

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Part-Time Practice Gives Some Lawyers Freedom to Pursue Other Dreams

STEPHANIE FRANCIS WARD

HE IS A LAWYER, AND HE SOMETIMES plays one on TV. R. Emery Bright juggles both careers at once. A full-time career as a Washington, D.C., insurance defense lawyer wasn't for him, but neither was living on an actor's paycheck. So, to supplement his acting income, Bright does legal contract work. He might, for example, spend two months working 80 hours a week on a legal project, followed by a month of auditions.

Or sometimes he does both at once. In August, Bright spent his days working on a D.C. contract project, while

his evenings were spent shooting a recurring role on *The Wire*, an HBO drama.

"When I started acting, I had actor friends who asked if I could live on \$19,000 a year," he says. "The answer, of course, was no, but if this is something you really want, you figure out how to do it. Contract attorney work enabled me to preserve the status quo, and sometimes you can make six figures doing this."

If you have an interest in something else, and don't enjoy practicing law full time, you might like it better part time, says Robert Byrnes, a Los Angeles contract lawyer who co-wrote *Brush With the Law*, a memoir of Byrnes' time at Stanford Law School, where he was more devoted to the pursuit of pleasure than to stellar grades. He and his writing partner started the book when they were associates at a Los Angeles law firm.

Now Byrnes works about 25 hours a week at a West Hollywood law firm and oversees the business he created, the Los Angeles Bike Messenger Co-op. He says practicing law isn't so bad, in small doses. "I think a lot of people who hate the job would hate it less if they were doing it less," Byrnes says. "It seems to me a fairly obvious solution. It's a horrendous job working 70 hours a week, but quite a good job working 20 to 30 hours a week."

Bright agrees. He began acting as a child, in Liberia. His family later immigrated to the United States. He considered pursuing a theater degree in college, but his parents persuaded him to study something more practical. Later, as an associate, he started auditioning for local plays.

A JEALOUS MISTRESS

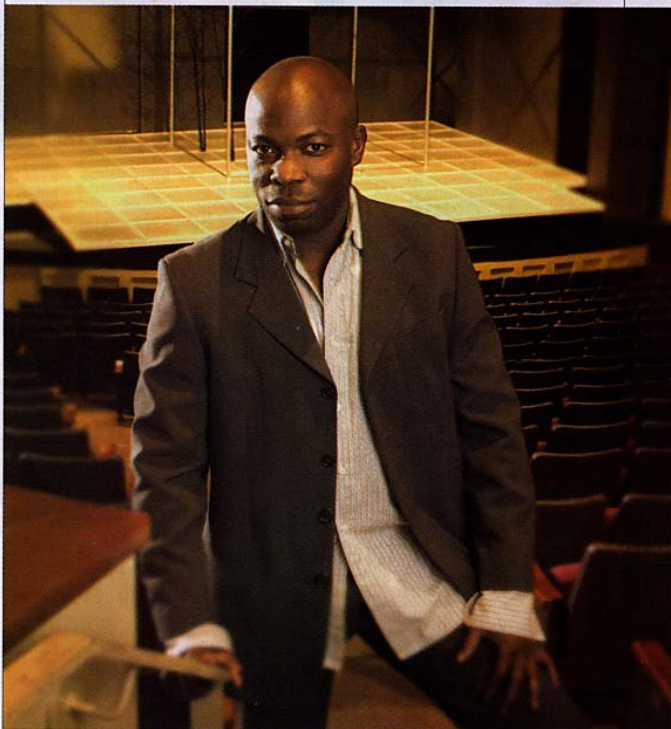
AFTER SOME SUCCESS, BRIGHT DECIDED TO PRACTICE part time so he could spend more time in theater. He also picked up some television work, including a late-'90s guest role on *Homicide*.

But the schedule got to be a bit much. Sometimes Bright spent mornings in legal meetings, later hopping on a commuter train to New York City for afternoon auditions. Often the roles involved playing murderers and crooks, and along with legal briefs he has had to carry props appropriate for such characters.

"They say law is a jealous mistress. The theater is a jealous mistress as well," Bright says. "Contract attorney work has given me the opportunity to have a steady income, along with the flexibility to audition."

So far, the schedule has worked. Bright does acting jobs on the East and West coasts, and in each location also does legal contract work. He also started a production company with a lawyer he met at a Los Angeles legal assignment. According to Bright, some of their projects have sparked interest among producers, and he is now able to cut back on playing murderers and crooks.

"I'm at a point where I prefer doing more intelligent fare," he says. "I want to be thought of as different, and I want to do legal material and break the mold. It's not that I want to be the black David E. Kelley, but I like to do political thrillers and provocative shows, things that can effect change." ■



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