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*Off Broadway*

## **Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell** **(Minetta Lane Theater; 199 seats; \$65 top)**

By MARK BLANKENSHIP



*Ain Gordon, left, Kathleen Chalfant, Hazelle Goodman and Frank Wood give voice to the words of the author in order to reconstruct his life in "Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell."*

An Eric Falkenstein, Michael Alden presentation with Naked Angels of a play in one act with text by Spalding Gray, conceived by Kathleen Russo and Lucy Sexton. Directed by Sexton.

**With:** Kathleen Chalfant, Hazelle Goodman, Ain Gordon, Frank Wood, Fisher Stevens.

**"Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell" is an excellent example of found poetry. Kathleen Russo, Gray's widow, and director Lucy Sexton have combed through the artist's journals, letters and monologue plays, extracting passages and reshaping them into a new piece of theater. Heard in this fresh configuration, Gray's words not only relate the story of his own life, they allow a new group of artists to reflect on what being alive can mean.**

The larger context is what makes "Stories Left to Tell" a moving piece of theater instead of just a reading of a renowned man's work. Though the real-life Gray -- the one who found fame with his insightful, autobiographical solo shows and who tragically committed suicide in early 2004 -- receives tribute, he is also transformed into a symbol. For at least 100 minutes, he represents the way joy and pain can fill any moment simultaneously, forcing us to feel both at once.

That's arguably a running theme in all of Gray's work, which consistently finds humor and beauty in a life full of isolation and discontent. Russo and Sexton shape their piece in roughly chronological order, demonstrating how much the artist honed his ability to draw wonder out of disagreeable situations.

The five-person cast, speaking directly to the audience, makes each step of Gray's journey engaging. Their speeches have been divided into categories, so that one thesp covers "adventure" while another tackles "love," "career," "family" or private journal entries. The conceit lets us focus more intently on the words, clarifying that Gray could write in multiple voices while continuing to explore his singular quest for self-understanding.

The splitting of one person into five also helps turn the show into metaphor. Sexton often groups the actors in meaningful ways, giving visual life to the inner conflict of a soul. Love (Kathleen Chalfant) will sometimes stand separate from the others, unable to fit in, or Adventure (a charming Hazelle Goodman) will buddy up with someone who isn't speaking. It's like watching the universal struggle to make all the parts of ourselves get along. Sometimes we succeed, and sometimes we don't. (It should be noted that rotating thesp plays Career. Fisher Stevens appeared in the perf reviewed.)

Equally arresting is how David Korins' set enhances the words and bodies. The stage is flooded with paper; stacks of bound scripts tower everywhere, and there's a backdrop made entirely of typed pages stitched together.

On one hand, the paper represents all that Spalding Gray left behind. This legacy of writing can fill a room and keep giving actors something to say. In some ways, people can live forever.

On the other hand, this paper is all that's left. When someone dies, no matter how clearly they're remembered, something is permanently gone. Korins' backdrop has holes where pages are missing, suggesting the words Gray was never able to write.

That's an excellent image for the show's equally powerful feelings of celebration and loss. The contradiction haunts the play with increasing clarity, becoming piercingly overt in the final moments. Gray's suicide note is delivered just slightly out of chronology, so that it's followed by a brief anecdote on how exultant his family makes him feel. We see a man who can be in lightness and darkness at once.

The elegant refashioning of Spalding Gray's work asks us to embrace that paradox by reminding us it's impossible to avoid.

Sets, David Korins; costumes, Michael Krass; lighting, Ben Stanton; original music and sound, Fitz Patton; projections, Leah Gelpe; production stage manager, Matthew Silver. Opened March 6, 2007. Reviewed March 2. Running time: 1 HOUR, 40 MIN.