

THE IRISH TIMES

This page shows the article as it originally appeared in the newspaper. The article itself can be read on the following page.



This is the article's web address for reference.

<http://www.irishtimes.com/newspaper/archive/1992/0721/Pg007.html#Ar00701>

The User may not copy, reproduce, distribute, or create derivative works from the Content without expressly being authorised to do so by the relevant copyright owner. © Copyright 2010 The Irish Times. All Rights Reserved.

GALWAY ARTS FESTIVAL

A coffin across the landscape

**Paddy
Woodworth talks
to Spalding
Gray, creator of
"Swimming
To Cambodia"**

Spalding Gray: political satirist with plenty of drama in his life

PERHAPS Spalding Gray should have been Irish: he seems to like nothing better than a good funeral. He took a day off to visit the Aran Islands just before performing at Galway Arts Festival last Friday, and he spent most of the morning following a coffin across the landscape.

He was fascinated by "the tractor coming down the road, and then the coffin behind the tractor, and the flowers around the coffin, and the fact that the coffin was exposed to the rain, with the whole event standing out against the empty rock and sky." The highpoint of another of Gray's attempts at a holiday — the "impossible vacation" is the theme of his latest book — took place in the rather more congenial surroundings of the island of Bali, but it also involved funeral rites. He found a local shaman to perform a funeral rite for his mother, who had been dead and cremated in his native New England for several years.

His mother looms large in his latest monologue, "Monster in the Box", which is appropriate for a Freudian existentialist obsessed with telling his life story in public. His mother's death occurred, apparently in very unhappy circumstances, when he was abroad, and he feels deeply cheated by the fact that he had no opportunity to mourn her. He describes his monologues as "autobiography with hyperbole", and the pain is as real in person as it comes across on stage.

Mind you, his very short encounter with Ireland (and Arthur Guinness) seems to be having a mellowing effect. He and his wife, screenwriter René Shafransky, who not only figures in his monologues but also directs them for the stage, slept late for the first time in 13 years together last Saturday morning, after they

had been invited for a few pints following the Galway show.

Gray is a loquacious interviewee, as one might expect from a man who performs monologues, but he is also rather disconcerting. He seizes the tape recorder, which he is convinced is not going to work, and talks directly into it, occasionally proffering it to the interviewer as though the roles had been entirely reversed. Using his own life as the direct source material for his art is, he agrees, an exhausting process in several senses of the word. His work demands that significant dramas occur in his everyday life. He admires Rimbaud for giving up writing when he felt his poetry had dried up, though, unlike the French

poet, he doesn't much fancy gun-running as an alternative career.

"If I give up writing and performing, I would prefer to take up teaching, but the economy at home is so bad, with so few jobs, I may just have to give gun-running a shot."

For the moment, however, there seems to be very little chance that he will have to take such radical action. There is plenty of drama in his life as it is. One of the centrepieces of his current monologue concerns a "fact-finding visit" he made to Nicaragua during the Contra insurgency, under the auspices of an American left-wing group. His account of meeting relatives of victims of Contra terrorism runs perilously close to mocking the

mutilated, so that the audience must wonder whether they should still be laughing.

"That's exactly what I want them to go through," he agrees. The target of his barbs, however, is not the ordinary Nicaraguans, or the Sandinistas, but the "Sandalista" American radicals who seemed to him to feed off the suffering of others. He says that the only member of the group who made any attempt to contact people outside the official channels was absolutely ostracised by his colleagues. He had dared to suggest that some citizens were so weary of the war that they would accept the return of the exiled dictator in return for jobs and food.

"When René and I got back from that tour, we wondered what right these Americans had to romanticise the situation in Nicaragua when our own entire country is falling apart, from Harlem to Oakland. We felt they were the kind of people who could only give to others in that romantic way, when they were in a foreign country. The woman who led our trip had been to Central America 13 times, but she couldn't even speak Spanish. Wasn't that strange?"

One waits with mixed glee and trepidation to see what use Gray may make of the material he has gathered in Galway. Even *The Irish Times* and its tape recorders may not be safe. Assuming he doesn't give it all up for gun-running in the meantime.