

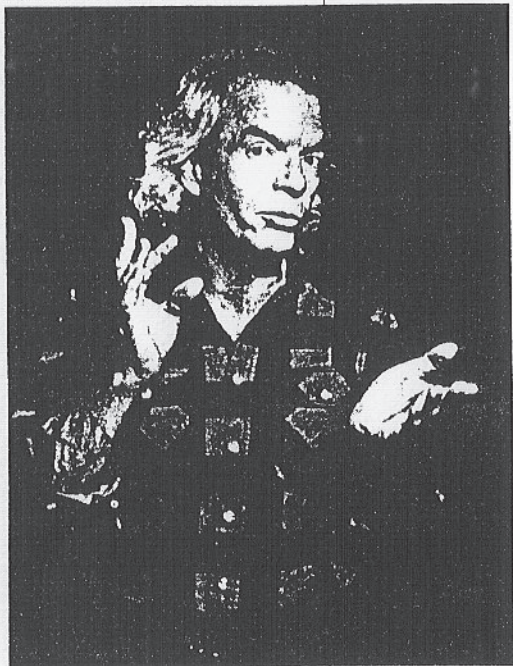
# FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

by Jessica Werner

By Spalding Gray's own account, the emotional exhibitionism for which he is famous can be traced back to a pivotal experience he had on stage in 1974, while he was starring as Hoss in the New York premiere of Sam Shepard's *Tooth of Crime* with Richard Schechner's Performance Group. Stripped down to a green cape, boxing shoes, a motorcycle jacket, and a leather jock strap, Gray was directed to step out of character at a specific moment every night and slowly scan the crowd, making eye contact with as many audience members as possible before jumping back into character for the next scene. "That was such a powerful meditation every night," Gray remembers. "My inner voice would start to say, 'What if you didn't go to the next scene, but just started talking from yourself?'"

Gray took his inner voice to heart and shortly thereafter began writing and performing the soul-searching, autobiographical narratives that would become his theatrical trademark. Working without the filter of a playwright's script, using the highs and lows of his own life story as inspiration, Gray has made a career out of playing himself. "I come to know my life through the telling of it," he has said.

Gray's one-man performances have become something of a genre unto themselves. With the blossoming of solo performance art throughout the 1980s and the everyday reality of public confession in the tabloid culture of the '90s, Gray has many imitators; no one, however, does exactly what he does. The preeminent storyteller and a self-described "poetic journalist," Gray serves as a tour guide through the vicissitudes of his own psyche, with his keen eye for irony somehow managing to illuminate universal truths in the process. Although his stories are often hilarious, they always have a dark side, a pervasive sadness which manifests in an obsession with his own mortality and with mourning the loss of his mother, who committed suicide when Gray was 26. Morbidity and an ample dose of skepticism are always close at hand. ("Good morning," Gray imagines his mirror reflecting back to him, "You are going to die.")



PAULA COURT

Spalding Gray

"I COME TO KNOW  
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Called a "master of the first person singular," Gray has no trouble baring his innermost neurotic struggles before an audience of strangers and describes his performances as "creative narcissism." "I'm an exhibitionist," he has said, "but a very creative one. My nature is to confess and do it well. Confession as entertainment—ultimately it's a healing act."

## YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE

During the last 17 years, Gray has written and performed fifteen autobiographical monologues and appeared in six feature films, including film versions of his three most popular monologues: the Obie Award-winning *Swimming to Cambodia*, about his experiences as an actor in Roland Joffe's film *The Killing Fields*; *Monster in a Box*, about his struggles to write a novel (*Impossible Vacation*, published in 1993) and his underlying struggle to make peace with the memory of his emotionally disturbed mother; and *Gray's Anatomy*, which recounts the loss of sight in his left eye and his ensuing globe-trotting search for alternative therapies. "I see myself as a Humpty-Dumpty figure," Gray has said. "There's a part [of myself] that is simply pushing the egg off the wall. I would name any of my monologues *All the King's Horses*, had it not already been used as a title. I push myself off and I get down and start picking up the pieces."

The anecdote has become Gray's stock-in-trade, albeit a device he admits has the potential to put his art and his life at cross purposes. The anecdotist's primary pitfall, he realizes, is the temptation to treat the events of his life simply as material for performance—even to cultivate experiences for their re-tell value—rather than let life unfold as a natural process. "Anecdoting is a defense and it's dangerous," he has said. "I have to be careful with it. It's a hazard of my trade."

Memory, according to Gray, is the primal act of creativity. "Memory, for all of us, is our first creative act," he has said. "Everyone that remembers is creative, is 're-membering.' Everyone that is remembering is always putting something together that is always not the original event. The origin is always lost to us forever." He finds a degree of solace in the fact that capturing his memories and narrating them grants him a kind of double life and allays, at least temporarily, his overwhelming fear of death. "I have a pretty good sense that I am only going to live once," Gray has said, "and [performing my monologues] is a way of living twice. Memory is the best I can do at reincarnating myself."

While Gray has admitted that "to tell a memory is more fun than to live it," in *It's a Slippery Slope*, arguably his most confessional monologue to date, he details his attempt to experience life for its own sake. "I'm tired of being a vicariant," he says. "I want to live a life, not tell it."



### CHRONICLING THE SELF

Soon after his onstage epiphany during *The Tooth of Crime*, Gray formed the Wooster Group with his longtime friend director Elizabeth LeCompte and a small group of fellow actors from The Performance Group. They began to create performance pieces that LeCompte structured around Gray's personal memories. Gray followed Schechner's advice to be himself first, before taking on a role; the result was Gray's first autobiographical trilogy, *Three Places in Rhode Island*, a docudrama about his turbulent New England childhood with a Christian Scientist mother and alcoholic father. His performance of *Rumstick Road* (the second part of the trilogy, based on a series of audiotapes Gray had made of his family) was the first time Gray took on no outside character and referred to himself onstage by his own name.

After *Three Places* (which he now refers to as "artistic mourning" for his mother), Gray knew he was finished with group collaboration but was unsure exactly what form his yearning for solo performance should take. While teaching a summer performance workshop at UC Santa Cruz in the summer of 1978, he sought the advice of Amelie Rorty, who was teaching a course in "The Philosophy of Emotions." Gray confided in Rorty his fear that western culture was disintegrating and that the world as he knew it was nearing its demise.

*She took me at my word and said, "Well, Spalding, during the collapse of Rome, the last artists were the chroniclers." And all the bells went off inside me. Of course, I thought, I'll chronicle my life, but I'll do it orally, because to write it down would be in bad faith, it would mean I believed in a future.*

Already a compulsive diarist (he hadn't missed a daily entry for seven years) and a natural storyteller, Gray was perfectly suited to his

new medium. He hurried back to New York and began performing monologues, to increasingly larger audiences, at The Performance Garage. He performed *Sex and Death to the Age 14*, his first published monologue, in 1979, and it established the look and feel of his subsequent solo work: "I sat behind that desk with a little notebook containing all I could remember about sex and death up until I was 14 years old."

During *Sex and Death*, Gray devised his unique process of performance development. Rather than committing his stories to memory, he develops and refines each monologue over many months in front of a live audience. He does not write his monologues in the formal sense; they are never spoken or rehearsed beforehand. Instead, he creates a simple outline of events recollected from his life, jotting down key words to jog his memory while he's onstage. "Then, guided by my outline, I tell you my story," Gray explains. "It's as though I am describing the images of an internal film." In the early stages of the development process, Gray tape records each performance and listens to it the following morning. Each piece eventually takes on a fairly finished form, from which he makes only minor deviations in any given performance. Because the performances evolve organically, however, the opportunity for change is always there, which gives each monologue its spontaneous feeling and often leaves audiences believing Gray is speaking the material for the first time.

Audience reaction and participation are fundamental to all of Gray's work. He has even developed a performance piece, called *Interviewing the Audience*, in which he turns his prodigious curiosity for once on others. Gray invites audience members to join him onstage and asks each one a stream of free-association questions that must resemble the interrogation to which he subjects himself in developing his own work. Life meets art meets life.

### AN ACTOR AT HEART

Although his career has flourished during a time when solo performance has become increasingly popular, Gray distances himself from performance artists who subject audiences to what he calls "postmodern fractured narratives." He continues to define himself first and foremost as an actor:

*For me where acting comes in . . . is when I begin over the course of the monologue's evolution to study myself and my behavior. I begin to observe myself as a sort of character study. . . .*



Scenes from the Wooster Group's production of Gray's trilogy, *Three Places in Rhode Island*:

OPPOSITE  
Point Judith (1979)

BELOW  
Mayatt School (1978)

I am to some extent an inverted Method actor in the sense that I use autobiographic emotional memory to play myself rather than some other character. When it works, and it has for years, I'm able to transform what might be considered a psychopathology (divided or schizoid personality) into a creative act.

One remarkable aspect of Gray's work is that audiences are able to find aspects of themselves in his very personal despair and irrepressible questioning. The audience, however, has the pleasure of laughing at it all. "The audience doesn't see the enormous amount of pain the humor comes out of," Gray explains. "They laugh right over it. There's a line in one of my monologues. It's funny—but not funny—that my father never went to see *Swimming to Cambodia* because he wouldn't miss cocktail hour. That audience would just howl, but that was the truth."

Gray's relentless commentary on the events of his life (which he calls "the ongoing self-opera of Spalding Gray") is so contingent on his suffering that one can't help but wonder, as he does in *It's a Slippery Slope*, whether achieving true happiness would thwart his creativity. Gray has emerged from the mid-life crisis he chronicled in *Slope* a more content and less detached man, and has settled into family life in Sag Harbor, Long Island with his two young sons, their mother, and her daughter. He is currently at work on a day-in-the-life monologue about fatherhood, entitled *Sketches on Morning, Noon, and Night*.

The recent calm in Gray's life, however, doesn't seem to pose a real threat to his passion for the neurotic any day soon. "I haven't really come through anything yet," he admits. "I'm still completely freaked out by the fact that I'm going to die forever. I'm trying to deal with that one, and with the knowledge that I'm not going to be able to tell a story about it." ■



It's a Slippery Slope  
(1997)

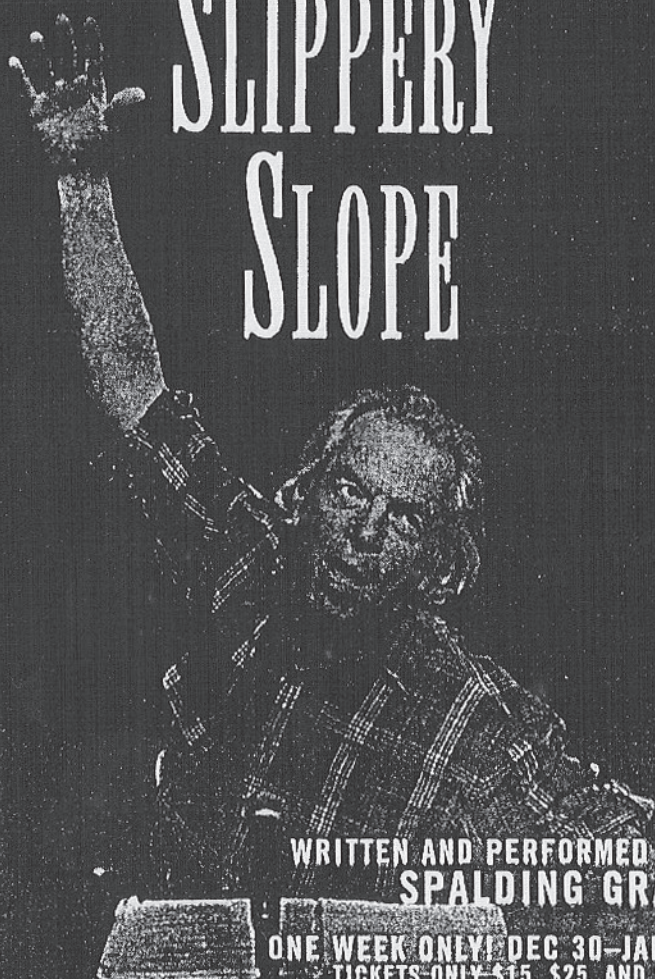
"I'M STILL COMPLETELY FREAKED OUT BY THE FACT THAT I'M GOING TO DIE FOREVER... AND... THAT I'M NOT GOING TO BE ABLE TO TELL A STORY ABOUT IT."



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