

# SPALDING GRAY'S LAST INTERVIEW

Theresa Smalec

## I

On January 9th 2004 I interviewed Spalding Gray for the purpose of my dissertation research. Roughly twenty-four hours later, he went missing. Though I find it odd to frame my intentions in this manner, my essay is, at least in part, an effort to solve a mystery: *Why did Gray agree to meet and discuss the life of Ron Vawter on the day before he killed himself?* It is also an effort to grasp my relationship to the death of a stranger, a man whom I knew for little over an hour. Since Gray's disappearance, I've struggled with an awkward recognition that our interview was the scene of something larger than a conversation about Vawter's past, even though it was rooted in Gray's memories of the personal and professional journeys they had taken together, first as members of The Performance Group, then of The Wooster Group. I use the word "scene" cautiously, at once resisting and embracing its reference to theatre. While I do not wish to claim Gray treated our interview as an orchestrated show, I now intuit that he used the occasion of remembering Vawter to address an audience in addition to me. What initially seemed like a rare opportunity to capture Gray's thoughts on a deceased friend and colleague later struck me as the performer's final effort to see himself through Vawter's eyes, and to imagine the ways in which others might see and respond to his decision to end his life/story.

The image of a dying man seeking an audience will surely offend some people. There is a sense in which we are more at ease with viewing suicide as a rash and profoundly isolated act. Yet over the past three years, I've uncovered a body of writing suggesting that my hunch about the hybrid nature of our encounter—private and public, coincidental and tactical—is correct. The performance scholar Della Pollock has theorized the unspoken expectations that underlie the oral history interview in this way: "The interviewer is her/himself a symbolic presence, standing in for other, unseen audiences and invoking a social compact: a tacit agreement that what is heard will be integrated into public memory and social knowledge in such a way that . . . it will make a material difference."<sup>1</sup> On a more concrete level, there is Gaby Woods's article, published in *The Guardian* to mark the first anniversary of Gray's death. Among the former friends and confidantes of Gray whom Woods quotes is Oliver

Sacks, a neurologist who treated the actor from August 2003 until almost the end of his life. “On several occasions,” Sacks explains, “he talked about what he called a creative suicide.” The therapist recalls a particularly troubling fantasy that Gray shared with him: “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 more creative alive than dead.”<sup>2</sup>

I was not aware of Gray’s thoughts on how an interview might set the stage for his death until August 2007, as I finished writing this piece. I was, however, already conscious of my intermediary role during our 2004 meeting. I brought a tape recorder with the intent of gathering information to publish in my dissertation. Gray made his recognition of my role as a go-between more explicit in his response to my closing query about whether he needed to review the tape before I used it publicly. He declined, assuring me he hadn’t said anything he considered to be “off the record.” Our seemingly private exchange was, in effect, a public artifact. Moreover, it was a document to be shared with Gray’s loved ones at a future date. When I impulsively offered to send a copy of the transcript to Kathleen Russo—Gray’s wife and the person who’d facilitated our meeting—he softly agreed that I should. This was the last time I saw Gray: as I stood in his doorway, promising to disseminate his words.

My essay thus emerges at the junction of two distinct endeavors. The first is a sense of responsibility to share a record of Gray’s testimony with those who cared about his life and work. The second is a need to explore our interview’s function as his last public act. The tension between these forms of knowledge transmission is the grounding for my analysis as I consider the multiple levels on which these work. For now, one basic tension to identify is at the level of value. A central cultural value associated with records is resolution: the certainty of knowing how a matter ends. Russo made this connection apparent after Gray went missing, by stressing the unprecedented lack of a record attending her husband’s behavior: “He’s never done anything like this before. Where, you know his past suicide attempts, he left notes right away for me to see . . . And there’s nothing, you know, this time.”<sup>3</sup> On the Internet, Gray’s fans likewise voiced their disbelief that the famous monologist had not left a narrative.

My first thought in reading these baffled reactions was to share my inadvertent possession of Gray’s final interview. Yet when my dissertation advisor and The Wooster Group’s archivist asked for copies of the audiotape, I abruptly felt the gap between the explanations they sought and the unsettled experience I had witnessed. Though I did not have what they wanted, I gladly made the copies. I did not want this audible proof of Gray’s faltering state for myself. What I wanted was a way to make sense of the troubling intersections surrounding our meeting: a phone conversation I’d had with Gray several weeks earlier; the regrets he’d tried to convey during our interview; his closing remarks about how he wanted to remember Ron Vawter; and the later claim of The Performance Group co-founder, Richard Schechner, that Gray did not believe in coincidence.<sup>4</sup>

For a while, everything about our encounter became symbolic, even seemingly innocuous metaphors like the one Gray had used in response to my question about why Vawter, unlike himself, remained with The Wooster Group till the end of his life, though Vawter worked independently on projects such as *Roy Cohn/Jack Smith* (1992–94): “Well, one thing is he didn’t have the same audience following, so it wasn’t as great a temptation to—to jump ship.”<sup>5</sup> Later, I’d remember how Gray had struggled with the end of this sentence. Was he foreshadowing his death, or simply finding a way to concretize a difference between himself and Vawter?

In the end, I saw that uncertainty was not a bad way to go. Rather than treating our interview as a hotbed of verbal symptoms which would ultimately solve the mysteries surrounding Gray’s death, I began rehearsing the extra-discursive information exchanged in that context alongside two recent works exploring his prior struggles with illness. The first is *Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell* (2007), a play created by Kathleen Russo and Lucy Sexton based on Gray’s writings. The second is Philip Auslander’s essay, “Performance as Therapy: Spalding Gray’s Autopathographic Monologues.”<sup>6</sup> By studying a prior history of “therapeutic” encounters with strangers that Gray inscribed in his written texts, I began to see the critical ways in which our exchange departed from an earlier plot. My reflections on the specificities of our meeting—issues of gender, wellness, and age—are an effort to acknowledge the “theatricality” from which I initially averted my gaze, and to consider its broader significance in what I’ve come to understand as Gray’s last public act.

## II

In November 2003, after months of calling Gray’s Manhattan number, he finally answered the telephone. Being unfamiliar with the performer’s offstage life, I didn’t know he had moved to Sag Harbor and rarely came into the city. That morning, Gray sounded distracted. He told me he was rehearsing *Life Interrupted*, a new work-in-progress soon to debut at P.S. 122. Mindful of how long it had taken to reach him, and anxious to prolong what seemed sure to be a brief exchange, I quickly recounted the legend of Vawter’s chance encounter with *The Tooth of Crime* (1973). To my surprise, my account of this famous coincidence prompted Gray to share a lesser-known memory: Vawter first came to the show with his boyfriend, a travel agent named Jon. I found this detail confusing, since The Performance Group’s chroniclers consistently claim he discovered the Performing Garage alone, on walks home from his Army recruiting job. Did Vawter invite his boyfriend to see that specific ensemble perform? Did he know TPG’s work in advance? Before I had time to ask, Gray abruptly agreed to an interview. He told me to e-mail Russo to set up a date. Still reeling in shock at this turn of events, I thanked him, adding that I would try to see *Life Interrupted*. Yet with my own busy schedule and holiday travel plans in the way, I never found the time.

Upon returning to Manhattan in the New Year, I e-mailed Russo to finalize my meeting with Gray. I found it odd that she was so involved in his correspondences. Had I seen *Life Interrupted*, I would have learned of their 2001 car accident, an event that

left Gray physically disabled and psychologically scarred. As it turned out, however, this was among the things I did not know about the performer when I ventured to his SoHo loft on that dangerously cold Friday afternoon. I realized something was wrong when Gray did not answer his doorbell. Freezing and apprehensive, I rang other buzzers till someone let me in. Strangely, Gray's door was already ajar when I knocked; from somewhere inside, he told me to enter. I found him lying on the couch, very still. Was Gray tired? Had he forgotten our interview? Did he always talk to strangers from the couch? The scene's Freudian undertones unnerved me. Reluctant to play the analyst's role, I refrained from asking these questions aloud and simply pulled up a chair. But it was one of those elongated barstools, and I found myself perched high above him. Discomfited by this position, I got down from the barstool and sat on the floor, my eyes level with his gaze.

Apart from my inability to read the physical scene—to diagnose that Gray was likely in pain—another factor distinguishing our meeting was that this was the first in a series of interviews I did with former members of The Performance Group. Later, by the time I'd met with several of them, I could largely anticipate the shows we'd discuss, the details they might recall, and the sites of contradiction likely to differentiate their testimony from one another. With Gray, however, it was for the first time. As such, I was unrehearsed in my questions, oblivious to details which would later prove instrumental to my thesis that Vawter's entry into avant-garde theatre was hardly an accident, as the transmitted narrative claims. Significantly, Gray was the only TPG member to describe his first impressions of Vawter in overtly theatrical terms:

*And so, as a performer, did you think this guy would join your company?*

No. No, I didn't think that. But yet, see the show was environmentally lit, so you could see him as clearly as the other performers. You could see his face, and it was lit up just as much as—as all of us. So he became a character.

*What kind of character?*

Well, the kind of character that he was. I mean [long pause] dressed in a military outfit.

Gray did not unequivocally mean that Vawter projected what Michael Kirby has famously called a "matrix" of character. Rather, he used the term in accord with Erving Goffman's definition of "front": "that part of an individual's behavior which functions in a fixed and general manner to define the situation for those who observe the performance."<sup>7</sup> Regardless of Vawter's intentions in returning to the theatre week after week, his Army uniform defined him as out of place in that context. As a result, his simple act of observing *The Tooth of Crime* soon acquired a greater theatrical import for TPG than their own drama: "After a couple of performances, the actors became more aware of him than we were of each other. Finally, after a dozen times or so, we approached him and told him he could come free as our honorary guest."<sup>8</sup> Gray's account of the free admission offered in exchange for Vawter's continued presence

suggests the company's effort to appraise a social performance signaling more than met the eye. Gray went further, however, explaining to me how Vawter's behavior led him to see the value of taking one's off-stage persona into the spotlight:

Later, I made a piece with him at The Kitchen called *Interviewing the Audience*. He selected audience members, and we both interviewed them. He was very good at that. I wanted to take the show on my own road, so I went off on my own. But he was genuine in his curiosity, and that in itself was an art.

Years after our interview, I would recognize the impact that Vawter's "front" might have had on Gray's gradual formulation of the difference between acting and performing. In "Performance as Therapy," Auslander argues that this trajectory, "from being an actor pretending to be someone else to playing himself through other characters, led Gray to the autobiographical monologue form." Yet Gray reveals how Vawter's hybrid self-presentation—as a self who was at once a character—was an integral part of that evolution. Gray was, in fact, so intrigued by the young man's life character that he framed their social interactions as theatrical display in *Interviewing the Audience* (c. 1978), a show which laid the foundations for the self-based persona featured in Gray's solo monologues. His attention to Vawter's "genuine art" of curiosity suggests the paradox at the heart of his colleague's behavior, and raises larger questions about Vawter's material role in the transformation of Gray's performance aesthetic.

At the time, however, the broader implications of Gray's testimony escaped me. I was more concerned with the frequent long pauses interrupting his monotone responses to my questions. The first and only time I'd seen Gray live prior to 2004 was at a public interview with Schechner in 1999. I recalled admiring his easy charisma and vibrant engagement with the audience. This is why I was so surprised by his sedentary position and flat, affectless voice. Hurt by his ostensible lack of interest in my questions, I found myself resisting Gray's gradual effort to shift our conversation to his own regrets.

Over the phone, Gray had remarked that from the very start, Vawter showed "talent and potential as an auteur," meaning that he was "able to take his own thoughts and instincts, and match them to what Liz [LeCompte] wanted to happen onstage." Early in our interview, I returned to Gray's image of Vawter as an *auteur*, citing his uncanny recreation of Rockwell Spalding's voice and breathing in *Rumstick Road* (1977); did Vawter likewise intuit how Gray wanted his father to be re-enacted? Gray sidestepped my question about this notable performance, one that Vawter had described as "performing in a new way. I saw myself as a stand-in, or surrogate, not playing a role so much as standing in for the people that Spalding wanted to have in the same room, in the scene."<sup>9</sup> Instead, he recounted a puzzling scenario from everyday life:

I don't know. Ron [long pause], I don't even remember where it was, but he booked me on a flight to a place where I didn't even want to go, when he was our business manager. I wanted to go north, but he sent me south.

He would do things; he would go ahead and initiate if someone was at all passive around him. I'm sure he was the active one in sexual relationships, too. He was the active aggressor, because he was the most male. He was very male, and not at all obviously gay. But I took LSD with him once, and we drove up to the Smokey Mountains in a Volkswagon. He wanted to stop at a miniature golf course and play miniature golf, and I wanted to get to the woods, and sit out in the woods. I couldn't imagine playing miniature golf while tripping. But I regret it now, and I'm sorry I didn't indulge him. Then driving back from the trip . . . I'm pretty sure he was driving because he was certainly more active than I. I was more passive. And we saw a hitchhiker on the road. No, I must have been driving because I bypassed him, and Ron was very upset. You know, he wondered what the guy was all about, and the stories he had to tell. I look back on that, and I regret those two things. I'm going through a lot of regret now anyway in my life. And those two incidents of not playing miniature golf, and not picking up the hitchhiker . . .

*Are among your regrets?*

Hmm?

*Are among your regrets?*

Yeah.

Up to this point, Gray had answered my questions matter-of-factly, with nothing extraneous. By contrast, his intricate anecdote struck me as oddly *theatrical*, a term that Elizabeth Burns applies to ordinary life in the following way: "We feel that we are in the presence of some action which has been devised to transmit beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of a kind that the 'composer' wishes us to have."<sup>10</sup> One factor shaping my perception was the form of Gray's response: it was essentially a monologue, like the ones he tells on stage. Secondly, there was Gray's emphatic account of Vawter's "maleness," a quality he not only aligns with his colleague's tendency to take the lead in their relationship, but also with an imagined sexual dominance that he simultaneously seems to admire and resent. Yet the roles constructed at the start of this monologue do not add up in the end. For even as Gray wants to put Vawter in the driver's seat on their way back from the trip, he realizes midway through that he himself was driving, thus playing the dominant role.

In short, there is a discrepancy between the passive way in which Gray seeks to portray himself retrospectively, and the way he'd in fact performed. This tension between narrative and performance resulted in my own, conflicted response to Gray's testimony. Partly because I did not wish to pry, but mostly due to my inner sense that he was subtly taking the wheel again—departing from my question about Vawter to focus on himself—I resisted the passive role that I suspected he hoped I would play. The typical "female" reaction might have been to ask, "What are your *other* regrets?" I regret now that I didn't do this, even as an actor later substantiated



my concern by reading the following line from Gray's journal in *Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell*: "I get a whiff of that mothering energy, and I suck it dry." Torn between maintaining my own agenda and wanting to nurture Gray's unspoken regrets, I chose the former path. In doing so, I missed an opportunity to function as his therapeutic audience.

### III

After Gray's death, I recalled his voice at the start of my phone call: he had seemed wholly preoccupied with other things. What else had been on his mind, and why had he suddenly agreed to meet? My first chance to explore this question using Gray's own thoughts as evidence came in 2007, when I saw *Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell*, a play that Russo describes as a tribute to her husband's textual oeuvre:

*Stories Left to Tell* came about when Theatre Communications Group republished *Swimming to Cambodia* in May 2004. TCG held a reading for the book's release at the Union Square Barnes & Noble where Roger Rosenblatt, Reno, Kate Valk, Eric Bogosian and Bob Holman all read excerpts. It was a "light-bulb" moment for me as I sat there listening to all these other voices reading Spalding's work . . . . That night made me realize more than ever that Spalding was a brilliant writer. His words, not his own performance, were now taking center stage.<sup>11</sup>

Russo's assertion that Gray's *writings* posthumously replace and upstage his *performance* is central to my study of the tensions between lasting narrative records and embodied acts. The words re-performed in this show are arguably the culmination of a quest for closure that began with the search for a suicide note. The playbill tells viewers that *Stories* includes excerpts from Gray's best-loved monologues; it also explains why the creators included his journals, a traditionally private mode of inscribing self-knowledge that Gray reconceived as a public one: "Peter Greenaway asked me who I wrote for when I did a journal . . . well, my audience of course." From Russo's early vision of how *Stories* might function, "Maybe we could make it into a fully staged play and through [Gray's] writing tell the story of his life," to the famous poem that Gray used in his Introduction to *Morning Noon and Night*, the citations chosen to contextualize this drama simultaneously position Gray's autobiographical texts as a vehicle for circuitous understanding:

We shall not cease from our exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

(T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*)

In this prominent way, *Stories* evinces Auslander's claim, in "Performance as Therapy," that satisfactory closure is a generic feature of life writing. He begins by defining Gray's monologues as autobiographical accounts of illness, injury, or disability, noting that "the mere existence" of an autopathographic narrative usually "suggests that the

author was healthy and able enough to write it and thus implies a happy ending.” However, Auslander soon complicates this conventional sense of life writing as a record of the author’s recovery by demonstrating how the act of performance stands in a complexly subversive relation to the “happy endings” inscribed in Gray’s texts. Whereas Gray’s published narratives about his struggles with illness repeatedly end with an “epiphany” that seems to remedy his problem, his performance of those same disabilities “does not lead to closure, and its therapeutic value to Gray does not lead to a cure.” Auslander’s thesis raises an integral question: What exactly does the act of performance do for Gray, and why does it threaten to undermine the resolutions at which he arrives in his writings?

As a preface to how this question applies to my encounter with Gray, I will summarize the narrative patterns that Auslander identifies. He begins with an eye disease whose treatment Gray chronicles in *Gray’s Anatomy* (1994). The bulk of this monologue recounts Gray’s quest for alternative cures, including psychic surgery in the Philippines. Ironically, however, it is only through his chance encounter with an aging Richard Nixon—who happens to be a recovering patient at his optometrist’s office—that Gray finally finds the courage to undergo the surgical procedure he needs.

As written, *Gray’s Anatomy* ends happily: “There’s magic in the world. But there’s also reality. And I have to begin to cope with the fact that I’m a little cockeyed.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the visual impairment to which Gray seems to have reconciled himself at the end of *Gray’s Anatomy* recurs in *It’s a Slippery Slope* (1997). Even as this later monologue begins with Gray happily skiing, a storm abruptly brings back his depression. Lost and unable to see clearly, he starts to have dire thoughts about whether or not he must follow his mother and commit suicide. But as luck would have it, Gray catches sight of “a yellow figure that I immediately intuit to be a man.”<sup>13</sup> This figure turns out to be an expert skier in his seventies who guides Gray down the mountain. When they stop, Gray confides that he isn’t sure if he’s having fun or trying to kill himself. The man replies, “When you’re in that place, you know you’re alive.” Echoing the glimpse of Nixon that persuaded Gray to have surgery, the older skier’s sage rejoinder now revives his will to live: “I have seen both a person and an apparition, the spirit of the future, that I, too, could be skiing at seventy if I continued, if I took care of myself, skiing with my son if he wanted to ski.”

Auslander finds it significant that the “epiphanic moments” in both monologues “hinge on these chance encounters with healthy-seeming older men.” He posits that in addition to being “father figures” who offset Gray’s unhealthy identification with his mother, and apart from being “stand-ins” for Gray’s imagined versions of his older self, these older men are also “surrogates for his audience.” He further elaborates on the therapeutic value Gray attaches to having an outside perspective on his erratic behavior by citing Gray’s account of how yet another male stranger dissuaded him from suicidal impulses after his car accident:



I was contemplating jumping but what stopped me was this guy there. A foreign guy. A stranger . . . he didn't speak much English. But I was kind of showing him that that's what I wanted to do. I was lifting my leg, and he was going, "No, no, no!" It was probably a cry for help, and I was certainly overmedicated. But I really don't know if I would have jumped if he weren't there.<sup>14</sup>

Auslander ends by proposing a crucial transition in Gray's therapeutic uses of performance. Whereas Gray once adjusted his real-life outlook and actions by means of the lucid reactions offered by older men, he gradually admits, in *It's a Slippery Slope*, that the theatrical stage is now the only context in which he can still control his behavior: "In fact, I welcomed the isolated protection of the stage. Telling a life was so much easier than living one. Although there were times I'd be in the Mom Mode all the way up to the stage door, barking and twisting on my way to the theatre." In short, the theatrical audiences for Gray's solo monologues temporarily force him act "as if" he is well. However, this obligatory performance no longer offers Gray any meaningful distance from his problems; moreover, it ends as soon as he leaves the stage.

I discovered Auslander's essay shortly after seeing *Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell*. I was not looking for an essay on Gray, but for a discourse of disability. Nevertheless, it was a useful convergence. Although initially stunned by the therapeutic pattern Auslander identifies—cognizant that I was nothing like the healthy-seeming older men who populate Gray's narratives and whose presence repeatedly saves his life—I also began to intuit, by means of my engagement with Russo's and Sexton's drama, that Gray chose to meet with me for that very reason: because he did not want to be rescued this time.

Contrary to what Auslander charts as the evolution of Gray's therapeutic uses of performance, our meeting fostered neither of these lineages. First, unlike the reassuring older men in his monologues, I was a young woman caught in the grip of my own anxieties. I worried about seeming unprepared, about crossing the line with potentially inappropriate questions: "Why are you lying on the couch?" "What are your other regrets?" There were several points at which I fiercely wanted to give Gray a hug, to tell him, "Cheer up," yet I resisted these impulses in the name of professionalism. I also had more personal fears. Was Gray trying to manipulate the situation? Did he expect me to forfeit my research to nurture his regrets? Even as I wanted to play a "mothering" role in that moment, my body refused to enact it. Instead of expressing my genuine concern for his welfare, I instinctively averted my gaze. Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, however, Gray no longer seemed able to present himself as someone in control of his actions, even temporarily. He was bed-ridden, edgy, and had frequent problems remembering what he wanted to say. This disability seemed to frustrate him, yet he also seemed visibly lost in other thoughts. As much as I failed to react in a way that made Gray feel better, I also sensed throughout most of our meeting that he did not see me as someone for whom he needed to compose his behavior, acting "as if" he were okay.

Why, then, did he agree to meet? As noted earlier, *Stories* offered a preliminary answer to this question. Before turning to discuss the drama's modes of resolution, however, it is important to stress that *Stories* is a nuanced record of Gray's loves, adventures, family ties, career, and private thoughts. While the play ultimately moves chronologically towards the satisfactory ending that Auslander links to life writing, it also leaves unresolved questions. About midway through the show, performer Ain Gordon reads the following text: "Journal Entry 1995: The freedom of choice is almost unbearable for me. As a result, I am a very messy chooser. I'm a very passive person, but I don't want to be ashamed of that passivity. I want to make it work." The initial effect of hearing Gray's account of his problem with making decisions was to hush my lingering sense that he had agreed to an interview for a symbolic reason. There was, in effect, nothing remarkable about his sudden interest in revising the legend of Vawter's chance encounter with TPG. He simply had a common—if often feminized—pathology: a hard time saying no.

As *Stories* veered toward its conclusion, however, I began to suspect once again that the question of "coincidence" was relevant to more than Vawter's entry into theatre. Although there is no formal break in the action, the play's tacit dividing line is Gray's 2001 car accident. The sudden glare of a spotlight evokes headlights; the sound of shattering glass pulls us into *Life Interrupted*, a text recounting the violent trauma that led Gray to experience unprecedented forms of distress. After this climactic scene, we witness a losing battle: Gray's many unsuccessful surgeries; the destructive shock treatments he received needlessly due to a misdiagnosis; his constant pain; and his relapse back to his wounded identification with Bette Gray: "Journal Entry April 2003: I cannot let the children see me go crazy. I cannot play that act out on them because I am in the place of mom now: Suicide thoughts."

I fully expected *Stories* to end with this formative plot, circling back to Gray's troubled origins as a way of explaining his fatal outcome. Nothing prepared me, however, for the show's jarring denouement:

December 2003. This is my last journal entry, Kathie. It's an old story you've heard over and over. My life is coming to an end. Everything is in my head now. My timing is off. In the last two years, I've had at least ten therapists and all those shock treatments. Suicide is a viable alternative for me instead of going to an institution. I don't want an audience. I don't want anyone to see me slip into the water.

It was at this juncture that I perceived something deeply problematic about the resolution found in Gray's text. I'd initially called Gray in mid-November, and e-mailed Russo to reconfirm our encounter on January 2, 2004. Somewhere in between those two dates, Gray resolved to kill himself. Why, then, follow through on such a relatively trivial commitment? My doubts that Gray would casually submit to an interview on the eve of his imminent death led me back to his unstable account of the road-trip with Vawter. Whereas the role he'd tried to construct for himself in that narrative was a passive one, the role Gray actually performed was paradoxically

active: he and not Vawter decided how their journey would unfold and end. Gray's final journal entry is equally conflicted. Whereas Gray writes that he does not want anyone to see his irreversible act of slipping into the water, he nonetheless seems conscious of explaining his choice to a future audience. Anticipating that his wife Kathie will one day read his journal, he narrates what is, for him, a viable ending.

Toward the end of our meeting, Gray enacted a slightly different need. No longer concerned with narrating his plan to arrive at his version of closure, Gray now proceeded to imagine his life and work from the vantage of several beloved spectators. After revisiting where he'd been and what he'd done, the performer turned to envision an audience reaction to what he was about to do.

#### IV

It wasn't simply what I saw as Gray's ironic tendency to steer the outcome of situations that made me return to my preset questions. I also feared opening a door that I wouldn't be able to close. I wonder now if my hasty retreat from Gray's regrets threw him off-guard. When I asked about the autobiographical facets of *Rumstick Road*, he warned me out of the blue that Elizabeth LeCompte would "get very upset if you referred to Libby Howes as my mother." This was the first of several times that Gray invoked his former director and lover as an unseen audience: someone who influences our behavior, even when not present, such that our behavior might be performed for them even when they're not around.<sup>15</sup> Gray did not recall much about how The Wooster Group's early shows developed. However, he vividly, even lovingly, recounted his anger about LeCompte's refusal to acknowledge him when he made mistakes:

I was less precise in my moves and in the way I handled props. And Liz would use Ron as a go-between to tell me to shape up, and that's when Liz and I were coming apart and having tension. But she would infuriate me by speaking about me in the third person to Ron, and then Ron would mediate, and try to talk her down. I was probably sloppier in my moves than he. He got more pleasure out of handling records and the record player.

By looking at his earlier self through LeCompte's eyes, Gray not only saw the precision he'd lacked, but the exactness he'd learned. When I playfully asked if he'd been the "sloppy brother" in relation to Vawter's "good brother" role within The Wooster Group, he replied earnestly, "Yeah, I was at the time," implying he'd adapted his style according to what he perceived as LeCompte's expectations. Apart from reviewing his progress from her virtual vantage, Gray also seemed intent on reframing his legacy for performance scholars. When I asked why he'd left TPG to work with LeCompte, he replied for the record: "Well, it was Liz and I who co-founded The Wooster Group. That's important history to know. I mean, I've seen places where Willem [Dafoe] is credited for it, but it was really Liz and I, in 1977." These moments were nothing unusual: like any accomplished performer, Gray simply wanted his public to know the facts about his past.

It was at the very end of our interview, however, that the subtext of being seen by a different kind of unseen audience became important to Gray. An oddly palpable pleasure seemed to overtake him when my sixty-minute tape ran out. At first I thought he was simply glad our meeting was over; yet it was precisely when he saw me physically writing his words down that his whole demeanor changed. He now sat up, leaned forward on the couch, and watched me intently, even gently, as I transcribed his response to my closing question, reading it back to him: “How would you like to have Vawter remembered?”

Well, I think he was a kind, genuine person. I think he had a lot of devilish qualities, as well—mischievous. How he was influential to me as an actor and performer was that he always set an example of dedicated discipline. He was extremely disciplined. He would come in after dancing all night at a club, after drinking and probably tripping, and just be completely energized and ready without whining. He never would whine or complain. That’s why I was surprised when he came up to me and said that he was having night sweats, which was the first sign of AIDS. And I was surprised that he confided that in me.

As I think about him now, I visualize him. And I visualize him exhaling cigarette smoke and speaking in that very calm, centered way: in a questioning way. I see him questioning. I hear him questioning. And within that questioning, there is enormous consideration for the other person’s privacy.

Once I knew Gray would not return, I returned to the notable fact that this passage did not exist on my audiotape. It barely existed as textual evidence, since I’d hastily scrawled Gray’s words as he spoke. With some consternation, I realized that the chief place in which this moment existed was in my memory: as a site where things having no apparent causal connection come together to be understood by a future audience. For me, part of the value of Gray’s closing remarks is as a lens through which to imagine how he hoped to be treated by his future audiences: he wanted people to kindly let him go. In this sense, his testimony still imposes a form of narrative closure. As Gray spoke, however, he also seemed to visualize Vawter in a more literal way—as a presence in the room. Significantly, this spectral audience was not a healthy older man, but a man who’d died ill and much too young. And just as I’d missed the reaction with Gray, unable to nurse his unspoken regrets, Gray had missed a chance to console Vawter’s fears about his failing health: “I remember him talking to me about having the night sweats . . . and me not being very responsive because I was shutting down.”

On the eve of his death, then, Gray not only sought to have an audience, but to be an audience. Viewed from this vantage, Gray’s last public act was not just about closure. Perhaps it was also a gesture of reparation and hope? Perhaps he thought Vawter, who had once performed as a “stand-in” for others whom Gray wanted in the room, would now have a chance to be seen as a seminal influence on Gray’s body of work? Perhaps he wanted Vawter to be among those to see him on the other

side—not as a theatrical audience, not as a stranger who could save his life, but as a friend who knows what it is to die?

I don't recall what time our interview ended but dusk had already settled over Wooster Street. As Gray walked me to the door, I noticed his limp and wondered what had caused it. For one split second, I thought about asking him out for a drink. Instead, sanity prevailed; I thanked him and left to meet my friends at an East Village bar. Bathed in the glow of warm amber lights, I shivered and told them that I couldn't seem to shake the sadness that had emanated from him.

The same evening, Gray went out into the record-breaking cold and rode the ferry. The following day, he took his sons to see *Big Fish*. On Saturday night, he told his family he was going for “a drink with a friend.” He was surely being symbolic, but when I heard this later his comment made me cry. I wish he'd gone for a drink with me instead. Once deeply ashamed of my failure to see Gray's pain, I am now grateful for what I've learned of him belatedly. He was a kind and generous person who took time to transform my understanding of Vawter's career even as he was rehearsing to end his own life.

In 1979, Bonnie Marranca reviewed three of Gray's solo “talking pieces,” as he called them back then, in *Performance Art* magazine. Her conclusion about the absolute lack of resolution uniting Gray's early performances is brutally prophetic of how his real-life ended: “Gray's talking pieces represent self-absorption in a relentlessly pure performance situation and the concomitant refusal to make judgments about the world at large. It is an attitude that expresses no commitment to a future, being irrevocably bound to its own sense of loss of the past.”<sup>16</sup> Gray's written monologues offered him, at least on the surface, means of arriving at closure. Meanwhile, his actual encounters with older male strangers presented him with the kinds of people who neatly made judgments for him, convincing him that he should try to live his life with a “happy ending” in mind. Gray's performances could not, however, commit to this kind of a future—for the loyalties he felt most deeply within himself seemed to be to his mother and to the water, bodies that represented an open-ended past.

Once Gray was too ill to perform for an audience, he chose to go home. And while recovery from my own forms of “blindness” has been slow and incomplete, I hope I gave Gray what he needed at the time: a future audience who might one day accept the incomprehensibility of his final, private act.

## NOTES

1. Della Pollock, ed. “Introduction: Remembering,” in *Remembering: Oral History Performance*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 3.

2. Quoted by Gaby Woods, “Profile: Shades of Gray,” *Guardian Unlimited*, December 26, 2004: <<http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,4120,1379764,00.html>> (accessed September 17, 2007).

3. Kathleen Russo, interview by Paula Zahn, *Paula Zahn Now*, CNN, January 15, 2004: <<http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0401/15/pzn.00.html>> (accessed August 21, 2007).
4. Richard Schechner, "Spalding Gray," lecture presented at the eleventh annual Performance Studies International conference, Brown University, Providence, RI, April 2, 2005.
5. Spalding Gray, interview with the author, January 9, 2004.
6. Philip Auslander, "Performance as Therapy: Spalding Gray's Autopathographic Monologues," in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, edited by Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005, 163–74.
7. Erving Goffman, *Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday, 1959, 22.
8. Ross Wetzsteon, "Saint Ron: New York's Best Unknown Actor," *Village Voice*, October 17, 1989: 39.
9. David Savran, *Breaking the Rules: The Wooster Group*, New York: TCG, 1988, 114.
10. Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*, London: Longman Group Ltd., 1972, 33.
11. Kathleen Russo, "About the Play," *Spalding Gray: Stories Left to Tell* playbill, April, 2007.
12. Spalding Gray, *Gray's Anatomy*, New York: Vintage, 1994, 73–74.
13. Spalding Gray, *It's a Slippery Slope*, New York: Noonday Press, 1997, 104.
14. John Moore, "No Happy Ending to Spalding Gray Story," *Denver Post*, February 28, 2003: FF1.
15. Auslander summarized Goffman's notion of the "unseen audience" in this manner in an e-mail sent to the ASTR-L Theatre History discussion list on June 25, 2007; see also Goffman, 122.
16. Bonnie Marranca, "Self-Portrait in Gray," *Ecologies of Theatre*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996, 103–4. Originally published in *Performance Art* 2, NY: Performing Arts Journal: 46.

---

THERESA SMALEC is a doctoral candidate in Performance Studies at New York University.