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Monologuing to Cambodia

CHARLES HUNTER talks to SPALDING GRAY, the monologist, writer and occasional film star, who is in Dublin for two performances at the Project Arts Centre.

SPALDING GRAY may sound like a brand and a grade of squash ball. Indeed, the image of an almost malleable object randomly ricocheting round a court probably describes his performances and writing rather well. He is the sort of one-off personality whom reviewers and interviewers describe, paradoxically, in terms of other personalities.

His new book, "Swimming to Cambodia" (Picador, UK £3.50), has these referential descriptions all over both covers: "An unholy cross between James Joyce and Hunter S. Thompson . . . A new wave Mark Twain . . . A contemporary Gulliver . . . A WASP Woody Allen . . . One of the most candid American confessors since Frank Harris." He is in Dublin for a few days to publicise this collection of his monologues and to perform two of them tonight and tomorrow night (11.30 in the Project Arts Centre).

While he is often explained in relation to other people, a few pages of Spalding Gray's book reveal him as highly egocentric. He doesn't regard that as an insult. "What else is there? I worked in groups with other actors for years and I was never at home with the collaborative thing. I remember doing a piece called 'Commune' and I ended up as the Ishmael character, the one who came through it. I was the reporter."

He reports, as it were, on episodes of his life from this self-obsessed, free-fall perspective, and it becomes an extremely funny performance. "Swimming to Cambodia", for example, is the title of a monologue which takes in his expedition to Thailand to act in Roland Joffe's film "The Killing Fields". It bounces and winds through Thai hotels, hallucinations on beaches, dinner with

David Puttnam, train journeys between Chicago and New York, Bangkok massage parlours, the history of Pol Pot and a whole lot more.

And all the way through it filters out via this highly subjective and very nearly chaotic consciousness, or rather self-consciousness. "I'm a firm believer", says Spalding Gray, "that there is nothing *under* my own ego. I'm an amateur Buddhist. One really is nothing but the collection of one's own sensations. That's why I am quite happy to talk about masturbation when I was 14. I just don't think there's any such thing as an objective experience."

He is serious about the principle, or the lack of principle, behind all of this, yet he's essentially a humorist. The more profound experiences in his narratives, the moments when he approaches the possibility of self-realisation, tend to be the most hilarious. The monologues, delivered from behind a table but highly animated, change from night to night. Sometimes the self-obsession rises gloriously to the surface.

In "Swimming to Cambodia" there's an episode when he thinks a colleague has drowned. "One night I was telling it and I put in a new line: 'My God, how can this be happening to me?' When I said that, I heard myself say it and the audience laughing, and I played it for the rest of the night as the self-obsessed Spalding Gray, making it funny and making the audience wonder if I knew what I was doing."

The other monologue he is performing in the Project, "Terrors of Pleasure", meanders round the account of a disastrous house purchase he made. "It was another recycling of negative

Spalding Gray . . . performing himself at the Project.

energy. The house was a disaster, but I realised I could only laugh. I get a lot of mileage out of that house. When I lived in New England I was very serious, very depressed. Then I moved to New York with a Jewish girlfriend. All that extroversion! Now my work is a mixture of extroversion and introversion and I'm popular in New York and New England."

His father, a reserved citizen of Rhode Island, only saw him perform live once, at Brown University, the respectable college all the men in the Gray family attended except Spalding. The monologue that night concerned, quite explicitly, all Spalding's early teenage sexual experiences. He later found out his father's reaction: "Well, some of the stories were fun, but we wish he didn't have to use those *words*."

When he was on the late-night David Letterman chat show, his father and stepmother set their alarm to get up and watch it. "Before me on the show they had this woman giving beauty hints using leftovers: putting bits of squid on the eyebrows, or tabasco on the head and so on. I came on

and David gave me my lead about my Hollywood failures." Gray said he just wanted to add something on the last item and told the story about how he and his brother had heard that early morning urine was a cure for baldness, but that they had "peed into a hair tonic bottle first. Then I went on to the prepared stuff. But as soon as my stepmother heard the word 'urine' she went back to bed."

As for those Hollywood failures, he's beginning to have successes. He played the very strange computer salesman in David Byrne's "True Stories" and had to turn down a role in Norman Mailer's new film, "Tough Guys Don't Dance" ("I would have played a homosexual trying to go straight"). He's met recently with Irish director Pat O'Connor for a part in his new film, "Stars and Bars." And he's writing another book, which he finds incredibly difficult. "Like most performers, I've a child's ego. I need immediate gratification. Writing is very different; it's not a 20 yards dash."

