

# Newsday

## THEATER REVIEW

### A new life in shades of Gray

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When Spalding Gray drowned himself on a frigid January day in 2004, probably by jumping off the Staten Island Ferry, an astonishing number of strangers shared a peculiar sense of loss.

How could this most personal of confessional artists have chosen, at 62, to go somewhere from which he would never return to tell us about it? We half-expected him to show up on some stage in one of his nerdy flannel shirts. He'd sit down at a wooden table with his glass of water and his spiral notebook, then lean his lanky, aging body into his table-mike and begin, in that Rhode Island WASP accent, to talk about his latest apocalyptic adventure.

Thus, we feel a special lump-in-the-throat gratitude for "Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell," an irreverent, loving, deeply revealing compilation of greatest hits and new observations from his unpublished journals. Conceived by Gray's second wife, Kathleen Russo, and director Lucy Sexton, the five-actor piece does at least two invaluable things.

First, it blows the hex off the final untold story of this charming master of shameless narcissism. Early into this 90-minute pleasure, we stop picturing his tabloid-plastered death and reconnect with the joys and agonies of the solo force behind such narratives as "Sex and Death to the Age of 14" and "Swimming to Cambodia."

Almost as important is the confirmation that, for all his singularity, Gray's writings exist on their own, and can be performed by others without diminishment or betrayal. At times, Sexton's staging lingers on the verge of overproduction. We're not convinced that a floor-to-ceiling backdrop of notebook pages is essential to the lean precision of his style, or that stacks of composition books need to catapult to the ground at a critical moment of revelation.

But the delightfully unmatched actors recite the stories with blissful belief in the man behind the painful life and the funny way. We sometimes wish that the two women - Kathleen Chalfant and Hazelle Goodman - had not been directed to act out the stories. After all, the men - Ain Gordon and Frank Wood - are allowed to maintain variations of Gray's own droll delivery.

Rotating guest performers fill in the fifth slot. At Sunday's preview, Fisher Stevens delivered Gray's Hollywood experiences with knowing cynicism. Estelle Parsons takes over this week.

The stories are loosely divvied up by content: "love" for Chalfant, "adventure" for Goodman, "family" for Wood and "journals" for Gordon, who gets to sit in Gray's familiar position at the desk. But the categories don't really matter.

There is particular focus on Gray's close relationship with his mother, a suicide at 52. We wish Russo would have included more about Gray's long public life with his first wife, filmmaker Renee Shafransky. But we appreciate the potent reminders of Gray's feelings about water and his late-life devotion to the three children he shared with Russo.

Typically, Gray once said, "I never wonder whether, if a tree falls in the forest, will anyone hear it." Instead, he wanted to know, "Who will tell about it?" He may not have lived to tell, but his stories have.

SPALDING GRAY: STORIES LEFT TO TELL. Concept by Kathleen Russo; directed by Lucy Sexton. Naked Angels Production, through May 13 at the Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane, Manhattan. Tickets \$35-\$65. Call 212-420-8000. Seen at Sunday afternoon preview.

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