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THEATER REVIEW | 'SPALDING GRAY: STORIES LEFT TO TELL'

A Master of Monologues, Living on in His Words

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Five minutes into “Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell,” the disarming show that opened last night at the Minetta Lane Theater, I stopped gritting my teeth and decided that a show about Spalding Gray without Spalding Gray might just work after all. As would surely be the case with most fans of Mr. Gray, the compellingly self-centered monologist who died at 62 in 2004, I needed convincing.



The lone star of such peerless exercises in public introspection as “Swimming to Cambodia” and “Monster in a Box,” Mr. Gray was the ultimate stand-up solipsist. He made it clear that his work was less about using his personality as a prism to refract the world than using the world to refract his personality.

His artfully awkward acting style was a shrewd distillation of that personality, and it defies easy imitation. Yet by the end of “Stories Left to Tell,” in which different performers read from Mr. Gray’s monologues and journals, I was hearing its author’s voice as if he were sitting beside me. It seems I had underestimated Mr. Gray as a dramatist. Though it would be preferable, of course, to have him with us, his writing turns out to have a cohesive theatrical life of its own.

“Stories” is delivered by five readers of different sexes, races and ages. Not one resembles Mr. Gray, and not one tries to impersonate him. But as directed with an affection that stops short of hero worship by Lucy Sexton, this collage of four decades of Spalding-isms and set pieces gradually coalesces into a breathing portrait.

At the same time, it reminds us that Mr. Gray wasn’t just inimitably himself. Like most major artists, he was also a mirror to everyone — well, everyone with a touch of the narcissist, the neurotic and the terrified child within. I’m assuming

that that includes all adults on this planet, and especially those who live in New York City, the undisputed capital of Grayland.

In its opening moments the production — conceived by Mr. Gray's widow, Kathleen Russo — would seem to confirm fears that the show might be a sticky, willfully positive celebration of a life that ended tragically. (Mr. Gray, whose body was found in the East River two weeks after he disappeared from his home, is presumed to have killed himself.)

Four of the five performers lope onto the stage to the perky pop babble of the Spice Girls (whose music figures in one of the first stories read). They smile at one another with practiced warmth and reassurance. They fondly clasp or leaf through some of the composition books that are piled in towers about the stage. (David Korins's set effectively evokes the sheer volume of Mr. Gray's writing, while Ben Stanton's lighting subtly suggests an ineradicable melancholy.) As a preface, it would seem to portend an evening of the "Oh, what a character" anecdotes that are the mainstay of upbeat memorial services.

But once the actors start to read, the show feels less like a life recalled than a life still being lived. In performance, Mr. Gray could pull retrospection right into the present tense, as if those acute moments of embarrassment, anxiety, anger and joy never stopped happening over and over again.

The text has been divided, unscientifically, among the readers according to category: Love (Kathleen Chalfant), Adventure (Hazelle Goodman), Journals (Ain Gordon), Family (Frank Wood) and Career, a swing slot (entertainingly filled by Fisher Stevens through Thursday).

Some of the accounts of sex, illnesses (real and imagined), travels and encounters with the dragons of show business are from Mr. Gray's best-known monologues. What's surprising is how vividly funny or affecting they remain in other hands and out of context.

Ms. Goodman transforms Mr. Gray's account of a therapeutic visit to an Indian sweat lodge into a virtuosic slice of physical comedy. Ms. Chalfant, recounting tales of sexual awakening, eliminates prurience by emphasizing sweetness and perplexity. Mr. Stevens, as any amused veteran of Hollywood would, makes a feast of Mr. Gray's sardonic tales of superagents and television producers, while Mr. Wood gives heartbreakingly hopeful and tentative life to descriptions of fleeting ecstasy.

The pitch-perfect Mr. Gordon — seated at a simple table with a glass of water, as Mr. Gray usually was in performance — reads from the journals, which often

articulate the method and motive behind the exhibitionism. "The unobserved life doesn't feel like living," goes an entry from 1978. "Once I no longer felt God watching, I began to watch myself." And from 1992: "I can't be creative without being self-destructive."

If there is the inevitable whiff of synthetic smoke that comes from compressing works of art into sound bites, there is compensation in the art of the patterns that emerge. The theme of suicide (Mr. Gray's mother also killed herself) assumes physical weight and pain as Mr. Gray drifts further and further into shadows after a crippling automobile accident in 2001. The final journal entry is devastating.

But the show also joyously traces Mr. Gray's progress from being a childless man (who saw his first obligation as being a parent to himself), into fatherhood, which he finally experienced in his 50s. His description of looking into the "no agenda" eyes of his first-born has a gorgeous redemptive symmetry, as if life could be parsed like a poem:

"Mere being, pure consciousness, the observing self that I'd always been trying to catch, was staring back at me."

The show ends with a buoyant account of Mr. Gray dancing with Ms. Russo, their two sons and her daughter. Suddenly, flickering before you, is a filmed image of late-vintage Mr. Gray dancing on a stage, and you feel the deep, lonely ache of something precious lost. Thank Heaven that "Stories Left to Tell" reminds you that something precious remains as well.

Stories Left to Tell

Words by Spalding Gray; concept by Kathleen Russo; directed by Lucy Sexton; sets by David Korins; costumes by Michael Krass; lighting by Ben Stanton; original music and sound by Fitz Patton; projections by Leah Gelpe; production manager, Shannon Nicole Case; production stage manager, Matthew Silver; associate producers, Jamie deRoy and Mort Swinsky; general manager, Richards/Climan Inc.; created and developed in association with Washington Square Arts. A Naked Angels Production, Jenny Gersten, artistic director; presented by Eric Falkenstein and Michael Alden. At the Minetta Lane Theater, 18 Minetta Lane, Greenwich Village; (212) 307-4100. Through May 13. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Kathleen Chalfant (Love), Hazelle Goodman (Adventure), Ain Gordon (Journals), Frank Wood (Family) and Fisher Stevens (Career).