

My Art in Life

Interviewing Spalding Gray

Richard Schechner

Ed. note: In February 1999, Spalding Gray took part in the “Tuesday Night Forum Series” of lectures and performances sponsored by the Performance Studies Department of the Tisch School of the Arts/NYU. The format of the program paralleled one of Gray’s own performances, Interviewing the Audience (1980), except in this case, Gray was interviewed—first by Richard Schechner and then by members of the audience. Because much of the interview concerns Gray’s life in the theatre, we will not preview that here. We wish to note only that Gray began performing his life—as multicharacter pieces and as a series of monologues—in the 1970s, making him a pioneer of autobiographical solo performance art. What is not so often noted, is that Gray has also acted onstage and in films, in works as divergent as Brecht’s Mother Courage and Her Children (with The Performance Group, 1975), Roland Joffe’s movie The Killing Fields (1984), and Gore Vidal’s The Best Man (on Broadway, 2000). Gray is currently developing a new monologue, tentatively called Black Spot.

SCHECHNER: I met Spalding in 1970 when The Performance Group was doing *Makbeth*, a variation on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* [see Schechner 1978]. The actor playing MacDuff quit on Sunday night leaving exactly four days to audition, hire, and rehearse a replacement. After going through the résumés on hand I called Spalding. “I’d like you to come work with The Performance Group,” I said. “We’re all full of process and everything but we have just four days because we perform again on Wednesday.” Spalding took the job, did well, but no one was coming to see our version of the Scottish play, and it closed. In fact, the whole first Performance Group exploded. Only three or four of those who made *Dionysus in 69* [1968] and *Makbeth* [1970] were left. Spalding was the first of the new people who I worked with throughout the 1970s on such productions as the group-devised *Commune* [1970], Sam Shephard’s *The Tooth of Crime* [1972], Brecht’s *Mother Courage and Her Children* [1975], Seneca’s *Oedipus* [1977], Terry Curtis Fox’s *Cops* [1978], and Genet’s *The Balcony* [1979]. Spalding acted in all of these except *Oedipus*. From the mid-’70s onward he and Liz LeCompte developed their own work, which morphed into the Wooster Group.

In *Commune* each performer sang the story of their first meeting with The Performance Group. These were called—

GRAY: “Songs of First Encounter”—

SCHECHNER: Right. And during the play, performers played both characters and themselves. Spalding’s character was called “Spalding.” So he was doubly himself. The last role Spalding did under my direction was as the Bishop in the 1979 production of *The Balcony*. In 1980 I left The Performance Group and the Wooster Group replaced The Performance Group.

GRAY: I’m going to start just by doing a recollection of how I think I came to be working the way that I work. It starts in Barrington, Rhode Island. I was born in 1941 and had a fairly normal childhood. The only kind of weird thing about it was that I was one of three Christian Scientists in Barrington. So that put me a little outside the community. People treated me, even my friends treated me, as odd, in the sense that they would ask often, “Is it true you don’t go to doctors?” “Yes.” Then they’d start the “Well, what if...” scenario: What if this tree fell on you now? What if this truck hit you? That put me a little bit on the outside.

I think these things are important. On the radio, when someone asked Oliver Sachs that old question about whether or not he felt artists had to suffer and he answered, “Not necessarily,” but still he believed art often came from a compensatory act, where you are compensating for something. So I think of myself, how I was thrown out of my community, pushed out of my community. That turned me into an observer of myself.

Also I had a learning disability, a form of dyslexia, but no one really knew. People didn’t know yet what to call it. Today there are labels for everything. But we didn’t have them then. I couldn’t scan and read fluently, so I was always behind in my reading. So I was branded as “slow.” That label was a catchall for the idea that I wouldn’t make it at anything. Basically, the school system thought I would drop out at 16 along with the other kids that were dropping out at 16 to become service workers for the town. So they put me in with them. I was no longer in with the college-preparatory kids, which were all the kids I grew up with on Rumstick Road. That was the final act of being cast out of my community.

Of course, all I did was cut up and fail. I failed seventh-grade math, which meant I had to repeat all of seventh grade. I failed ninth-grade algebra. And finally I was sent away to a boarding school, not a very fancy one, but an academy in Maine which was kind of for wayward kids, problem kids. And I guess the shock of being sent away sobered me up because I realized that I was on my own and I buckled down, as they say, and started doing very well in school. But I had no real interest, or passion. I didn’t know what I was looking for. I was bored generally with things.

So in my junior year I tried out—I always thought I wanted to be in a play—for the junior play. Because I am mildly dyslexic and can’t scan—I can really only read one word at a time—and I was doing a cold reading, and also I was shaking so much—I was so nervous I couldn’t hold the book. I didn’t get the role. I don’t remember what the play was.

But in my senior year, and I have to give myself credit for this looking back at it, I tried out again for a play called the *Curious Savage* [John Patrick] which takes place in an insane asylum. The character I was trying out for had delusions of grandeur. Not only did he believe he was Hannibal; he thought he could play the violin, but he couldn’t. When I read, I read relentlessly, the way I perceived the text, one word at a time. And I got the role because they thought that I was just doing this really effective reading.

And also the director, Ruth Hartz, was the first person, the first adult in my life that said something really good about me. We were rehearsing and the stage manager kept giving me my lines. Ruth said, “Do not give Spuddy Gray a line until he asks for it, because he has excellent timing.” Now, that was a big one



1. *Spalding Gray's publicity photo. (Photo courtesy of Washington Square Arts)*

because “excellent timing,” can apply to a lot of things. I had never heard the word “excellent” applied to me in any way. Ruth fluffed my feathers—she was just wonderful. On opening night they had a carpet on the floor that we hadn’t rehearsed with in dress rehearsal. I was supposed to do a downstage left cross while sawing on my violin. I looked down and I saw these square patterns on the rug and I just improvised hopscotch with the violin, my own little dance. The audience laughed, and that was it [*finger snap*] for me.

I was absolutely struck, but by what? By the power of that instant communication. That was my first autobiographical performance because I’d initiated that move, an improvisational move that had not been blocked in rehearsal. And that direct communication with the audience, that laughter went through me, electrified me. I went to my guidance counselor: “I don’t want to go to college, I want to go to New York City to study in a studio. I want to become an actor.” And he said, “What do you know about acting, you’ve been in one play? You have to go to a liberal arts college.” And I believed him.

I went to Boston University. But they wouldn’t let me in the theatre department because I had no experience. So I transferred to Emerson College. This was really an important move for me, though I didn’t realize it at the time. Emerson’s emphasis was on speech and so I didn’t have to do the enormous amount of reading

that would be required in a school that was more academic. At Emerson what I started to do, besides acting in all the plays I could be in, was taking all of Shakespeare out of the library on records. I realized that I perceive better through listening—I grew up with radio, I was a great radio fan—and also I communicate better through speaking. I’d listen to Shakespeare from the Boston Public Library. That’s how I would do my Shakespeare class. I got cast in every play.

When I graduated from Emerson, I thought I was setting out to be a traditional regional theatre actor. I did stock in the summer and then a few small non-equity regional theatres. Then in 1967 I went off to the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, where I got my Equity Card—and got disillusioned by professional theatre. It was really good that I got hit so quickly, realizing how conservative theatre is. At the same time I was reading articles in *The New York Times* about Andre Gregory being expelled from the Theatre for the Living Arts in Philadelphia because he directed *Bedch* by Rochelle Owens. I thought: “Wow, a board of directors has fired this man, something’s going on up on the East Coast that’s not happening in Houston where people call up and say they want seats, “but not next to no Negroes.”

I wondered, what kind of plays do you do in order to move those people? The Alley was very conservative, the productions were not daring, the audience was a staid, subscription audience. Inside the theatre a very, very sad homosexual community was hiding out. The whole theatre was gay but they really did not dare go out of the theatre at that time, in 1967. Gays were being beaten with tire irons and left on the streets of Houston. So I got really disillusioned with theatre and thought I was going to give it up.

And then Elizabeth LeCompte, who I’d met at a small theatre in Saratoga [upstate New York], and I got together that summer and went to Mexico. She

had just graduated from Skidmore. We hung out in San Miguel. I thought that I wanted to be a child photographer and I started taking photography classes in San Miguel and taking portraits of Mexican kids and developing them myself. Theatre was pretty much over for me.

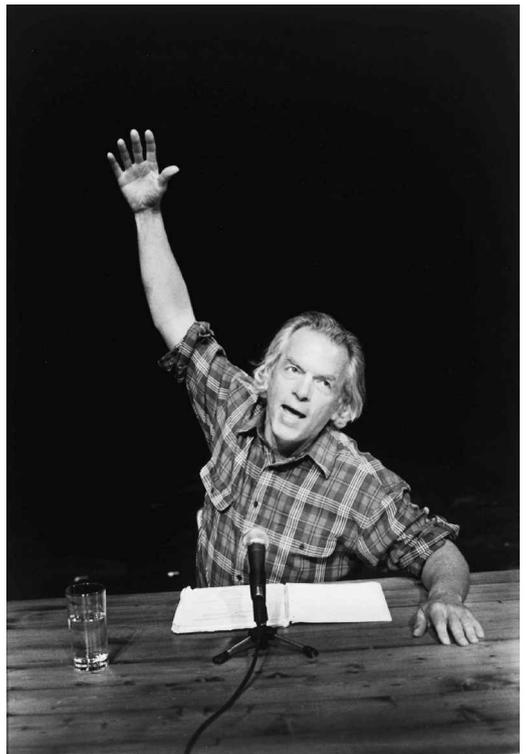
When I came back to New York I found out that my mother had killed herself. No one could find me while I was in Mexico, I had no telephone. I didn't know how to take in my mother's suicide. I became a kind of zombie. I went to New York to live with Liz but didn't know what I was gonna do, had no idea how I was going to make a living. I was collecting \$32 a week Texas unemployment and walking the streets of New York. And, by the way, looking back on it, telling stories to Liz, her sister Ellen, and their roommate every night when I'd get back, about my encounters on the streets. We all lived in this one house on Sixth Street and Avenue D. No television, and no radio really. That was really kind of the beginning of my storytelling.

After being in New York for six months, I was really lucky to get work in Robert Lowell's adaptation of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Endecott and the Red Cross* [1967] off-Broadway. And then I went into Tom O'Horgan's *Tom Paine*. That was in 1968. O'Horgan was experimenting with an ensemble production—people were not playing psychological characters as much as we were doing sketches of characters with all of us onstage all the time. It was like we were an ensemble dream of Tom Paine's consciousness. There were two Tom Paines. At times I'd be a general, at other times I'd be a fury haunting him in his alcohol delirium. And this experience, I guess it was about six months, made me realize that I wasn't interested in approaching theatre from a naturalist psychological character way.

The '60s were catching up with and influencing the '70s. I'd seen a couple of other things that really changed my consciousness. One was the Living Theatre's *Frankenstein* which I saw at the Brooklyn Academy in 1969. The other was Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69* [1968] at the Performing Garage, which I saw with Elizabeth LeCompte. That really shook me to my roots. Liz and I were up—it was an environmental production—and Liz and I were on the highest platform we could find to get away from the action, from the insanity that was going on, down on the floor. But also we had this enormous gut response where we went, "Wow!" We not only saw something but we experienced something in that room that we never knew was a possibility in theatre. And that caused me—that and having worked with Tom O'Horgan—to know that there was something else possible in theatre that I'd never dreamt of before.

It caused me to begin to walk back and forth outside the Performing Garage to see what was going on there. It became my haunt. It was September [1969] and Richard was rehearsing The Performance Group in an environmental production of *Makbeth*. I remember they had a whole bunch of carpets in there on the floor that he'd gotten cheap from some carpet place to work on because the garage floor was stone and cement. [The carpets were for *Dionysus*. The *Makbeth* environment, designed by Jerry Rojo, was all wood dominated by a large wooden table at the center.] I would see them in there, sitting in a circle, Richard cross-legged and car-

2. Gray in performance in *It's a Slippery Slope*, 1995. (Photo courtesy Washington Square Arts)





3. Gray as Spalding in *Commune*, with *The Performance Group*, directed by Richard Schechner, 1970. (Photo by Richard Schechner)

rying on. I'd go by, and I thought, "I'm going to send my picture and résumé to them." Which was absolutely ludicrous, but that's how I had gone about it in the traditional theatre. So when Richard called me and asked, "Could you do the role of MacDuff in four days?" I just went, "Oh sure, of course," because that's what you're supposed to say. You don't say no. Also I'd been doing summer stock where you do a play in a week. But *The Performance Group* had been working on *Makbeth* for a year so it was kind of funny to hear Richard ask, "Could you do it in four days?"

SCHECHNER: I was very angry at the guy who quit. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of making us close or even delay the play.

GRAY: Yes, there was a lot of rage in the room, a lot of rage. The company was boycotting the introduction of new people. The power structure had broken up. Some people were speaking to Richard, some weren't. At any rate, they didn't show up for the rehearsal. Richard was the only one there. So, it was a production unto itself because Richard played all the roles. He was running around giving me my cues so that I could get in shape for Thursday. The group wouldn't show up to rehearse but they would show up to do the show with me—and pay me in cash, I remember.

I liked it very much, this environmental production of *Makbeth*. It was very reduced—we were in boxing shoes and corduroy jumpsuits with just one prop, the crown, a big, heavy brass crown that everyone was constantly seeking after. Richard was into his theories of "Actuals" then [see Schechner 1970], which I came to know and like. For instance, Malcolm would go to my castle to find my wife and "all my pretty ones," my children. While the production was going on, Richard had me and Steve Borst, who was playing Malcolm, follow an actual/physical route within the Performing Garage (under people, over people, around people) to get to the place that was supposed to be my castle. It didn't look like a castle, it was just a place in the Garage that Richard decided was the castle—it was the place where we did the murder scene. I really liked this way of working. I liked the fact that we were present in the space all the time, there was no running backstage.

But during this bizarre rehearsal with Richard, I remember him playing all the

roles, including King Duncan. There was an actual banquet scene where we would all have to feed on the King. The King lifted his shirt and he became the banquet. All the sons—in *Makbeth*, Malcolm, MacDuff, Banquo, and Makbeth were all Duncan's sons—began to suck and bite their father's stomach. The guy who played the King [Tom Crawley] had blue hickeys up and down his stomach. He was covered from all the sucking. So at this rehearsal Richard exposed his belly and said, "Suck!" so I just went...I went right down on him. And I was pulling hairs out of my teeth. Who said I wouldn't do anything for a role? Here I am going down on the director. And yet it seemed perfectly, you know... experimental.

We had a good relationship. Richard and I got really close through these rehearsals. But *Makbeth* was short-lived because the company was exploding. Some people wouldn't work with some people. It was not a comfortable situation. I felt like a real mercenary. I think I was getting a big \$80 a week, which was a really good salary for me, but the money was given to me disdainfully by one of the performers.

Finally, Richard reorganized The Performance Group. He asked me, Steve Borst, Joan MacIntosh, and a couple of others to stay on. The rest left. Then we added some new people and began to work on *Commune*, a group-devised piece [see Sainer 1997]. *Commune* was very important for me. I'm not going to go into all the stories about *Commune* but just say why it was important to me. Richard told the group, and no director had ever said this to me before, "We're going to work from a process here, evolving a text together, or a theatre piece, together. But the thing I want to know about first is who you are. I'm not real interested in your ability to take on a character yet, but let's explore who you are."

And so we went into a lot of—something that was fairly popular then—"encounter exercises" as a group. This work was extremely intense for me; and it was something that I really needed in my life. I had vacillated between wanting to be involved with Richard and The Performance Group or with the Open Theatre of Joe Chaikin. Looking back on it now, I think that going with Richard was the right choice. I needed a solid ego figure to come up against. I'd had a rather passive-aggressive father, and though Joe Chaikin was very creative, he was more passive in the sense of not being as confrontational with the performers.



4. Gray as Swiss Cheese in Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage and Her Children* with The Performance Group, directed by Richard Schechner, 1975. (Photo by Richard Schechner)

5. Gray as *The Bishop* in Jean Genet's *The Balcony* with *The Performance Group*, directed by Richard Schechner, 1979. (Photo by Richard Schechner)



And Richard was very much that. He gave us something to bounce off of. We did psychophysical exercises that he had developed from Grotowski's work, but also with a lot of sound and speech. We never just sat still. We free associated, or sang "songs of first encounter" [about how each of us first came into contact with *The Performance Group*] or other kinds of autobiographical work. Richard would come up to a person who was doing a body roll or some physical exercise and hold up a microphone and ask us to just talk about something or sing. We kept moving at the same time. And in that way—bringing in our own texts, and stuff we got from plays or books—we made *Commune*. In *Commune* I played "Spalding," the role Spalding. That was my first move toward autobiography, but I didn't realize it at the time. My character Spalding was very much how Richard perceived me, how he saw me from the outside as a kind of watcher. He would watch and comment on the action.

The next production with *The Performance Group*, Sam Shepard's *The Tooth of Crime*, was a big one for me. Richard and I went for a walk in Central Park and he said, "Listen, I think it's time for you to stop being on the outside and passive and jump in and take a major role, I want you to play Hoss, the lead." I couldn't imagine doing this tough-talking rock-star killer.

And that's when Richard really started to get into working on character with me, helping me develop a character that I could play at. I remember that one of the big things was having my head shaved. Richard did not suggest that that's what he wanted to do: he just went ahead and did it. We walked right down to Canal Street and he stood over me while a barber shaved my head. That was a big step. No one had their heads shaved then; I was the first skinhead in SoHo. And in fact, when I was in Spain, people yelled at me because they thought I'd just got out of prison. It was very uncomfortable.

SCHECHNER: Some people used to call you "Balding."

GRAY: Balding Spray, yeah. So the most important thing about *Tooth of Crime* for me was that it was totally environmental, like *Commune*. Suddenly I had to speak a lot of lines directly and very close to the audience because they were moving around with me and equally lit as I was. And that was a big breakthrough

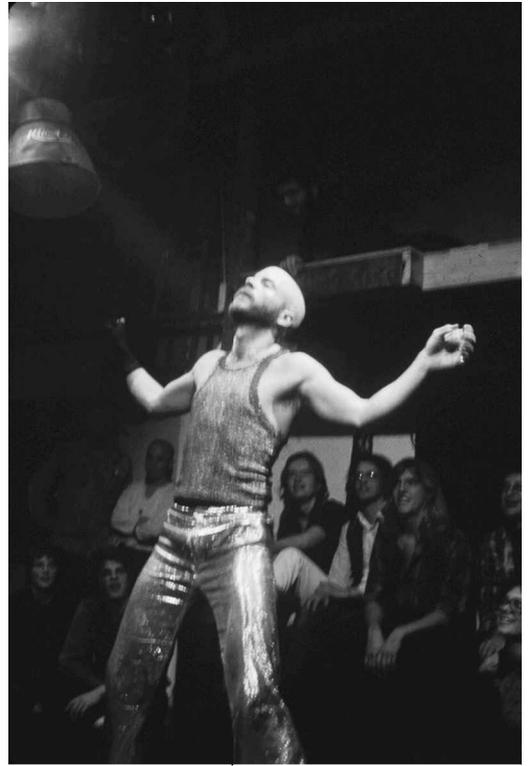
for me because I had always been really interested in the fourth wall, and hiding—pretending there was no audience out there. I was really afraid that I would see the spectators' eyes and read not just indifference but, "We know you're acting." I was embarrassed by being caught in the act—some Puritan thing going on where I was never really comfortable with "acting."

This was a real act, this *Tooth of Crime*: Hoss with his leather jacket, costume-jeweled jock strap, boxing shoes, and big beautiful green cape. I really got into and owned this role. I played it for a long time, yeah, a couple of years. It was highly energizing, both the language and the movement.

I want to tell two things about that production before I move on. One is that Richard wanted to get us into getting the moves down and there was a lot of rock-and-roll music mentioned in the play so he had a tape made of all of the music that was in the play, a lot of '60s music. Then for a number of rehearsals we'd listen to that tape, do the whole play moving or dancing to the music. There was no speaking, but we would go through all the moves. I remember that those rehearsals were invaluable for finding my character. Really, essentially *Tooth* was a rock opera and a dance. It was never still. The audience moved around following the action like a golf match. There was no set seating for the audience.

The other important thing for me was that there was a big street scene where me and this character named Crow [played by Tim Shelton] who is a kind of gypsy outsider who's overthrowing me by his mercurial indifference and lack of self—I, Hoss, just couldn't pin him down. So Crow and I had this word battle, back and forth like the Eskimos have or some tribes have where they come out and insult each other very poetically instead of hitting each other. Before this word-duel, I do a very long soliloquy about a fight that I'd been in. Richard said, "I want you at the end of this—" (while the drums were going full blast) "—to drop your character. Drop all this character you've built up of Hoss, and just stand there"—in the middle of this circle, surrounded by the audience. Richard said, "Go neutral," as the saying was then. I remember standing there in my green cape, trying to be neutral with a shaved head, and a jock strap, and feeling this onion of the character peeling away, peel after peel, and then standing there like this, looking at the audiences' faces. I looked at them from...myself...whatever that was, which really felt quite empty. And then Richard said, "Just take the time, as long as you want to stand there, and when you feel ready to move, then go to the other side of the room and begin your next scene." And that was a really important space for me to go into every night, I really looked forward to that. It was a very powerful, beautiful meditation. It began to occur to me, What if I didn't rebuild my character? If I continued to stand here, looking at the audience. What might I say? And I think that's where the first curiosity and temptation came in that I might be able to publicly be Spalding Gray. At that time it was just a fantasy, nothing I thought of really doing.

My next role with The Performance Group was as Swiss Cheese in Brecht's *Mother Courage*. We took *Courage* to India. After a few months, some of us came back. But we didn't come back as a whole company. Richard stayed in India for



6. Gray as Hoss in Sam Shephard's *The Tooth of Crime* with *The Performance Group*, directed by Richard Schechner, 1972. (Photo by Richard Schechner)

a year. In India I had a crack-up, and when I got back to America I had reverse culture shock. I really couldn't stay awake, I was sleeping 19 hours a day—but that's a whole other story.

I pulled out of that by beginning to work with Elizabeth LeCompte and the people from The Performance Group that were waiting around to get back to work with Richard when he came back. Liz and I began to evolve *Three Places in Rhode Island. Sakonett Point* [1975] was the first, a dumb show, really silent. The performance was me moving with music, some singing, some records. Next came *Rumstick Road* [1977], which was me talking but also tapes of my relatives talking about my mother's suicide. It was an investigation of that. And the third piece, *Nayatt School* [1978], was me doing direct address to the audience. So looking at those three pieces I think of it as like Pinocchio in Geppetto's workshop. Geppetto's workshop was the Performing Garage, but Geppetto was in India. So we began working on our own. It started as the puppet of the non-speaking boy in *Sakonett Point*. Then he begins to speak using his relatives' voices on tape. And then *Nayatt School*, the third piece, was a series of direct addresses to the audience, short monologues about my relationship to T. S. Eliot's *Cocktail Party*. Elizabeth LeCompte would tape them, transcribe them, and say, "Here let's do it again like this." And that's when I began to realize that what I was speaking was text, and could be used as a text. So when I finally split from the Wooster Group/Performance Group in 1978, I had no idea what I wanted to do, but I knew I wanted to get out of the group situation. I had been in The Performance Group and the Wooster Group, but I had never been really alone.

So I took a bus across America, a Greyhound. For \$69 you could go to California but get off anywhere, and get back on whenever you wanted, over the course of a summer. I remember getting off in Cheyenne, Wyoming, because I liked the name. I didn't like the town once I saw it, and hitchhiked to Boulder. When I got to Boulder I stayed with friends and I walked down the esplanade where they were doing an open-air poetry reading. They had the Jack Kerouac School of Poetry there at Naropa Institute. I knew I had to get up on that platform and do a poem, but I didn't have a poem, and I wasn't a poet. So I got up and I spoke as fast as I could remember all the details from the time I left NYC on the Greyhound bus to hitchhiking, getting picked up by a Romanian refugee and his son, going with them to Fort Collins (where I'm going this Friday, strangely enough). I stayed in his house, there was no furniture, I slept on the floor in a sleeping bag, got to Boulder. I just told that story real fast and then I ran. I had no idea what I had done, or what the audience's reaction was. But looking back on it, I realized that was the first autobiographic monologue outside of the Performing Garage.

I got to Santa Cruz and hung out there. It kind of went like this: I was crashing on a course that Emily Watts was teaching called Philosophy of Motions. Emily and I became friends. She was Richard Watts's ex-wife. I told her, "I just don't know what I'm going to do." I felt the world was coming to an end. It was an egocentric predicament. I thought because I'd left the Wooster Group that the world was coming to an end. I said, "The world is coming to an end and I don't know what kind of art could exist in that." And she said, "Well if you feel that America is like Rome, the last artists in Rome were the chroniclers." I thought, "Ah, that's it, I'll chronicle my life orally, I won't write it down because to write it down would be in bad faith, it would be to assume there's a future. And, as much as I love books and poetry, I think there's enough of them in the world." So I thought, "If I speak it, it will disappear at the end of each performance." And that's when I came back to New York.

I remember sitting in the Performing Garage, or right next door to it—we had another space there then [the Envelope Theatre]. I sat at a table and recol-

lected. I think I had a very heavy title for it, something like, “Growing up in Rhode Island.” It was either Richard or Liz or both of them that said, “Why don’t you call it *Sex and Death to the Age 14*?” It was recollections up until the time I was 14. That title for my first monologue gave me some sense of humor about myself, and irony. I thought I was going to sit down and just really tell the story of my growing up and that nothing could possibly be funny about it. But people started laughing—the audience taught me what was funny about it. It was really a relationship; it wasn’t just a monologue, it was a dialogue.

SCHECHNER: Wasn’t that in the little room at Connecticut College in 1979?

GRAY: No I started at the Envelope on the set of *Cops*. Then I took it that summer to Connecticut College to develop it. *Sex and Death to the Age 14* was 1979. It led to 14 other monologues [up until 1999]. The new one I’m doing now will open at Lincoln Center in the fall is called *Morning, Noon, and Night* [1997]. It’s one day in my life with my family in eastern Long Island.

One other thing I wanted to add. I didn’t get out of boarding school till I was almost 20. When I was in my senior year, not only did I get in the play, but I also wrote a description of my hometown for English that my teacher read out loud to the class. When I heard her read that, I realized clearly that I was a writer. So I was always trying, unconsciously, to get those two together. How could I do acting and writing, or performing and writing? And so I was extremely pleased. I remember hugging myself in the Envelope after doing *Sex and Death* and just thinking, “Oh my god, I have found something, I have found a form for myself that I didn’t know I was looking for.”

So that’s a quick sketch. What I want to do now is take your questions.

SCHECHNER: You’ve worked with some very strong women collaborators: Liz LeCompte, Renee Shafrensky, and Kathleen Russo. They were all more or less “behind the scenes” but with a strong input into your work one way or another. What has been the difference among those three and how have they each affected your work?

GRAY: That’s a good question. So there are three women; I hadn’t thought of Kathie as being part of the work process but she is.

Elizabeth LeCompte—we were all going to work together on *Sakonett Point*, but we couldn’t. There was no director. I said, “We need an outside eye here. Liz, you should do it.” I really cast her in that role. She went right into it, became an instant director. It was in there all the time, and I must have sensed that. Liz first got to know her vision through directing me. I used to make the comparison that Liz and I were like Wallace Stevens and Robert Lowell. I leaned toward Robert Lowell who used his poetry as a diary. I heard Robert Lowell on record read, say at the YMHA, and when he would introduce the poem, the introduction was as interesting as the poem because Lowell would talk about the history of where a word came from. Also the tapes of Baba Ram Das fascinated me, the stories he would tell about his first trip to India.

Liz, like Wallace Stevens, was trying to make art that referred to itself, not to anything in the outside world. The more Liz came into that vision and the more I was speaking directly to the audience, the more we had conflict. After a show, everyone would rush to Liz for her reaction. But I already knew from how the audience reacted. But Liz felt any direct relationship to the audience was the most horrible form of pandering. Already there was a split between us. Also Liz was very influenced by Richard Foreman. She was not really interested in traditional human emotions. If someone was supposed to cry, she would have them put glycerin in their eyes. So it was very Brechtian, or Japanese, and still is.

Renee Shafransky I lived with for 14 years—an incredibly long time. Liz and I lived together for 12 years. Renee was and is a great spirit. Renee and I were both very dramatic together, very neurotic, very complicated. We lived our lives almost like two characters. I would tell stories about our life together and that would make the monologue. So in a way Renee was a cowriter because I would often be quoting her. She'd be a central character, not only my life partner. The monologues were about those two characters, Renee and Spalding. There's no way that I can imagine having gone on with the monologues without her.

I really didn't have a life outside of the monologues. So when I began to crave a secret life I had an affair that lasted two years, before I finally married Renee after 14 years. Then the woman I was having the affair with [Kathie] got pregnant and completely exploded my relationship with Renee and smashed everything. I thought I couldn't possibly go on and do another monologue. That was a very difficult time. I went into therapy for a while to try and figure out what the story was. What was speakable and what was unspeakable? What belonged in the therapist's office and what onstage? I came out of it by doing two new monologues *Slippery Slope* [1995] and *Morning, Noon, and Night* without Renee. That was a huge loss and at the same time my transformation into a family man.

That's where Kathie comes in. Elizabeth LeCompte and Renee Shafransky were both people that I worked with. It was more confusing with Renee because I think she wanted to have a family more than Liz did. But that didn't happen so our relationship became exclusively a work relationship. We would be waiting to do the next monologue, or traveling to do a monologue, or hanging out until new material came up. But the monologue was always the thing.

Once I had my first son with Kathie—now I have two—the family became as big as the monologues. A new balance happened that I didn't dream possible: I could have energy for both.

I am in a sticky place now because *Morning, Noon, and Night* is about my family—so I am both living in it and telling about it, which makes things extremely claustrophobic. Also, once it's done, where do I go? How can I be a family man and do new material? Because to do new material would be to make an ongoing soap opera of the family—which I don't want to do.

SCHECHNER: That leads me to this question: Do you ever “live your life” with your performances in mind? That is, do you look for stuff to do and ways to react that would suit a present or future project?

GRAY: Now, that question is one that's often asked. It's a circle, a tricky business. Just one comment about how I think storytelling works. If you are too good and too quick at telling a story, it can be a very good defense mechanism and take you away from feeling and being in the moment. That's one of the things I have to watch about myself, because I tend to relate through stories. If someone asks me, “How do you feel?” I answer by telling an anecdote. So when something comes on the horizon I think, “Would that make a good story?”

I'll give you an example. The big issue in Sag Harbor, Long Island, where I live is that they've reopened the nuclear power plant in Waterford, Connecticut. We're downwind of this very dirty plant that releases radioactivity everyday. And if there was ever a meltdown there's no evacuation plan for us. They estimate 23,000 dead on the north and south forks of Long Island Sound. Helen Caldicott, who's been fighting the bomb and nuclear power plants, came from Australia to organize. She believes the plant is so dangerous and dirty that it has to be shut down immediately. We've had some meetings in our home where people have come and spoken about this. This is stuff I feel I have to do as a citizen and a father. But at the same time I'm feeling it, I'm also thinking, “How can I possibly turn this into a monologue?” That's a creative way of looking at it: How can I

tell a story with a sense of humor about the misuse of nuclear energy? Helen Caldicott tells the story, but not with a sense of humor. When she speaks, it's terrifying.

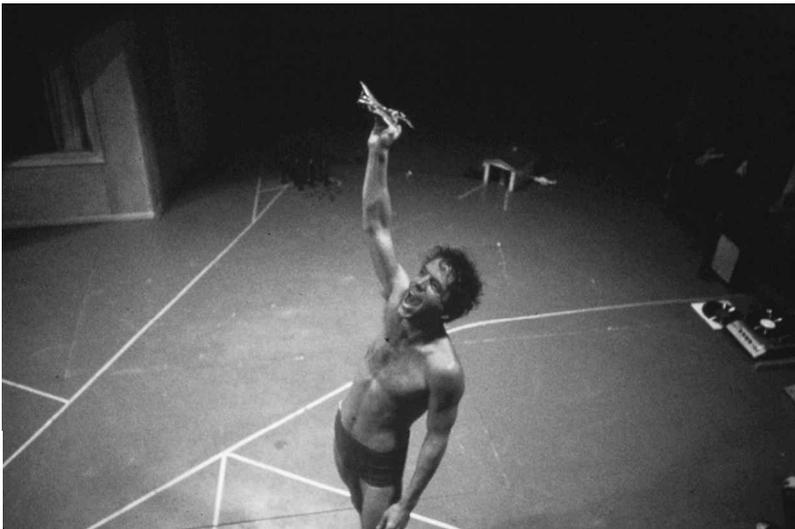
So, as I've said, "You have to live a life to tell a life. I prefer to just tell it." Part of me means that and part of it is a joke. I mean, telling it gives me so much more control, and also heightens it. I work like a collage artist. I put together everything that works for me, that makes my life feel uplifted: a good story rather than just a life.

SCHECHNER: Ok, you have a life and it provides you with material. But on the technical level, how do you prepare a piece? What steps do you take from living your life, to performing a monologue, to publishing the monologue as a book?

GRAY: I go through three stages. The first is trying to figure out what I'm thinking about and talking about by actually doing it. I have never prewritten a monologue; I depend on working off the audience, making it like a dialogue. The audience makes me feel smarter. An audience is more of a resonator than sitting in a room dealing with just a wall and yourself. But I do have an outline.

The New York Times wanted to do a cover story about *Gray's Anatomy* [Gray 1992]. I was going to be on the cover of *The New York Times Magazine*. They wanted some of the monologue to publish. But I wasn't ready to do it yet. My agent said, "They're gonna do a cover story, you'd better get ready." And I said, "I don't perform it until March, in Berkeley." She said, "That's too late, do something." I said, "But I don't prewrite these monologues, I have no idea what the monologue is about." She said, "Find an audience." So I got John Howell, who was an editor at *Elle* at the time, to sit across from me. I sat at the table with a tape recorder and my little outline and I told him the story. He was my first audience. I thought the *New York Times* would think it was like Dick and Jane, that it wasn't literary enough. But they liked it and they printed it [1992]. John was my first audience.

This is how I start. I sit down with a penciled outline and tape record it as I perform it with an audience. What I start with is memory. All memory is a creative act. If you have a memory, you're re-creating the original event. That's



7. Sakonett Point, 1975, the first part of *The Rhode Island Trilogy*. (Photo by Richard Schechner)



8. Rumstick Road, 1977, the second part of The Rhode Island Trilogy. Ron Vawter as Grandma Gray in the wheelchair. (Photo by Elizabeth LeCompte)

public memory, and that's a very active and present thing. It's not memorized. It's heightened speech. Each night I still don't know where I'm going—at least it's that way for a while. Of course, once the monologue reaches Lincoln Center, I sit down and it's very rote then, very performed.

SCHECHNER: Is it almost over at that point?

GRAY: Yeah. Then I'm only interested in it as a performer. I'm not turned on any more as the creator or the writer. I'm not making discoveries. I do it as a job. It's fun, but missing that element of the writer and creator searching for something new.

SCHECHNER: You've worked in three kinds of performing: as a monologist, as a film actor, and as a stage actor. What are the similarities, what are the differences?

GRAY: In *Beaches* [1988] with Bette Midler and Barbara Hershey I was playing the gynecologist who delivers Bette's baby. Hershey said to me, "The word is that you're looking really good in the dailies—in the rushes." I said, "Oh God. I don't feel like I'm really doing anything." And she said, "Sssshh, Spalding. That's the best kept secret in Hollywood." That's kind of what I understood film acting to be. How can you be very still and very present at the same time and not overly emote? Because that camera is going to pick up every innuendo on your face.

I've always had a theory about acting—that there are very few great actors and actresses in the United States of America. In order to be one you have to be able to almost enter a psychotic state. Where you let go of any concept of the self, or illusion that you have a self. Peter Sellers is a good example of that. He

why the O.J. Simpson trial went on for as long as it did. It's based on recollection, and that's a very loose and open thing, a creative thing. So my memory is my first structure. Then I listen to a tape of what I said and wonder how I can make it a little more dramatic and funny by juxtaposing a little hyperbole here and play with it a little bit there.

So it evolves. The second part, the evolution of it, involves a very rapid growth. During the first 15 performances it's all over the place. Then it starts to fall into place after 30 performances and it sets itself. Improvisation, what Robin Williams does, is wide open. He's not interested in setting it. But I start wide open and want it to come down to something set organically. An actor who memorizes lines is on a train track going up a mountain. He has to pretend he doesn't know those lines. Method actors give the impression that they haven't memorized the lines, that they are speaking spontaneously. But I never memorize my lines. I'm trying to corral them every time. It's like bushwhacking—I hack my way up the hill each night until eventually I make a clear path for myself. The path sets itself.

I think—and this is just a theory—that when I sit down to talk, the fact that I haven't memorized the lines makes my re-recalling immediate, in the present, actual. So much so that the audience thinks I'm saying it for the first time. Because they experience me in the act of corralling and remembering. I am doing

said he never knew who he was. He would know what role he was playing, and while he was waiting for the next role, he was simply this nonbeing, this empty self waiting to be filled. The really great actors really become the role. I think Meryl Streep is an example of that. John Malkovich in *The Killing Fields* was in character on camera and off camera. I never knew who John was or how to relate to him because he was always in character. It was very odd, something that I didn't quite understand.

Or the man who was playing the American ambassador's aide, Ira Wheeler—he was a businessman and became an actor late in life. He was studying method acting and he still won't forgive me for this because I put it in my film *Swimming to Cambodia* [1987]. We were in a Cadillac being evacuated from the American Embassy—that was the scene. We're in this Cadillac limousine in Thailand and its overheating, and the steam's coming out of the radiator because it's so hot outside. The driver of the limousine is an extra whose real job is counting elephants in the Thai jungle. While we're waiting to do the scene he's telling about how he's lame now, how he hurt his leg and he's afraid that he won't be able to outrun an elephant if it surprises him at night. He's afraid he may be killed by an elephant. Ira Wheeler, sitting next to me, playing the American ambassador's aide, says, "Will you please be quiet?! I'm trying to get into character." And I said, "Ira, here's a man talking about getting killed by an elephant, try using that as material, ya know?"

I just felt that acting in a film is being put in the environment. And as soon as I am in the location, I feel like I'm acting. In *True Stories* [1986] David Byrne had me playing the mayor of the town. David didn't impose any southern accent on me, he let me talk the way I wanted to talk. The first scene was with my wife who had a big beehive hairdo. We're sitting up in the back of a Cadillac going through McKinney, Texas. We were actually in McKinney and some of the extras were real people from the town as well as extras David hired, all out to watch this parade. As soon as we enter, I'm playing this town official in a suit and I start waving to the people. That's it. You know, unlike the stage, you're suddenly in character. You're in the suit, you're in the car, the people are there, the sun is shining. It all feels very real.

Now I can't do that onstage. The stage is a totally artificial thing for me. I



9. Nayatt School, 1978, the third part of The Rhode Island Trilogy. (Photo by Elizabeth LeCompte)

walk into a theatre and I hear people acting and I see they are looking at each other but they are really projecting so that their voices will reach the back. So it was perfect that Gregory Mosher cast me as the Stage Manager in the Lincoln Center revival of *Our Town* [1988] because I can go in and out of character. Once I started doing the monologues I felt comfortable with that. So as the Stage Manager I totally understood what the role was—to bring the audience in, to be this conduit, to be like a pointer saying, “Look, here’s what’s happening.” That was the last role onstage I felt comfortable with. Although I think I could do a Chekhov character, though I don’t know which one.

There’s one thing I wanted to say: I don’t see myself as a “performance artist” but as an actor. I was trained as an actor and I’m playing myself.

SCHECHNER: So what’s the difference?

GRAY: I think that most performance artists start with a concept. Take Laurie Anderson in her early work where she used slides and electronic instruments to distort her voice. These were all props and elements that she arranged with her body. It wasn’t as though she was acting; she wasn’t being someone other than Laurie Anderson. She was Laurie Anderson showing slides, telling stories, playing music. It’s a heightened Laurie, but it’s still very much Laurie. And performance artists aren’t interested in repeating. The ritual of repetition is something that’s really embedded in an actor. When I think of doing eight shows a week of *Our Town* for five months on Broadway, there’s something very comforting about that; actors find safety in repetition.

SCHECHNER: But don’t your pieces begin as performance art and end as acting?

GRAY: Yeah, I think so. They start as performance art and then when I understand—through listening to the tapes—what I’m doing, I begin to act. Yup.

SCHECHNER: Let’s turn to politics. Does your work have a political dimension?

GRAY: Let’s see. I’m trying to get a clear definition of politics...

SCHECHNER: When you were talking about demonstrating against the atomic power plant that would be local politics. But let me be clearer. Your pieces are very personal. And in the ’70s and ’80s artists said that the “personal is the political.” But I don’t see your work fitting that slogan. I was wondering if you ever thought about it.

GRAY: I’ve thought about it. I thought that *Swimming to Cambodia* was political because it was a reenactment of the time when there was secret bombing of Cambodia by the United States. I took a kind of leftist stance—which was the position of the people who were doing the film *The Killing Fields*. I guess that was the first time that I took a stand on an issue. I know that the Performance Group once went to Washington to protest the bombing of Cambodia. I remember we were at a distance and I saw the hardcore people who were doing a sit-down. I saw the horses ride over them and that’s when I knew that I wasn’t going to get any further involved.

I’ve been laissez-faire and wishy-washy about politics because I lived for so long in SoHo when it was New York’s art ghetto. The only community politics there was how to keep the commercial riff-raff out of the artistic area. I was never really involved in that.

SCHECHNER: That battle was lost.

GRAY: Yeah. I vote, but when I think of the word “politics” I draw a blank.

SCHNECHNER: What about politics at that level of empowerment? In other words, when you’re presenting your own life, are you saying to other people that they could present their own lives too?

GRAY: I’d say that wouldn’t be a great choice for an occupation. Also I don’t want a lot of competitors out there. But seriously, when I do a workshop, that’s political in this way: I’m saying that people are the stars. It’s democratic, very, very democratic. In my *Interviewing the Audience* [1980] I hang out with the audience in the lobby. I come up to anyone and say, “Look, if I call your name tonight would you be willing to talk about any topic that comes up?” And if the person says yes, I’ll take down the name and ask a few questions. “What is your occupation? How old are you?” That will be the extent, that’s all I will know about them. Then they come up onstage and sit with me and I begin with, “How’d you get here today? What were you driving? What were you thinking? How much did you have to drink?” And if a person goes with the questions it turns into a wonderful dialogue. We begin to hear a story about what it is to live in the world. It’s a sharing. The theatre becomes a community.

There’s no other form in the United States where that happens. What I do isn’t a Twelve-Step program or happening in a bar privately. So I would say that’s a kind of political piece that says, “What’s going on in this room has the potential to be much more interesting than Jay Leno or David Letterman or Jerry Springer. This kind of thing is behind the teaching I do at Esalen. I tell people: “Your stories are absolutely important. Let’s not live through Hollywood stars. Who needs their stories?” I also participated in Art Against AIDS, doing benefits which consisted of interviewing people with AIDS—that was really strong—in San Francisco and Washington, DC.

SCHNECHNER: What do you ask people with AIDS?

GRAY: Well I was a nervous wreck in San Francisco because I felt it wasn’t my territory. Not being gay and not having AIDS I felt I had no right to ask the first question. And so I took a woman up first. I’ll often do that because women are usually more emotionally accessible onstage; men are completely practiced at



10. Interviewing the Audience, 1980. (Photo by Paula Court; courtesy of Washington Square Arts)

defending and being cautious. This woman just was great. She was a housewife from Long Island. She got tired of making her furniture shine with Pledge. Had an affair with the milkman. They ran off together across the United States. They heard on the radio about swinging so when they got to Phoenix they swung with everyone in Phoenix and then left for the Bay area. And when she got out to the Bay area she realized that she was more interested in S&M and the leather scene. She realized that gay men were more into it than straights so she started going to the gay baths and that's where she picked up AIDS. But, hey, that's just a rough outline of the story. She was absolutely a great spirit. A very, very funny woman who had me and the whole audience laughing. It really broke the ice. From there on out the men who came up had nothing to hide. They were completely open to any question, because they were dying. So it was really strong. Those interviews were very strong.

SCHECHNER: That leads me to this: What is the spiritual or yogic dimension to your work?

GRAY: Well, I've been doing yoga since I learned it from you 30 years ago. And I do it every day, a kind of hatha yoga. I often do it with the news on.

SCHECHNER: That's not the way!

GRAY: I can't function without doing it every morning. It really opens up my spine, but I have really lost touch with the spirituality. Spirituality is as vague a term to me as politics. I don't know what it means to be spiritual. I remember I taught a workshop at the Omega Institute and a woman there gave me a questionnaire. "We question you to find out what your spiritual practice is and how you use it in your teaching methods." I was very terse in answering this. "I don't know what you're talking about. Spiritual what? What in the hell is it?"

I really don't know. I don't meditate. The thing that's most alive for me spiritually is my relationship between me and my sons. Theo is two and Forest is six. I couldn't live without them. They're a great source of love and inspiration. That's the only thing I laugh at, a child's innocence. I've never laughed at a funny movie or a play that's supposed to be funny because I always see the humor coming at me. I see the construction of it. I see the joke before it hits. But with the children I don't. They completely catch me off guard. Their questions are absolutely profound and fun. So I suppose that when I think of something that's completely intangible in that spiritual way, it's my love for the children.

SCHECHNER: Have more children.

GRAY: Kathie got her tubes tied. She wants to adopt now.

[Schechner opens up the discussion for questions, responses, interactions, etc.]

DIANA TAYLOR: I have a comment about individuals and memory—actually, more than a question. When you were talking about heightening your story and the role of memory in your telling I was thinking about Rigoberta Menchu who won the Nobel Prize for telling her story about the massacred population in Guatemala. She told her story to somebody who taped it. Later her story was found to be inconsistent. There was a big brouhaha about whether she had lied. There was something about her younger brother who she said had died, and in fact he died before she was born. She defended herself by saying something like, "This is not just my story—it's the story of my people and what happened to them. If there are inconsistencies, so what?" Her inconsistencies were on the personal not political level. I am wondering about the political repercussions,

about the environment in which you tell your story, and what's at stake when you tell it. Maybe there's a dimension there of the political.

GRAY: In the United States, or least in the circles that I go in, the psychological comes before the political. It's not true everywhere. When I performed *Interviewing the Audience* in Israel, one of my tasks I set for myself was to try to avoid politics and talk about "the personal." What a joke! Everyone I interviewed was in the army or the reserves, ready to pick up a gun at any point. I remember one guy that I interviewed, Gabriel Matskin, a professor who specialized in Heidegger. He said in the United States you might begin at a dinner table talking about politics but soon end up with diet, and spiritual disciplines, and vacations.

THERESA K. SMALEC: Do you know what transitional objects are?

GRAY: I think I do. I think I see my sons working with them a lot.

SMALEC: So, are the monologues?

GRAY: The monologues transitional objects? Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for bringing that up. What I realized about the monologue is that in order to live my life in a free and open way, I have to have a monologue going. That's my way into the world. That's my transitional object. If I have a monologue going I can relax and not watch everything in life as material because I'm not searching for the next monologue. But once I begin looking for a new monologue... After reading [D.W.] Winnicott, just within the last year, I clearly realized that for me my transitional object is the personal monologue. And when I have one going I have a life.

SMALEC: Do you know how a monologue is going to end when you begin working on it?

GRAY: No I don't know. Finding out how, where it's going, making a monologue is therapeutic in that way.

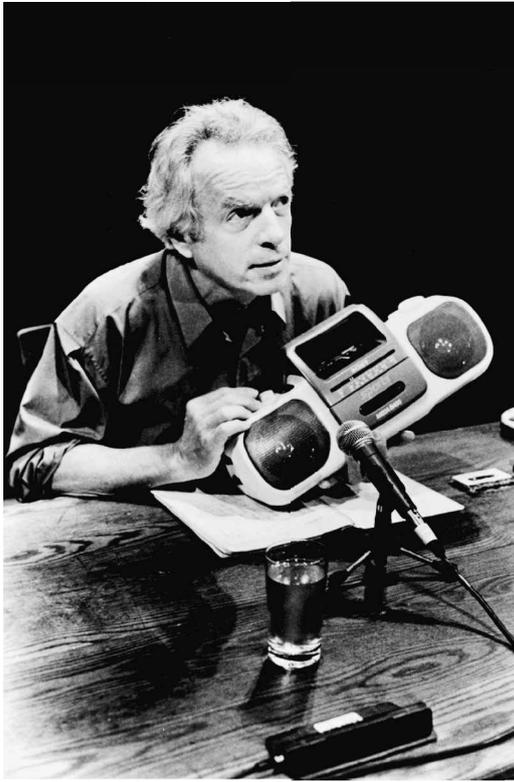
SMALEC: This is my last question. You said that, "you have to live a life to tell a life." Is that really so?

GRAY: Your question is about preferring telling over living. But when you tell a story you're really retelling it, right from the first time of telling. I have no sense of reincarnation for myself. So one way of coming back is to retell my life, to reincarnate myself through the story. That's very, very pleasurable, to retell it every night. "Here I've been. I have been in the world and I am retelling this story and the repetition gives me a sense of meaning." Because if you only live once and you have no repetition, you could almost say—the way [Milan] Kundera does in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*—why live at all? Because it's like you haven't lived at all.

My life with the kids and the family—when it's not reflected—is very banal. I just go through the motions not being exactly sure what it's about. But when I tell the story and pick out all the good lines of my son Forest—I mean, a classically good line is, "Dad, I'm so glad you met Mom, or I would have been stuck inside a sperm forever." Such a very beautiful claustrophobic image. Had I not recorded that in my journal, I wouldn't have that. I write down all of Forest's good lines so that if I want to go back and use them as material I can.

SCHECHNER: What if somebody said, "I want to perform 'Spalding' the character"? Has anybody taken one of your monologues and performed it?

GRAY: They do it in classes. And someone staged *Swimming to Cambodia* in Germany. I don't know how they did it. I welcome that kind of thing.



11. Morning, Noon and Night, 1997. (Photo by Paula Court; courtesy of Washington Square Arts)

STUDENT: Is there anything in your personal life that's off limits in your work?

GRAY: Oh sure. I'm 57 years old and a monologue's an hour and a half. You can imagine how much is left out. At the same time, there's nothing that I haven't consciously talked about to someone. Either with the woman I'm living with or the therapist or the audience. Everything that has come into my fantasy and consciousness that I can articulate I have talked about. But not all of it to an audience.

I'm not in therapy now. I guess I'm one of those people that's not disciplined with therapy. With Martha there was an enormous amount of emotion. A lot of open crying and feeling. It was very important that she was a Jungian, a change for me, and a blonde WASP. It was my first non-Jewish therapist so that was the closest thing to having a sister-lover...but I wasn't sleeping with her and that was really important. I really began to understand a lot about all this business of redirecting sexual energy with Martha. There was a lot of feeling going on in that room. And that was more important than insight. I was able to weep openly and grieve the loss of Renee and the loss of my mother, which were so highly symbolically interconnected that I really did not know the difference. I turned Renee into such a mother and had to have my girlfriend behind my mom's back and all the rest of it. So that was really strong. I started to realize that the importance of ther-

apy was that I had the private relationship with Martha. I also knew what could be spoken publicly. I could delineate them.

Then I knew I could do a new monologue. I didn't think I could do another one. But then *Slippery Slope* grew out of my therapy. I left therapy because I moved to Sag Harbor and also because I had the clear insight that I had come as far as I could with Martha. The next thing I wanted from her was for her to tell me that I could live forever and I knew that she couldn't do that. She was going to die too. And as soon as I realized that this was the issue that was unsolvable, I knew there was no sense going on. To some extent I was angry with Renee for not telling me that I was going to live forever, which my mother did. My mother was a really arch Christian Scientist. She had no doubt: there was nothing to fear. So in therapy, that was an insight. That was funny for me: That we're all going to die. I, I, I had always known that but hadn't believed it.

UNKNOWN: How did you deal with your pain when you had monologues on such a touchy subject?

GRAY: Well the pain really had been worked out in the therapy. I couldn't have gone on the stage and done the monologue had I not emoted and wept and catharticked with Martha. I would have broken down, certainly, onstage. I wouldn't have been able to speak. So the therapy was essential as a prefoundation to that particular monologue, *Slippery Slope*. The others are more distant and ironic. *Slippery Slope* is the most deeply felt of the monologues.

SCHECHNER: Where do you want to go from here? Do you see the rest of your artistic life as monologues? Do you see doing something else?



12. Spalding Gray and his children, from left to right: Marissa, Forest, and Theo. (Photo by Noah L. Greenberg; courtesy of Washington Square Arts)

GRAY: That's a good question, because I never really looked ahead. I think *Morning, Noon, and Night* is the end for a while. But I would have said that after *Slippery Slope*. But I really think it more so now because I don't want to use my family as an ongoing soap opera. I don't want to turn my children into characters.

SCHECHNER: Kind of like *The Truman Show* [1998].

GRAY: I had a weird thing happen the other day. I have a dialogue in *Morning, Noon, and Night* where I'm talking about Forest asking where words come from and he says, "Dad, I think I know why they call a fish a fish." I say, "Why?" He says, "Because it has a fin and that begins with 'fuh' like that." I tell that story regularly in the monologue. Just a year later I'm walking across the playground in the very same place and he says, "Dad, I think I know why they call a fish a fish." And I'm thinking, Wait a minute, have you heard the monologue or what? And he said, "Because it has a fin and fin begins with a 'p-h' sound." He moved it into another direction. It was no longer just a sound. Now it was spelling. But still it was a *déjà vu* and it weirded me out. I thought, Wait a minute, which reality do I prefer? I like them both. I loved telling the story about Forest, having Forest at a distance, and I also love him real—up close. And I wonder if I can live without the balance of the two. Once I lose the transitional object—back to that—I lose the ability to step back from the family and observe and tell about it. Then I have no breathing space, I get totally claustrophobic.

So I wonder if I have to do what I'm doing—really *have* to do it—as a form of mental health.

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