

## **“Swimming to Spalding, Swimming with Schechner: On Losing and Finding One’s Way.”**

Over ten years ago, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett introduced our incoming class to “Performance Studies” by means of Richard Schechner’s provocative metaphor:

The sidewinder rattlesnake moves across the desert floor by contracting and extending itself in a sideways motion. Wherever this beautiful reptile points, it is not going there. Such indirection is often characteristic of performance studies.<sup>1</sup>

Here, I will revisit Schechner’s image of the sidewinder’s circuitous progress, exploring its relevance to how he guides performers and scholars. My point of departure will be *Swimming to Spalding*, a monologue written and performed by Lián Amaris, and directed by Schechner at the HERE Arts Center from 6-20 December 2009.

I will first explain the trans-generational connections at the heart of *Swimming to Spalding*.<sup>2</sup> Like Schechner, Amaris felt a strong connection to Gray’s body of work. In 2008, she decided to engage with Gray’s legendary monologue, *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987), by retracing his path through Thailand. Amaris asked Schechner to direct her monologue, which narrates a year of her own life—taking us from Thailand to Colorado to New Orleans, and then circuitously to Afghanistan, Iraq, and Kosovo.

My study of how *Swimming to Spalding* follows (and loses) the trail of Gray’s original will also consider the risks that Amaris and Schechner take in reconstructing Gray’s journey. Where they interact most complexly with Gray’s legacy is through their negotiations with the social dilemma of suicide. I explore the pedagogical and political implications of approaching Gray’s life story from the perspective of a sidewinder. In short, what can we learn about Schechner’s approach to teaching and making theatre by accompanying him and Amaris as they meander through Gray’s darkness?

### About the Author

Theresa Smalec has accepted a tenure-track position as Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Arts and Sciences at Bronx Community College/CUNY. Her dissertation from the Department of Performance Studies, New York University—“Body of

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1. Richard Schechner, “What Is ‘Performance Studies’ Anyway?” *The Ends of Performance*. Ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane. New York and London: New York UP, 1998. 357.

2. Schechner began directing Spalding Gray in 1970, when The Performance Group staged *Makbeth*. They continued working together throughout the 1970s on TPG productions such as *Commune* (1970), *The Tooth of Crime* (1973), *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1975), *Oedipus* (1977), *Cops* (1978), and *The Balcony* (1979). Gray credits Schechner as the first collaborator who encouraged him to be himself on stage, thus laying the groundwork for Gray’s lifelong interest in the self-based persona. Meanwhile, Amaris encountered Gray three decades later when, as a college freshman, she attended one of his monologues. Amaris went on to graduate studies at NYU, where she worked with Schechner.

Work: *Reconstructing Ron Vawter's Performance Career*—won her the 2009 Monroe Lippman Award for Distinguished Doctoral Dissertation. Her recent articles and reviews appear in *TDR*, *Theatre Journal*, *PAJ*, and *New England Theatre Journal*. Her major areas of research include the American avant-garde, The Performance Group, and The Wooster Group.

List of Relevant Publications

“Scenes of Self-Recruitment: Ron Vawter’s Entry into The Performance Group,” Theatre Journal 61.1 (March 2009): 23-41.

“Spalding Gray’s Last Interview: The Edited Transcript,” New England Theatre Journal 19.2 (2008): 53-69.

“Spalding Gray’s Last Interview,” PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art 30.1 (January 2008): 1-14.