

# Who Killed Spalding Gray? revels in truth, untruth and what lies between

## **WHO KILLED SPALDING GRAY?**

reWork Productions (Toronto); part of Ontario Scene

At the Great Canadian Theatre Company

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So who did kill Spalding Gray, the American monologist who died in 2004? Considering that he committed suicide by jumping off the Staten Island Ferry in New York, you'd think the question unnecessary.

Turns out the question is very much necessary according to Daniel MacIvor's disarmingly idiosyncratic solo show about himself, Gray, a guy called Howard, and some pretty big issues including death, self- forgiveness and truth.

Principal among those issues is truth. The question of who killed Gray is, after all, a question about the truth, metaphoric or otherwise, of what happened, and as MacIvor makes clear, certainty about any situation or person is a moving target. While that's hardly a stop-the-presses insight, the ways in which the playwright frames that target make for a fine 85 minutes.

The show, directed by Daniel Brooks, is a skein of stories and enacted pieces that link MacIvor, Gray and Howard in progressively inextricable fashion.

About himself, for example, MacIvor relates how he visited a California psychic surgeon in 2004 to have an "entity" removed. The process took three sessions, the accounting of which he weaves throughout the play, and occurred at the same time that Gray killed himself. Related in the convivial storytelling style of which MacIvor is a master, the tale is very funny, a bit disquieting and ultimately ambiguous: does MacIvor believe he harboured an entity or not? And does it matter what he believes when the entire play rings with some indefinable but undeniable larger truth?

We learn and care deeply about Howard who decides to end his life because he doesn't "fit." Like the figures of MacIvor and Gray, he appears periodically throughout the play. In one especially moving moment, we visit an incident involving Howard and his young son that reminds us of how powerfully MacIvor, author of plays like *The Best Brothers* and *Communion*, can write about family.

Where Howard came from, how much of him is real and how much is MacIvor's creation, remains unknown. But again, does it matter what's true and what's not if it feels true?

We also spend time with Gray. When MacIvor plays him, he sits at a table with a spiral-bound notebook, a glass of water and a microphone as Gray himself used to do when he performed. We discover things about Gray like the time he took his son to see the 2003 Tim Burton film *Big Fish* (Helena Bonham Carter, who appeared in the film, also shows up in MacIvor's play, but that's a story for another time). His face cast partly in shadow, the man remains a mystery, his death possibly linked to MacIvor's West Coast experience and, on some level, to Howard's own death wish.

Gray's monologues, MacIvor warns, are untruth masking as the truth. By contrast, MacIvor says of himself, "I tell stories and I say they're not true but I'm not sure they're not," the string of double negatives rendering certainty even more elusive.

Trying to follow this path of truth, untruth and whatever lies between, the mind after a while reels, kind of like when you start imagining multiple universes. Few could package it all into an accessible and pleasing performance, one which even includes a goofy little solo dance, but MacIvor does. And that you can take as gospel.

*Who Killed Spalding Gray? continues until May 2. Tickets: NAC box office, 1-888-991-2787, nac-cna.ca (<http://nac-cna.ca>)*