

A pen dipped in poison

When Stephen Fry staged his famous walk-out on Simon Gray's play *Cell Mates*, the writer retaliated with a crushing memoir. "It was a necessary exorcism... you see, the severance was so abrupt and so extraordinarily painful," says this most exquisitely cutting of diarists.

Was the defection the worst thing that had ever happened to him? There's a deep pause. Then he says: "I don't feel so emotionally now, but then I've just got over an operation and it was apparently very dodgy for a time. I remember feeling so ill that almost nothing in my life seemed relevant, other than being able to get out of bed and walk across the room."

Friends of Gray's mutter that the two events are not unconnected. Fry's breakdown was nothing beside the collapse of Gray's health after the *Cell Mates* fiasco. But, extraordinarily, the 60-year-old writer has come out of convalescence with not only a novella, *Breaking Hearts* (discussed above), but a new West End play. It is a dark comedy, starring one old friend, Alan Bates, and directed by another, Harold Pinter. And, appropriately enough, it is called *Life Support*.

The question of how autobiographical his work is has always dogged Gray, who has charted a perilous course through the male psyche, taking in academic disenchantment, alcoholism,

marital betrayal and nervous breakdown. Together with Bates — who has starred in five of his stage works and three of his television films — he has followed mid-century middle-class man into middle age using the middle-brow conventions of the boulevardier to do it.

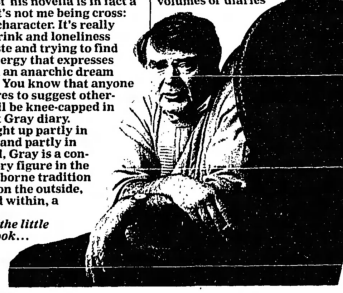
Does *Life Support* represent a recognition that Gray the man, like Gray the writer, has moved beyond those securities? In the strange, convoluted sense in which life and art are entwined, it undoubtedly does. Gray's work has become steadily darker and more bitter. Yet he is quick to point out that, in *Life Support*, it isn't the central character but his wife who is catastrophically ill — "living, or

dead, or neither". He's equally quick to squash suspicions that the woozy, waddling don at the centre of his novella is in fact a man. "It's not me being cross: it's the character. It's really about drink and loneliness and waste and trying to find some energy that expresses itself in an anarchic dream figure." You know that anyone who dares to suggest otherwise will be knee-capped in the next Gray diary.

Brought up partly in Canada and partly in England, Gray is a contradictory figure in the John Osborne tradition — mild on the outside, tortured within, a

Beware the little black book... deadly diarist Simon Gray

cricket-loving academic who is capable of being quite frighteningly venomous. His two volumes of diaries



— An Unnatural Pursuit and *How's That For Telling 'Em, Fat Lady* — are every bit as good as Osborne's.

But diary-writing is not a comfortable gift. His ruthless eye for the idiosyncrasies of humanity caused a famous bust-up with Pinter, who is said to have told friends to cut Gray off after seeing himself portrayed as a self-important do-gooder in the TV adaptation of *An Unnatural Pursuit*. The irony was that Pinter had planned to play himself, but cried off because of a clash of dates.

It was the sort of spat that could only happen between best mates — and they duly made it up. Though *Life Support* is their ninth collaboration, it is the first fruit of their reconciliation.

Life Support opens on August 5 at the Aldwych Theatre

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