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Soderbergh on the death of Spalding Gray



Steven Soderbergh

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The director discusses his fascination with — and ultimate fear of and for — the famous monologist

Steven Soderbergh shuffles uncomfortable in his chair in his office on Hollywood Boulevard. “A friend would have called,” he says. It’s more than six years since the death of Spalding Gray, the celebrated American monologist, whom Soderbergh liked to think of as a friend.

But between the time of Gray's devastating car accident in Ireland in June 2001, which left him physically and psychologically traumatised, and his presumed suicide at the age of 62 in early January 2004, Soderbergh admits that he was "completely absent", never contacting Gray or his family.

"There was something about his state after the accident that really terrified me," Soderbergh says. "His equilibrium was precarious at the best of times, and I didn't think I could handle seeing him like that."

Since *Sex, Lies and Videotape* established Soderbergh in 1989 as one of America's most intriguing directorial talents, he has gone on to defy expectations with almost every film he's made. He has directed Oscar-winning hits such as *Traffic* and *Erin Brockovich*. He has made the commercially successful series of *Oceans* caper movies. But he has also continued to make provocative and formally experimental independent films, such as *The Girlfriend Experience*, starring the porn star Sasha Grey, the 270-minute biopic *Che*, starring Benicio del Toro, and *Gray's Anatomy*, the film he made in 1996 from Spalding Gray's monologue about his anxiety that he was going blind.

The actor turned self-styled autobiographical monologist had been an underground cultural star since the mid-1970s, when he had co-founded the Wooster Group avant-garde theatre company. As he developed his unique, revelatory, confessional style, he became lauded as the greatest story-teller of his generation, "the WASP Woody Allen", the "grandmaster of the first-person singular".

His style was simple but entrancing. He would sit on stage behind a wooden desk, a glass of water, a notebook and a microphone his only props. In his rich, patrician voice he would spin soaring, painfully funny metaphysical yarns from the apparent chaos of his life. He liked to think of himself as a "poetic journalist", starting with a true story, which would be "filtered through my imagination and told with poetry, with flavour, with innuendo, with hyperbole".

A few months after Gray's death, Soderbergh got a call from Kathleen Russo, his widow. (Gray also left two young sons: Forrest, who was 11 at the time of his death, Theo, then 6; and Marissa, his 17-year-old stepdaughter.) Russo wanted to know if Soderbergh was interested in making a film about Gray. He quickly agreed. "I felt I needed to make up for being such a bad friend. The film became an act of penance, of contrition."

Soderbergh and his editor pared down more than 90 hours of filmed material, including previously unseen early performances, home video footage and interviews. The resulting documentary is called *And Everything is Going Fine*, a phrase Gray used, with equally obvious irony, in one of his performances.

Like many people, Soderbergh first became aware of Gray in 1987 when he saw *Swimming to Cambodia*, the film of a performance Gray had been giving about, among other things, his

experience of acting in the movie *The Killing Fields*. “I was in awe of his ability to recreate that digressive inner voice that we all have, and yet tell it as a story with a structure. His subject was this constant search for meaning within chaos and randomness.”

When Soderbergh was casting his movie *King of the Hill* in 1993 he thought of Gray for the part of Mr Mungo. He’d read Gray’s novel *Impossible Vacation*, about a man, a very thinly veiled version of Gray himself, brought up in a dreary, repressive, East Coast Christian Scientist family, contending with his mother’s spiraling mental illness and his own bouts of depression. Gray admitted that he took the role because Soderbergh told him he’d be perfect to play a character “ruled by regret to the extent that he kills himself”.

There was no mystery about Gray’s obsession with suicide. His own mother had killed herself in 1967, when she was 52 and he was away on holiday. “It was very important for me to tell the story in order to heal myself through the telling, to try to make sense of it,” Gray later said. “It was a way both of mourning her and accepting the gigantic horror of the event.”

But his mother’s suicide was a trauma from which Gray was never fully to recover, despite his persistent attempts to exorcise it through performance. She had told him exactly how she intended to die, asphyxiating herself with exhaust fumes. “How shall I do it, dear,” he recalls her asking him. “In the garage with the car?”

In his performances he revealed his fears that he was doomed to repeat her act. When his own 52nd birthday loomed he became increasingly consumed by suicidal fantasies.

In 1996 Soderbergh directed the film version of the monologue *Gray’s Anatomy*, about the existential angst that Gray endured trying to find a cure for an obscure eye condition — “macular pucker” — that might cause him to go blind. By the time they made *Gray’s Anatomy*, “Spalding was in a much more centred place in his life,” Soderbergh says. Only afterwards did Soderbergh find out that while they had been shooting *King of the Hill*, Gray had been going through a crisis, the end of his long relationship with Renée Shafransky, who had also been his director, and the beginning of his affair with Russo, a talent agent.

Gray turned the nightmare of that time, which included marrying Shafransky only to leave her shortly afterwards, demanding that Russo have an abortion, and refusing to see Forrest, his first son, for eight months, into his most troubling, revealing and painfully raw monologue, *Slippery Slope*. “My shadow is showing in this,” Gray said of it. “I’m not a good guy.”

But the five years after leaving Shafransky and moving in with Russo were the happiest of his life. Determined never to have children, he felt transformed by fatherhood, and he performed a monologue — *Morning, Noon and Night* — about finding domestic bliss so late in life.

His happiness was cut tragically short by the car crash. Gray had been wary of going on the trip, which was Russo's 60th birthday present to him, and had a prescient sense of doom about it. The car Gray, Russo and some friends were travelling in was struck on a narrow country road by a lorry. The others escaped relatively unscathed. Gray suffered a fractured skull and a broken hip that left him needing to wear a brace. He was in constant pain. Over the next two years he underwent six operations, including one to repair his skull.

But his psychological scars were even worse, not helped by a cocktail of aggressive psychotropic drugs prescribed by doctors who didn't realise that he had suffered significant brain injury. Shards of his skull were later found in his brain.

Overnight he seemed to age ten years. He became withdrawn, obsessed with doom and openly suicidal. He attempted suicide several times before his final disappearance, even leaving suicide notes on the kitchen table. One was found by Forrest.

Gray desperately tried what had always worked before. He turned the accident and its aftermath into a performance, *Life Interrupted*, that ended its intermittent run in New York a couple of weeks before he disappeared.

"But it just wasn't happening in the way it normally would," Soderbergh says. "His organisational skills had been affected by his brain injury. He just wasn't able to line the planets up. Watching the performance was very upsetting to people who knew him well.

He saw harrowing footage of a haunted Gray, shot not long before his death. "He's gone, his eyes are dead, the timing's off — and he knew it," Soderbergh says. "For someone like Spalding, whose balance was predicated on being able to filter and organise his experience, that would just be impossible to deal with."

On the afternoon Gray disappeared he took his sons to see the movie *Big Fish*. It's about the relationship between a dying father and his young son. That night, after saying he was going out to see a friend, he was seen by four people on the Staten Island ferry. At about 10.30pm he called home and spoke to Theo, finishing the call by saying: "I love you."

Soderbergh was in Chicago, shooting *Ocean's Twelve*, when he heard that Gray had disappeared. "It was the second time he had gone missing, but this felt more definitive," he says. "It sounded like he just couldn't control the digressions any more. Everything that was happening seemed to remind him that death was at the end of everything."

Gray's decomposed body was found floating in the East River off Brooklyn on March 8 2004. There was a plastic brace on its right leg.

The last image in *And Everything is Going Fine* shows Gray as a baby, cradled in his mother's arms. The lovely music that accompanies it, called *Sunset*, was composed by Forrest, his son, who is now 17.

And Everything is Going Fine will be screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival tomorrow and on Sunday. www.edfilmfest.org.uk

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