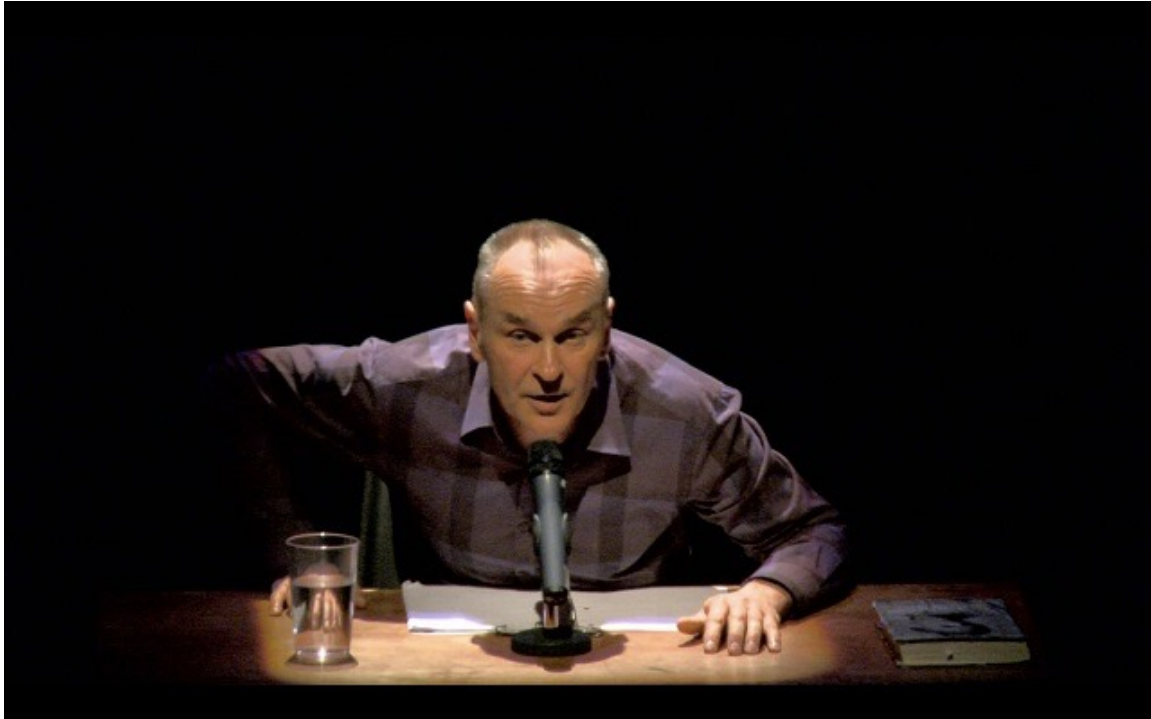


Acting With His Guard Down

At Luminato, Daniel MacIvor gets vulnerable for an intimate (and witty) solo show about the troubled American storyteller Spalding Gray.

BY [MARTIN MORROW](#)



Daniel MacIvor adopts the style of the eponymous American monologist in his new one-man show, *Who Killed Spalding Gray?* Photo courtesy of Luminato Festival.

Who Killed Spalding Gray?

Harbourfront Centre Theatre ([231 Queens Quay West](#))

June 20 and 21

\$29 – \$85.50

On a bitterly cold Saturday evening in January of 2004, the great American monologist [Spalding Gray](#) left his SoHo loft in Manhattan, claiming that he was meeting a friend for a drink. When he didn't come home the next day, he was declared missing. Gray, 62, suffered from severe depression exacerbated by a crippling car accident a few years earlier, and had recently made several suicide attempts. His family and friends feared the worst.

In the days that followed, Gray's many admirers waited tensely for news reports on the police search, hoping he might still be found alive. Among them was a brilliant Canadian

monologist, [Daniel Maclvor](#), who happened to be wrestling with problems of his own. The creator of such dark, disturbing solo shows as *Monster* and *Cul-de-sac* had gone to San Francisco for the weekend to participate in sessions with, in his words, a “spiritual life coach.” “I was going through this very intense spiritual and psychological experience,” recalls Maclvor, whose new play, *Who Killed Spalding Gray?*, is making its Toronto debut at the [Luminato Festival](#). “Then I would go home in the evenings and I would just be glued to this news loop on CNN about Spalding. By the time that weekend was over, he was presumed dead.”

It’s almost certain Gray jumped from the Staten Island Ferry—a suicide scenario he’d previously rehearsed. His body was finally recovered two months later in the East River.

Sitting at a table in World Class Bakers on St. Clair West, a few days ahead of Saturday’s opening night at Harbourfront Centre—where his show is part of Luminato’s international 7 Monologues series—the distinguished-looking Maclvor says that for years he only thought of that weekend as a strange coincidence: there he was on the West Coast, trying to save his own life, even as Gray on the East Coast was ending his.

But then a few years ago at the Stratford Festival, while working on his play *The Best Brothers*, the playwright-actor told the story during a script reading. “Iris Turcott, the dramaturge, was there,” he says, “and she said, ‘You’ve got to write about this! This could be a show.’”

At first, Maclvor wasn’t convinced. For one thing, while he appreciated his fellow monologist, he had always resisted being lumped into the same category. Spalding Gray had become a household name in the late 1980s after Jonathan Demme filmed his stage show [Swimming to Cambodia](#), which popularized Gray’s simple-but-engaging autobiographical style: a man sitting behind a desk, telling true stories about his life. The younger Maclvor, who premiered his breakthrough solo *House* in 1991, invariably embodied fictional characters in fictional and highly dramatic tales.

“I actually toured a lot of the same circuits that he did,” Maclvor says, “and I used to get annoyed when I was compared with him, because I always felt what he did was so different from my work.” It was only after studying videotapes of Gray’s monologues—among them *Monster in a Box*, *Gray’s Anatomy*, *It’s a Slippery Slope* and *Morning, Noon and Night*—that Maclvor began to appreciate how much acting went into Gray’s seemingly ingenuous performances. And checking actual biographical details against Gray’s stories, he found Gray was not above spinning the facts to tell a better story. (Gray’s real heir among monologists is Mike Daisey, who [learned the hard way](#) what happens when you fudge “real-life experiences” after his hit show about Apple’s Chinese factories, *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, was shown to be riddled with fabrications.)

[Who Killed Spalding Gray? trailer](#) from [Marcie Januska](#) on [Vimeo](#).

Realizing how much he and Gray were similar, MacIvor was inspired to do a show that's partly an homage to the man and his methods, and partly a deeper inquiry into the business of living. MacIvor appropriates Gray's ostensibly candid style to relate the story of his experience in San Francisco, complete with desk, microphone and glass of water. "I'm being myself, but I'm also playing myself," he says slyly. He also makes his first foray into audience participation à la Gray.

"Whenever he was feeling uninspired or tired, Spalding would interview the audience," MacIvor says. "So we start that way: I pick someone out and we have a little chat. That was very uncomfortable for me to consider doing," he admits, "but actually doing it feels liberating."

Indeed, MacIvor has usually hid behind personae in the past and says he once had an adversarial attitude onstage. "When I started out, way back, I think I was afraid of the audience in some ways," he says. "I thought a performance was some kind of a battle and I had to win them over." For this show, however, he's dropped his guard. "I hate to say this word," he says, fidgeting and glancing away, "but I guess I'm vulnerable in it."

But there's still a good deal of fiction and invention in the show. At one point, MacIvor even impersonates Helena Bonham Carter. Why that eccentric British actress? She was one of the stars of *Big Fish*, ex-husband Tim Burton's 2003 father-and-son fable, which was the last film Gray saw before his death. He took his two boys to see it the afternoon before he disappeared.

Tellingly, in the movie's final fantasy sequence, the dying storyteller father is seen throwing himself into a raging river, whereupon he transforms into a giant fish. While Gray's widow, Kathie Russo, has said she thinks the film "gave him permission to die," MacIvor's Bonham Carter isn't buying it. "Her question is: How could a man sit in a theatre after a film about a father and son and look at his own sons and still feel so alone?"

The play finds MacIvor grappling with such conundrums when faced with mental illness. "I've had experience with depression," he says, "but not to that extent, where you're so submerged in it." Visiting New York, MacIvor emulated Gray and rode the Staten Island Ferry in the wee hours of a Sunday morning. He was amazed by the swarm of people waiting at the ferry terminal even at that time. "What struck me, as a writer, is that not to have your instincts excited by this sea of humanity, not to find that so delicious and inspiring, means you have to be so lost, so disconnected. It made me realize how deep he had sunk."

But at the same time, MacIvor celebrates Spalding Gray at his best: the masterful storyteller; the funny, intense, soul-baring neurotic often referred to as the WASP Woody Allen. “The show feels incredibly alive, which is funny to say, since its subject is so incredibly dead,” MacIvor notes with a laugh. “But there’s something about that engagement with Spalding’s energy. And even with all the weird stuff—talking directly to the audience, playing myself—doing the show is a very calm, peaceful thing for me.”

Who Killed Spalding Gray? was created with the help of Turcott and MacIvor’s long-time collaborator, director Daniel Brooks. MacIvor first performed it last year at the [Magnetic North Theatre Festival](#) in Halifax (a Nova Scotia native, he still lives there part of the year). It had another test run in Ottawa during the National Arts Centre’s [Ontario Scene](#) showcase this spring. At Luminato, it joins six other shows in a monologue marathon that runs Saturday and again Sunday. “I’m glad to be part of the festival,” MacIvor says, “but I’m hoping we’ll have a chance to have a bit of a longer run in Toronto in the future.”