

# TWISI Blog - Amanda Campbell

## Who Killed Spalding Gray?

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Halifax is very fortunate to have the premiere performance of the newest Daniel MacIvor and Daniel Brooks collaboration here as part of the [Magnetic North/ Stages Festival](#). *Who Killed Spalding Gray?* plays at the Neptune Studio Theatre until June 28th, 2014.

On January 11, 2004 Spalding Gray, a renowned American actor who worked with Richard Schechner's experimental theatre company The Performance Group in 1970, went on to co-found The Wooster Group in 1975 and then became a celebrated solo theatre artist specializing in Monologue storytelling and went on to play Fran Drescher's therapist on *The Nanny* (1993), committed suicide by jumping off the Staten Island Ferry in New York. At the same time renowned Canadian playwright and solo theatre artist Daniel MacIvor was in California having "an entity" removed from his body by a "psychic surgeon" under warnings from an ex boyfriend that this entity was trying to kill him. Throughout the play MacIvor melds the story of Gray's depression and suicide with his own experience in California and tells the story of a man named Howard who also plans to kill himself, but is too afraid of failure to try. The result is a building of the stories we tell ourselves on the stories we are told and an examination of how "we search for significance wherever we can find it" and that, with faith, this significance informs and changes the story we tell, which changes the pathways of our lives. We can find connections everywhere, if we go looking for them, even ones that seemed to be unintentional or coincidental, and the same can be said for this play. It is left up to the audience to piece the bits together to try to build a meaning or an epiphany if that is what we seek, or they can be left to reflect the randomness and chaos of life.

MacIvor says that his work has often been compared to Gray's, a connection that he questions and resists, likely because he isn't sure whether he even likes Gray's work. On the surface the form of their theatre appears similar- both told stories that often sound like truth to audience members- although there are many profound differences in the ways that they go about telling and performing and layering these stories. Gray's work is infused with his perspective as an American WASP who lived in New York and connected ardently with the neurosis of someone like Woody Allen, while MacIvor's work is swathed in his experience as a Gay, Catholic Cape Bretoner, which is quite a disparate experience. Yet, this quote from American Theatre Director Jonathan Demme about Gray could also be said about MacIvor, "[His] unfailing ability to ignite universal emotions and laughter in all of us while gloriously wallowing in his own exquisite uniqueness will remain forever one of the great joys of... performance and literature." MacIvor also explores the perceptiveness of Helena Bonham Carter, another person who has a challenging, haphazard connection to Gray, since her husband (Tim Burton)'s film *Big Fish*, which she starred in, was the last film Gray saw before he boarded the Staten Island ferry and ended his life. The last lines of the film are "A man tells a story over and over so many times he becomes the story. In that way, he is immortal."

Does it matter if the stories we tell ourselves are true? Does believing the story we tell ourselves make it true? Was Daniel MacIvor saved because he believed that the entity trying to kill him was slain? Does an audience respond to a monologue more ardently if they believe it to be true? Is the monologue any less compelling if it turns out to be false? Does the truth about whether the story is fact or fiction matter if an audience believes in it regardless? Why doesn't Robert Cushman, theatre critic of [The National Post](#) that MacIvor references in the play, care about the answers to these questions when the tension and delicate balance inherent between the performer and the audience is so informed by what we believe to be truth in the theatre and what significance we give to it. We are complicit in these stories by being active listeners- how we hear the story we are told is as much part of the theatre as what the performer says.

There is so much in this play to consider- the layering of MacIvor as MacIvor and MacIvor as Gray for example and the way that Brooks swathes the stage with intense light and intense dark rapidly and the drinking of the water, as harkening to Gray's signature table with a glass of water and notebook and microphone, with allusions to swimming and to drowning, to the ferry, to MacIvor's earlier work *Never Swim Alone*, to drunken benders and healthier choices and the very sustenance that MacIvor needs to stay alive. There is also the question of where this "entity" that was expelled from MacIvor came from, and where it went, and what (or who) it was, and who else is present here onstage or in the theatre that we cannot see. It also suggests that whether or not you believe in planes of existence, or "entities" or ghosts or spirits or the theatre, if Spalding Gray is the story and Daniel MacIvor tells us the story then, in a way Spalding Gray is living on inside of us and that knowing this has the potential to be both significant and transformative for all of us... or it could just be a very captivating lie.