



NYTimes: [Home](#) - [Site Index](#) - [Archive](#) - [Help](#)Welcome, [Ilucas](#) - [Member Center](#) - [Log Out](#)Go to a Section Site Search:



Q. HAND is to Glove as HEAD is to:

Hair
 Hat
 Neck
 Earring
 Hairpin



[NYTimes.com](#) > [Arts](#)

Spalding Gray, 62, Actor and Monologist, Is Confirmed Dead

By [SHAILA K. DEWAN](#) and [JESSE MCKINLEY](#)

Published: March 9, 2004

A body that surfaced in the East River on Sunday was identified by the city medical examiner yesterday as that of Spalding Gray, the confessional monologist and actor who disappeared two months ago.

The cause of death had not yet been determined, but the police were investigating reports that Mr. Gray, who had a history of depression, had committed suicide by jumping off the Staten Island ferry, said Paul J. Browne, the chief spokesman for the Police Department.

Mr. Gray, 62, practiced the art of storytelling with a quiet mania, transforming his travels, fascinations and traumas into such acclaimed works as "Swimming to Cambodia" and "Monster in a Box." He almost always appeared seated behind a simple desk, with a glass of water and some notes.

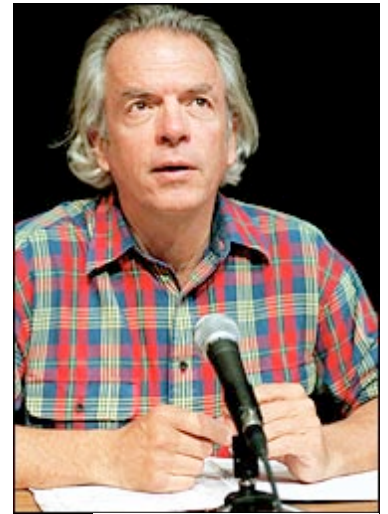
Advertisement

The news of his death ended a painful limbo for Mr. Gray's friends and family, during which they answered calls from fans and followed up on reported sightings, including one at a diner in New Jersey. There seemed to be little hope: the police had traced one of Mr. Gray's final calls to a pay phone at the ferry terminal, and he had previously threatened to jump off a ferry. But for his wife, Kathleen Russo, their two young sons and Mr. Gray's stepdaughter, there had been no final answer.

The suspense grew more agonizing in its final hours, when the family received a call on Sunday night from an Associated Press reporter who told her a body had washed up near Greenpoint in Brooklyn wearing black corduroy pants. That was what Mr. Gray had been wearing when he was last seen on Jan. 10. At that point, Ms. Russo had not yet heard from the police, a friend of the family said.

Spalding Gray's older brother, Rockwell Gray, said he had been holding out hope that his brother would be found alive until he talked with Ms. Russo early yesterday, before the medical examiner's findings were announced. "She told me it seemed almost certain it was his body they had found," said Mr. Gray, an English professor at Washington University in St. Louis.

Many knew that Spalding Gray, who spoke publicly of infidelity, depression and a sometimes pained conscience, had his fair share of emotional turmoil. But by the late 1990's, it seemed he had begun wanting to put that behind him. He had safely passed the age, 52, at which his



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
Spalding Gray in the one-man play "It's a Slippery Slope" at Lincoln Center in 1996.

ARTICLE TOOLS

- [E-Mail This Article](#)
- [Printer-Friendly Format](#)
- [Most E-Mailed Articles](#)
- [Reprints & Permissions](#)

ARTICLE TOOLS
SPONSORED BY **THE DREAMERS**
NOW PLAYING
IN SELECT CITIES

FILMOGRAPHY

[Spalding Gray](#)

RELATED

- [On Stage and in Life, A Comic Desperation](#) (March 9, 2004)

READERS' OPINIONS

- [Forum: Join a Discussion on Theater](#)

TIMES NEWS TRACKER

Topics	Alerts
Theater	<input type="button" value="Create"/>
Gray, Spalding	<input type="button" value="Create"/>
Deaths (Obituaries)	<input type="button" value="Create"/>

mother had killed herself. He had told countless audiences of surviving near-drowning, "psychic surgery," claustrophobic attacks and what he described as the inescapable letdown of real life. But as he eventually settled into a domestic bliss he had once resisted — fatherhood, a home on Long Island, daily yoga — darkness and cynicism had retreated, at least somewhat, from his performances.

While he was on vacation in Ireland in 2001, though, a devastating car accident fractured his skull and crushed his hip, sending Mr. Gray into a profound depression.

After his disappearance, an article in New York magazine chronicled Mr. Gray's despair after the accident and his ineffectual attempts to recover through surgery, physical therapy and antidepressants. He checked himself into a psychiatric hospital in June 2002, the article said. Back home, he sometimes left answering machine messages and notes saying he intended to kill himself.

The police confirmed some of this account, saying that more than once, Mr. Gray had to be talked down from a bridge on Long Island.

Still, last October, he began performing "Life Interrupted," a monologue about the accident, and while the performances were often disjointed and unpolished, those close to him viewed his return to the stage as a hopeful sign. On the day he disappeared, Mr. Gray was scheduled to fly to Aspen, Colo., for a ski clinic, a gift from Ms. Russo in celebration of his partial physical recovery. He loved skiing, and had rhapsodized on it in a piece called "It's a Slippery Slope."

His flight was canceled because of bad weather. Instead, he took his sons, Theo and Forrest, to see "Big Fish," a movie about a son and his dying father. Afterward, he said he was going to visit some friends. He never reached their house.

It was a muted end for Mr. Gray, whose singular talent was closely observed autobiography, performed in a style that alternated between conspiratorial whispers and antic screams as he roamed through topics large and small.

This talent was perhaps never better displayed than in "Swimming to Cambodia," his 1984 monologue in which his experiences playing a small role in the movie "The Killing Fields," became a jumping off point for exploring the history and culture of war in Southeast Asia. That monologue was itself turned into a noted film, directed by Jonathan Demme, in 1987.

"Swimming" may have been Mr. Gray's most famous work, but for 25 years, he turned out a consistent stream of well-received pieces on subjects as varied as writing ("Monster in a Box," 1990) and illness ("Gray's Anatomy," 1993), to less weighty issues like learning to ski ("It's a Slippery Slope," 1996) and performing while high on LSD ("Point Judith," 1980).

His relentless self-absorption drew a broad range of audiences at Broadway-size theaters like the Vivian Beaumont at Lincoln Center (where he produced four shows during the 1990's) to downtown spaces like the Performing Garage and P.S. 122, where he typically fine-tuned his monologues.

While his performances resembled — and influenced — the confessional style of contemporaries like Eric Bogosian and John Leguizamo, Mr. Gray's work had a deeper refrain: a search for larger meaning — a quest, as he put it, for "the perfect moment."

The monologues were also often, for the record, painfully funny.

"He is a sit-down monologist with the comic sensibility of a stand-up comedian," Mel Gussow wrote in The New York Times while reviewing the 1981 show "47 Beds," a chronicle of all the places Mr. Gray had slept. "He describes in vivid detail his search for self-discovery, and then laughs at himself and needles nirvana."

One of three sons, Mr. Gray was born on June 5, 1941, in Barrington, R.I. His father was a factory worker and his mother a homemaker; Mr. Gray referred to himself as "a Rhode Island WASP," raised in a house he depicted as rife with repression, depression and all kinds of neuroses. His mother, Elizabeth Gray, committed suicide in 1967.

Mr. Gray, tall and lanky with an awkward charm, began acting in high school; by his mid-20's that interest had blossomed into a modest career as an actor on the regional theater circuit.

In 1967, he moved to New York, and three years later joined the director Richard Schechner's

› Create Your Own	› Manage
› Most Popular Alerts	› Take a Tour
CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE 	

NYT Store



Photo: The Opening of "Skylark" at the Morosco Theater in Times Square, 1939

[Learn More.](#)

NEW IN REAL ESTATE



House of the day

Cape Coral, FL

With more than 2,300 square feet, this 3-bedroom offers a canal view and a swimming pool.

[View this and many other dream homes in Florida on \[realestate.nytimes.com\]\(http://realestate.nytimes.com\).](#)

influential experimental troupe, the Performance Group.

In 1975, he left to help found the Wooster Group, an experimental company based at the Performing Garage, a converted flatware factory on Wooster Street in SoHo. The group's connections ran deep; Mr. Gray had dated the group's director, Elizabeth LeCompte, and kept an apartment in the same building on Wooster Street as Ms. LeCompte and Willem Dafoe, another group member and Ms. LeCompte's longtime boyfriend. And, shortly after the company's founding, Mr. Gray and Ms. LeCompte turned out a trilogy of plays based on his memories of childhood in Rhode Island, including "Rumstick Road."

But by 1979, Mr. Gray had decided to pursue the monologue as a type of performance art, and soon hit on his basic set (desk, water, notes) and approach (simple, measured, candid). His first piece, "Sex and Death to the Age of 14," told the story of just that, setting an autobiographical tone that continued throughout his career, including such self-explanatory titles as "Booze, Cars and College Girls," and "India (and After)," the story of a Wooster Group tour to India.

In recent years his monologues became more personal, however. "Morning, Noon and Night," in 1999, examined his adventures in fatherhood, and many who saw his final piece, "Life Interrupted," considered it his darkest work yet.

In addition to film versions of several of his monologues, Mr. Gray appeared in nearly 40 movies, including "True Stories" (1986), "Beaches" (1988), "The Paper" (1994) and "Beyond Rangoon" (1995); he also appeared on Broadway in 1988 as the Stage Manager in "Our Town," and in 2000 as a political candidate in "Gore Vidal's The Best Man."

In addition to his immediate family and brother Rockwell, Mr. Gray is survived by a second brother, Channing Gray, a music critic for The Providence Journal; and his former wife, Renee Shafransky.

In his 1980 show "Point Judith," Mr. Gray spoke a line that may well have summed up his life and career. "It's very hard for me," he said, "not to tell everybody everything."

Get home delivery of The Times from \$2.90/week

ADVERTISER LINKS

[what's this?](#)

Crohn's & Colitis

Foundation of America. Learn about treatment, coping, & help.
www.cdfa.org

United Way

Your investment has the power to improve lives where you live.
www.unitedway.org

Asian Developing Nations

Invest in education for girls in Nepal, Vietnam, India & Cambodia.
www.roomtoread.org

OUR ADVERTISERS

A California Wine Adventure!
\$32.95/month plus shipping.



RELATED ARTICLES

- [THEATER REVIEW; A Timeless Morality Tale Cloaked in Politics](#) (September 18, 2000)
- [THEATER; The Bard of American Politics, Still Campaigning](#) (September 3, 2000) **\$**
- [ON STAGE AND OFF](#) (February 4, 2000) **\$**
- [A Mellow Monologist, Trying Home Life](#) (December 27, 1999) **\$**
Find more results for [Theater](#) and [Gray, Spalding](#)

TOP ARTS ARTICLES

- [Spalding Gray, 62, Actor and Monologist, Is Confirmed Dead](#)
- [A Poet's Spirit Springs to Life on Death Row](#)
- [Soprano Says Her Weight Cost Her Role in London](#)
- [For Spielberg, an Anniversary Full of Urgency](#)
Go to [Arts](#)

