

Shades of Gray

He was the greatest American storyteller of his generation, a performer who turned his life into a series of brilliantly insightful monologues. But was his drowning in the freezing waters of New York's East River the act of a seriously disturbed man - or the 'creative suicide' he'd often spoken of? On the first anniversary of Spalding Gray's disappearance, Gaby Wood tells his final story.

On the night of 10 January 2004, Spalding Gray disappeared. Within days, the New York police had received hundreds of tips. He'd been seen shopping in Macy's that afternoon; he'd been haggling with a waitress in New Jersey; he had even been spotted in Los Angeles. It was a testament, perhaps, to his status as an American institution - or an 'Un-American original' as he himself had put it - that so many people thought they recognised him. But none of these sightings turned out to be real.

In fact, it seemed, he had been on the Staten Island ferry. Four witnesses placed him there, and police traced the last call he made to the ferry terminal at 10.30pm. Gray often took the ferry, just to relax, but recently he'd spoken about jumping off it. Months before he vanished, he had left a message on his family's answering machine saying he was going to jump. That night, police called his wife to say they had found him wandering aimlessly around Staten Island. The day before he went missing, he had been seen by ferry staff putting his wallet on a bench and wandering over to the railing; he was escorted off the boat by two security guards. He had attempted suicide a number of times in the previous year, but always left a message, or a note. This time, there was nothing. It was two months before his body was found.

Spalding Gray is often said to have been a pioneer, but there was really no one like him. His monologues charted new territory, somewhere between Jean-Paul Sartre and Jack Benny, and held people's attention with the aid of only a few deadpan props. Each director who filmed him - Jonathan Demme with *Swimming to Cambodia*, Nick Broomfield with *Monster in a Box*, Steven Soderbergh with *Gray's Anatomy* - was a well known auteur, and yet they shot Gray as he was on stage, adding little.

He would sit behind a desk, with a glass of water and a notebook in which he had written a bare outline of what he planned to say. He had a frank, challenging expression and an even, velvety tone of voice. His eyebrows were in the shape of circumflexes, as if scepticism had been somehow built in ('The only thing I don't doubt is my doubt,' he once said), and his hair had turned grey prematurely, you supposed, from too much thought. Like a dry-witted Scheherazade, he would pull story after story out of his brain. He would turn one narrative into another, and the next one back into the first, until everything was in focus and the world made a new kind of sense. You'd end up seeing the wisdom in paranoia, the logic in superstition, the existential threat in the everyday. He'd do all of this with a low-key but unstoppable mania, telling tales as if his life depended on it.

In the summer of 2001, he had gone to Ireland to celebrate his 60th birthday with some friends. After dinner one night, their car collided with a van carrying medicine for mad-cow disease. Four out of the five people in the car were knocked unconscious. Gray's head knocked against the back of his wife's. She had to have 15 stitches; he had a crushed hip and, it later turned out, a crushed skull - hundreds of shards of bone were found in his brain.

After the accident, things were never the same, though it became hard to tell whether Gray was suffering from depression as a result of the physical trauma, or from some form of brain damage. He had had nervous breakdowns, and everyday neuroses, before - his monologues documented them brilliantly ('I'm basically a very fearful person. I call it phobic. I'm a phobic person'). But he didn't seem to be able to find a way out of this one. He never lost the brace on his right leg, or the jagged scar on his forehead; he went through six hospitals in two years, and tried every kind of psychoactive drug available. In the last few months he was seen by the celebrated neurologist Oliver Sacks. 'He was a

very fit and athletic man who became hobbled,' his friend Robby Stein tells me. 'That aged him enormously. He went from being someone who looked youthful to being someone who looked 80. He seemed to be another person.'

'That was my father's final joke, I guess. A man tells his stories so many times that he becomes his stories. They live on after him, and in that way he becomes immortal.' These are the last lines of Tim Burton's *Big Fish*, a film Spalding Gray went to see with his two sons on the last afternoon of his life. In the movie, the father dies by jumping into the river and turning into a huge fish. When they left the cinema, Gray was in tears. He dropped the kids at home, and hours later made the call from the ferry terminal. His six-year-old son Theo answered. Gray said he was 'just checking in', and that he'd be back soon. 'Love you,' he said.

'I tell my kids that dad had a terminal illness,' Kathie Russo, Gray's widow, tells me. 'That it wasn't out of not loving you or any of that, it's just that he couldn't live in this world any more. And I tell them that he probably wouldn't have gotten better no matter what medication he took, because you have to give him a lot of credit - he tried so many different things, and nothing worked.'

We are sitting in a restaurant near their home in Sag Harbor, a quaint Long Island town full of antique candy stores, peopled with the ghosts of whaling captains and poets. Kathie is a youthful-looking 44-year-old, with long brown wavy hair, a bright, informal manner and seemingly exceptional optimism. In the summer, after she'd arranged two memorial services for Gray, Kathie started seeing a therapist who had also survived suicide. It has helped her a lot, she tells me, and now she's putting all her energy into her family (her 17-year-old daughter Marissa, and her two sons with Gray, Forrest and Theo, who are now 12 and seven), into the talent agency she runs, and into keeping Gray's memory alive. She's the executive producer of a documentary about Gray, to be directed by Steven Soderbergh, and she's thinking about publishing his journals. Next year, his last monologue, edited by her, together with other writings, will be published posthumously. 'I just feel I have so much more to live for than not to live for,' she says. 'And I can't bring the kids down - I really want them to survive this.'

In Gray's monologues, Kathie comes across as remarkably sanguine. When they met, 14 years ago, Gray was living with his long-term partner, Renee Shafransky (Shafransky has since trained as a psychotherapist and moved to Sag Harbor). While he was having an affair with Kathie, Gray married Renee, thinking this would set him on the straight and narrow. Not long afterwards, Kathie found out she was pregnant. He asked her to have an abortion, and when she wouldn't, he didn't see her until months after the baby was born. In his monologue *Morning, Noon and Night*, he describes being on the phone to Renee when another call came through. He pressed the 'call waiting' button, and heard Kathie's mother telling him he had just become the father of a baby boy. He switched back to Renee and told her it had been a wrong number. Eventually, he left Renee and he and Kathie had another boy. 'He was very, very happy with the children,' says Robby Stein, Theo's godfather. 'It changed him, in a way that no one really could predict.'

'It's a terrible thing to say,' I tell Kathie, 'but what he wrote about those kids in *Morning, Noon and Night* was so beautiful you can't believe he would ...'

'Leave them?' she asks. 'I know. But he lost sight of that, somehow, under the weight of the depression. It's so confusing, I'm going to be digesting it for the rest of my life, I think. One of the things that haunts me - well, there are many things that haunt me, but - how did he ever get it together to call our son that night? I don't understand that. And there's a big part of me that's angry. I understand him wanting to touch base one last time and hear his voice, but God, if I heard that little voice on the other end I would have stopped the whole plan. And Theo - I can't tell you how many times he's said to me, "Oh, if only I'd told Dad to come home." And I'm trying to comfort him and in my head I'll be like, "Fuck you, Spalding, for doing that to our kid." Because he's always going to think there was something he could have done, no matter what I say.' On the way back to the house - a rambling old place with cobalt-blue shutters - we pick Theo up from school. Though dressed in a knitted cap with brightly coloured beads in his hair, Theo looks strikingly like his father. We stop by Gray's grave, laugh at the self-portrait quoted on his tombstone ('Inner-directed, troubled and can-not type'), and all the way back, Theo animatedly tells me ghost stories.

'I took them to the movies last week,' Robby Stein remembers, 'and in the car we were talking about eclipses and Theo said, "What happens if the sun goes out?" And Forrest said, "We die - in eight minutes." So Theo said, "Well, if you only had eight minutes to live, what would you do?" And Forrest said, "How would you know you only had eight minutes? What I would do is I'd want to find out if it was really going to happen." I turned to Theo and asked what he would do. He said, "I'd go parachute jumping and eat as much candy as I could." The boys represent the two different aspects of Spalding in that way. Theo being the wilder, more manic side, and Forrest being the more literal and depressed side.'

Spalding Gray - or 'Spuddy', as his mother called him - was born on 5 June 1941, the middle child of three boys. He was brought up in Rhode Island, in what his younger brother Channing now describes as 'kind of a dreary, middle-class, repressed, suburban family'. Their mother, Margaret Elizabeth Horton Gray, was a Christian Scientist, though their father, Rockwell Gray, was not. 'All she thought about was Mary Baker Eddy,' Gray's father later told him. This was a situation Spalding Gray later recreated to great comic effect, and one of which Channing Gray came to feel resentful. 'I felt it caused me a lot of neurotic thinking,' he says. 'Because [Christian Science] is always saying, well, we don't believe in disease and doctors, but at the same time it's absolutely obsessed with it. And if you're brought up in it, then it becomes a very scary proposition. At every turn, you're waiting for something to befall you, like your arm is going to be severed or you're going to come down with some kind of terminal disease. And really, all you have is the good wishes of a practitioner, which is their version of a doctor, someone who prays for you over the telephone - unless you're on death's door, then they'll come to the house. You feel powerless.'

This might explain something about his brother's patterns of thought (Gray's Anatomy, one of the funniest monologues, is about the fear of going blind). But it also set up an irony that trapped their mother. 'All is infinite mind,' the founder of Christian Science professed. 'Matter is mortal error.' Gray's mother suffered her first nervous breakdown when he was 11 (Channing would have been five). If all was infinite mind, then, it seemed all she had left was a mind that had gone bad. She spoke about drowning, and much later, at the age of 52, she committed suicide in the garage.

Channing was living at home at the time, and took her to the hospital with his father. Spalding and their older brother Rockwell were away. 'I feel that our family situation was distorted,' Channing says, 'partly by Spalding's own proclivity towards exaggeration, or picking out singular things and running with those, giving the impression, for example, that my mother was a lunatic, which was not at all the case. She was actually very upbeat, and a person of a generally sunny disposition. She was a very caring, loving parent.'

Spalding was close to her - in fact, he joked that he 'dated' his mother for many years, and became haunted by the idea he was doomed to repeat her actions. But why should he have felt this, when his brothers did not?

'That's a good question,' Channing replies. 'I felt he was unduly preoccupied with it. It doesn't haunt me in the least, really. I don't know about my older brother. I'm unable to sort out whether this was part of the act, or really was a serious preoccupation with him. I'm not saying there wasn't some inherited propensity. It's not clear to me totally what befell him. It does seem as though he did repeat my mother's actions, on the face of it, and that is strange.'

You might say the Performing Garage on Wooster Street, in SoHo, New York, was the place where Spalding Gray found his voice. It was here that he performed his first monologues, here that he co-founded, with his former girlfriend Elizabeth LeCompte, the experimental Wooster Group theatre company, and it is here I meet LeCompte back-stage. We sit in a corner between a rack of coats and a miscellaneous collection of props; an ancient heating system turns itself on and off, at times almost drowning out her careful voice.

'At first Spalding started writing poetry - bad copies of Dylan Thomas,' LeCompte says. 'And he knew somewhere that that wasn't it. Then he tried to make a piece using Kerouac. He was trying other people

on all the way through.' But by the time they made Rumstick Road together in 1977, Gray, she says, was 'very focused - he never had any question about what he wanted to do. He just didn't know how he wanted to say it.' The piece was all about his mother's death, and used tape-recorded interviews he had made with his family. 'He was nervous about speaking directly to the audience,' LeCompte explains, 'so I put a very strong light behind him, so his face was in darkness. And I think he loved it.'

'He was the most fantastic raconteur,' says Ken Kobland, who shared an apartment with Gray and LeCompte in the early days and remained one of their close friends. 'He would come home at night, and we'd open cans of India pale ale, and he'd tell the story of his day. And we would just be totally broken up by this. He'd describe the symmetry of the world with such wit and self-awareness, such incredibly rich detail and complexity. It was ... talent is a funny word - it was a gift, a madness.'

LeCompte had met Gray in 1964. She met his mother, who seemed to her to be 'a lovely, quiet, bird-like woman - fragile, but not sick', and she went through two nervous breakdowns with Gray. The way he got out of them, she says, was always by performing. 'He started to perform, and he got better and better every day.' 'He once told me that when he was not on stage he considered himself an empty shell of a person - that there was nothing there,' Channing Gray recalls. Kobland suggests that Gray 'discovered his life as he told it. I think that became very difficult later on because the world he inhabited in real life and the world he performed became too dependent on each other. To be absolutely blunt, he couldn't talk about his real life any more. There were jeopardies. He couldn't reveal the detail of what was happening and he began to have to construct a life for the stage.'

After a while, it became questionable which came first - the life or the performance - or whether any difference could really be discerned. His friends suggest there was not much of a gap between his person and his persona. The themes and obsessions of his life, what he referred to as his 'ritualised magical thinking', became the subject of his work. He would be cast in a movie, and the movie would generate a monologue about filming, sex, neighbours, drowning and the United States' involvement in Southeast Asia. His eyesight would become impaired, and he'd embark on a monologue about the Oedipus complex, sweat lodges and psychic surgery in Manila. He had some great one-liners, such as his comment about a quack nutritionist: 'He lives on air - when he can find it.' He once thought Richard Nixon had mistaken him for Ralph Lauren, and he said he refused to fly on any airline where the pilots believed in reincarnation.

'The early work was so great and renegade,' Kobland reminisces. 'He was an outsider, looking in, and he brought a perverse, abstruse vision to the world.' Then came the fame, and then the fear that, as his brother puts it, 'He was running out of material as he became more bourgeois.' 'I don't think he liked hurting his children, and in the early work he had no compunction about who he hurt,' says LeCompte, 'so there was a kind of wildness when you went to see him. You never knew what he was going to say, and it might really be dangerous. That went away. I mean, it's hard when you're feeding off your own experience and you begin to see that your own experience is finite.'

'He was a very remarkable man,' says Oliver Sacks, in the manner and tone of Sherlock Holmes. 'I much admired him. I never thought I would have occasion to see him as a patient. But I did, in August of last year, and continued to see him until almost the time of his death.'

Kathie Russo had tried everything. Doctors on the East Coast said Gray was depressed and needed to be institutionalised; doctors in California said he was brain damaged, and would never function again. Only Sacks thought there was room for hope. 'He always had remarkable powers of resilience and humour,' Sacks now says of his former patient, 'and, of course, of being able to transmute states of mind and mishaps and depressions and hauntings into this wonderful, monologous art of his. But he felt, and I also came to feel, that this head injury had added something unprecedented, which tended to sort of push him overboard. He was intellectually and verbally intact, but what previously he had been able to organise easily now required a tremendous effort.'

So did Sacks think Gray was suffering from a brain injury, or a severe form of depression? 'I think neither alone would have brought him to the end he had. And I can't help wondering whether the head injury served to release some early memories and obsessions which without the head injury he could

have dealt with.'

In a sense, the loss of Gray really began after the accident in Ireland. 'I cried for years when he got sick,' Ken Kobland says. 'I felt the slide.' Gray became obsessed with certain things - moving house, for example. The day they had been due to move was 11 September 2001. When Kathie told Gray what had just happened to the World Trade Center, he couldn't take it in. 'You're just trying to make me feel better because I feel so bad about moving,' he said. Later, Ground Zero became another obsession; he felt he should have been there. 'He was building up a real cosmology that was seamless,' Robby Stein, who is a psychotherapist, remembers. 'There was a theme throughout his life around water, and the week they moved to the new house the name of the road was changed. It used to be called Lost At Sea Memorial Pike. So that was like a sign to him, and it was particularly bizarre - these coincidences seemed to surround him, in serendipitous and synchronistic ways.' The address is now, perhaps even more appositely, Ferry Road. 'I noted that all his suicide fantasies related to drowning,' Sacks recalls. "'Why water, why drowning?' I asked. 'Returning to the sea, our mother,'" he said.'

The hero of Gray's novel, *Impossible Vacation*, is an actor who aspires to play Konstantin Gavrilovich in Chekhov's *The Seagull*, because he loves the idea of committing suicide every night, and coming back to do it again for the next show. Since Gray turned his life into a performance, there is a temptation to see his actual suicide as in some way part of his work - a final role which, it could be argued, he had long researched and rehearsed. Sacks recalls going to visit him in hospital, and seeing him reading a book of collected suicide notes. Robby Stein suggests that it's crucial to understand Gray in a literary tradition.

'To not see him as a literary figure would be like describing Sylvia Plath as just a housewife,' he says. 'He was always afraid that he would have nothing left to say, that he couldn't live up to this deeper tradition.' It's possible that, rather than simply having come to the end of what he had to say, Gray saw the taking of his own life as part of what he had to say. 'On several occasions he talked about what he called "a creative suicide",' Sacks tells me. 'On one occasion, when he was being interviewed, he thought that the interview might be culminated with a "dramatic and creative suicide". I was at pains to say that he would be much more creative alive than dead.'

Not long after he had attempted to kill himself by jumping off the bridge in Sag Harbor, Gray took to the stage with his last monologue, *Life Interrupted*, which included a lot of material about the car accident. He seemed to be much better. The twice-weekly run lasted from October to December, and the performances gradually became longer and more complex. Kathie, in the audience when his signature free-association kicked in, thought, 'Oh my God, he's coming back!' Mark Russell, then artistic director of the theatre, PS122, believed Gray was 'healing himself through the act of performing. We were all witnesses to this act of recovery,' Russell recalled, 'participants in reclaiming a life.'

Others felt less optimistic. Elizabeth LeCompte, collaborator on his first performance, was deeply disturbed by this last. 'It was so obvious he was sick and so obvious that he hated performing. He was saying ugly and racist things - the ugly Pakistani nurses in the hospital, Garrison Keillor should have died ... He was saying horrible things that were in his deep reptilian mind. And people were laughing, and he'd look at them with such anger. Ugh, it was horrendous. I just remember going out on the street and crying.'

Because of the way Gray's life ended, his work now has, as Ken Kobland puts it, 'a tragic sense to it that it wouldn't have otherwise. The work now has resonances, thorns that strike you.' Signs and meanings are everywhere if you look for them, but Gray's head injury seems to have been a deciding factor, more significant than any continuous line one might draw from the work to the death. He talked about death all the time - but that seemed to be his way of standing up to it, rather than falling. And nothing, surely, is preordained?

The day after I first speak to him, Channing Gray calls back. He tells me he wants to clarify something. 'Spalding's preoccupation with my mother's suicide did not make him a suicidal person,' he says succinctly. 'I didn't ever consider him a suicidal person until this last illness. And actually, he was quite a narcissist - he clung to his life quite robustly.'

'He may have ruminated on it in a neurotic way,' Gray's brother continues. 'He may have used it as material, he may have feared it as one fears one's own death. But even in his more troubled times - and he was plagued by anxiety - I didn't consider him a person who was of a suicidal nature. And I never expected him to come to this end.'