brown's grave site, near Lake Placid, New York, to "pick up the scent" and "invite him in." The visit to Brown's birthplace brought the process full circle. "It was a farewell salute," he said, adding, "You want every project to have deep meaning to you, but they don't. This one was magical to me. It's somehow connected to the spine of my life."

The site of Brown's family house—which burned down a hundred years ago—was in the woods, up a somnolent arterial

road named for Brown. The day was overcast, the ground wet. A creek ran through the property, which was bounded by a tracery of collapsed stone walls. A rough-hewn granite slab, engraved with Brown's name, stood on the spot where the house had been. "You feel your spirit get very quiet in these places," Hawke said. In that emollient stillness, he said his thank-you.

By mid-June, the enforced isolation of lockdown had taken a toll on Hawke. He was, he admitted, struggling. "The hard part of getting out of character is you have to ask the difficult question 'Who am I?'" he said, staring at me over Skype. "If I say, 'Who is John Brown?,' I point to all these facts. If I say, 'Who is Chet Baker?,' I can start to study that person. These characters flow through you. It's very easy to let them in, but if you invite them out you're left with these darker questions." As a performer, Hawke is a purveyor of presence; what he was experiencing was the confounding sense of not being seen. "If I'm not trying to please my mother, and I'm not trying to please my father, and I'm not trying to please an audience, I'm pleasing myself," he said. "It brings me to a very adult question: Who is this person I've been calling Ethan?" He added later, by e-mail, "I spent a couple weeks with a cruel case of the blues (the state of the nation not helping) and decided to come out of it with the only answer I could grab: I am my choices." ♦

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John Lahr has written for The New Yorker since 1991. His book "Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh" won the 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award for biography.

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