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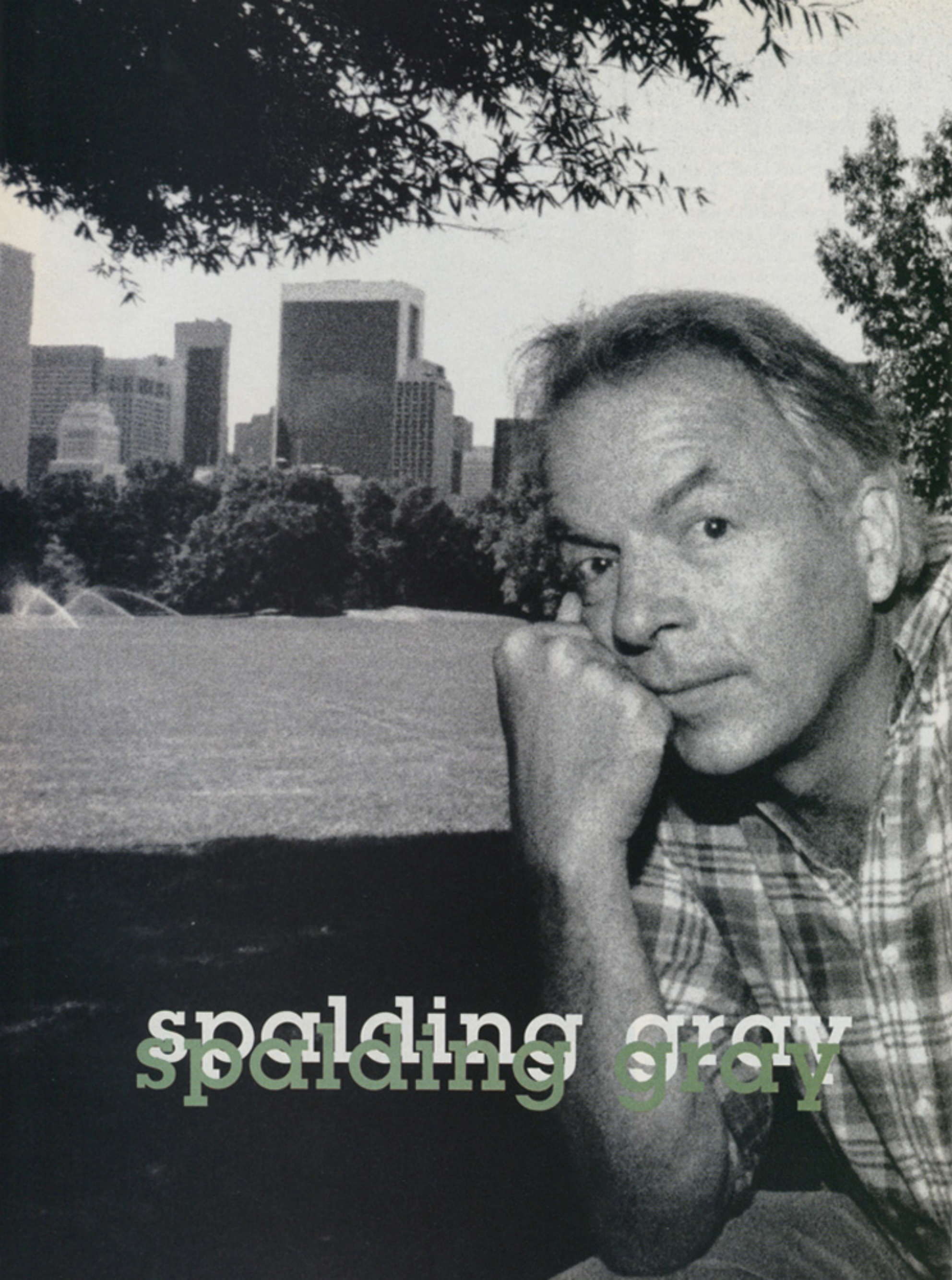
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spalding gray
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Frozen Therapy

A look at sex and skiing through the prism of Spalding Gray.

By Johanna Berkman



Where skiing is better than sex is that you can do it for seven hours," proclaims neurotic actor and monologist Spalding Gray from his perch atop McHenry's Beach at Deer Valley. Decked out in a blue Killy one-piece, his long, thick gray hair sticking out from beneath a plaid flannel cap, the modern-day Dionysus best known for the movie *Swimming to Cambodia* is giving a free-flowing commentary on skiing, the subject of his latest monologue, *It's a Slippery Slope*.

"Skiing completes you in a way that good sex doesn't, more wholly," explains Gray matter-of-factly. "It releases that energy in a more subtle arc throughout the day." Skiers around him are sunk deep in white Adirondack chairs, legs outstretched, eyes closed to the sun, but Gray is busy making metaphors: "Skiing is like making love to the earth. The mountain, it is a breast."

While Gray has been obsessed with sex for nearly all his life (his first monologue was *Sex and Death to the Age 14*), he's a Johnny-come-lately to skiing. Gray started skiing just three years ago, at the age of 52, his interest in the sport sparked during a visit to Aspen. On a whim, he and his girlfriend had ridden the gondola, sans skis, to the top of Ajax. When they unloaded, Gray was amazed by what he saw: "a white garden of Eden," with everyone dressed in "very expensive Easter eggs" swooshing all around. To the pavement-bound New Yorker, the skiers were "gods and goddesses." A few months later, he donned skis for the very first time, and he's been going downhill ever since, conveniently taking his monologues—and his skis—to America's top ski resorts.

Skiing appeals to Gray because it allows him to blend into the crowd. "I'm starting to admire other people's form," he says. For Gray, this is no small affair. He's resisted conformity ever since childhood (he dropped out of the Cub Scouts because he refused to wear the full uniform—he only liked the top). Up until now Gray's career has been founded on this rejection of convention. But seeing Gray on McHenry's Beach, with little to distinguish him from the masses, it's hard to imagine him ever feeling such deep-rooted anxiety about assimilation. "It's wholesome," he says of skiing, unlike his past favorite pursuits, which were often illegal (drugs) or immoral (cheating on his wife). "A good focus for me." He nods his head like a convert. "Great therapy."

Not surprisingly, the man of the monologue has plenty to

say about the ski resorts he's been to, including Deer Valley. "It's kind of like an Aspen scene here, though not quite as glitzy," he says, as someone nearby pulls out a cellular phone. The problem with Utah? The beer. "It's too weak. You can't get drunk on it," Gray says with exasperation. "I'm a hophead and a connoisseur of microbrews." In the East, he likes Stowe. "It's a gentleman's ski slope, so discreet and simple. There are no condos . . . just an old lodge. It's like an old blue blood." In the West, Gray prefers Sun Valley for its long, steep runs, "where your thighs burn and you can get into a rhythm." But, he says, "It's called Sun Valley for a reason—it has no snow." Instead they make what he calls "Japanese snow," a little bit like the artificial stuff of indoor ski slopes.

And so Gray is on a quest. "I've given up searching for the woman that has everything," he says, laughing. "Now I'm looking for the mountain that has everything."

He is also shopping around for a good pair of skis. Well, not shopping exactly. "I'm not interested in purchasing anything anymore for the rest of my life," he admits. What he really wants is free skis. He's been skiing all morning on the latest Rossignol super-sidecuts lent to him by a company rep. Problem is, he thought Rossignol was giving him the skis for a sort of endorsement. But no, after today it'll be back to his old boards. On the other hand, while he's hot for new skis, he's also anti-innovation. "It's typical of everything that's going on with late capitalism. Every year they produce a new model. Everything's in code and numbers. Computer nerd talk."

In general, he finds the language of skiing a little strange. Just this morning a skier called out to Gray as a snowmobile towing a stretcher whizzed by: "There goes another burrito." "Warrior talk," Gray calls it, "an enormous suppression of the sublime."

While he's puzzled by the way skiers celebrate injury, laughing when others fall, cheering videos of big crashes in après-ski bars, he admits that such behavior is contagious. He likes to show friends the scars on his chest from when he crashed into a tree at Taos. "It looks like a battle wound. Like I was stabbed in my side."

In spite of all this nonlyrical bravado, Gray sees a poetic side to skiing. "That was my intention in the monologue. To find some poetry in skiing. I've had more poetic moments skiing than doing any other activities in my life."

The midday break is over, and it's time to get back in the rhythm. Gray grabs his borrowed Rossis and heads for the lift. He waits in line, eager to get back on the mountain, just like everyone else. <