

Who Killed Spalding Gray a Fascinating, Raw and Heartfelt Examination of Life, Death and Belonging

Posted by: [broadwaybabyto](#) Tags: [calgary](#), [daniel macivor](#), [high performance rodeo](#), [playwright](#), [review](#), [spalding gray](#), [theatre](#), [yyc](#), [yycarts](#) Posted date: January 28, 2016 | No comment



Canadian playwright Daniel MacIvor opened his new one-man show “Who Killed Spalding Gray?” last night as part of Calgary’s High Performance Rodeo.

Interestingly, it was also #BellLetsTalk day, which for those who don’t know, is a social media campaign designed to raise money and awareness around mental health issues and ending the stigma associated with them. I found this coincidence to be incredibly meaningful given the thematic nature of MacIvor’s piece.

The show examines the life (and death) of Spalding Gray, an actor and writer who was known for his autobiographical monologues. Gray died in 2004 of an apparent suicide – allegedly jumping off the Staten Island Ferry after seeing Tim Burton’s film “Big Fish”. Therefore, the question “Who Killed Spalding Gray?” seems an odd one to ask, but as MacIvor explains, there’s always more to the story and to what we see and believe to be true.

He opens the show by plucking a person out of the audience and asking three questions – “Who are you? Who am I? Who Killed Spalding Gray?” MacIvor possesses that rare quality of being able to put anyone at ease, and interacts well with the chosen audience member and the entire crowd. From the moment the participant is pulled on stage until the end of the production, you are engrossed.

While the show examines who/what might have been the cause of Spalding Gray's demise, it simultaneously weaves two other stories into the fold. The first is of Maclvor himself, who at the exact time Gray was jumping off the Staten Island Ferry, was in LA trying to have an 'entity' removed from his being. The second is the story of "Howard", a man contemplating suicide because of intense feelings that he just doesn't belong.

Maclvor bobs and weaves through the three men's tales, embodying each personality and shifting between them effortlessly. Helena Bonham Carter even makes an appearance, and dare I say he plays a fine Bonham Carter as well.



Without giving too much away, I will say that central to the story are the themes of life, death, depression and feelings of dis-ease. All three characters are struggling with their own personal demons, feeling like they don't quite fit, like they don't belong, or as if there is no reason to go on. At one point Maclvor opens up about being a writer and performer, discussing the criticism lauded on him over the years. In comparing himself to Spalding Gray he remarks that they both knew what it was to be criticized, and in that they had common ground. When playing himself, Maclvor discusses a deep rooted desire to find relevance and meaning wherever he could – including a particularly touching story about a hotel matchbook that he chose to save (and subsequently worried it would be found upon his death and ascribed more meaning than was necessarily true).

Oddly enough, I found myself doing the same thing after experiencing this piece of theatre. Looking for meaning in all sorts of places and asking myself the question 'Why Does This Matter?'

Why does theatre matter? Why does it matter that I write a review on a website in the hopes that other people will read it and garner some meaning? If “Who Killed Spalding Gray?” taught me anything, it was that it matters because it happened. That’s why I feel it relevant that the show opened on #BellLetsTalk day, because what better piece of art to witness on a day dedicated to mental health than a show that examines suicide and the complex nature of the human mind. That desire to belong, to feel relevant, and the pain that comes when we don’t quite fit.

In the end, art matters. Stories matter. Theatre matters. It’s a collective experience unlike any other, that challenges us, forces us to examine our thinking and look deep into our souls. “Who Killed Spalding Gray” is an fantastic example of that kind of art, the kind that changes you for having witnessed it.

The final line in Big Fish, the line that reduced Gray to tears, states that “A man tells a story over and over so many times he becomes the story. In that way, he is immortal.” Perhaps that is the best reason ever to tell your story – to achieve immortality whilst changing the lives of others. I thank MacIvor for telling his.