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## Theater: "The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs"

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### THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY OF STEVE JOBS \*\* 1/2 THE PUBLIC THEATER

The storyteller [Mike Daisey](#) is new to me. I'd been hearing about his work for years -- *The Last Cargo Cult*, *How Theater Failed America* and so on -- all of them invariably intriguing and well-reviewed. He's clearly a [Spalding Gray 2.0](#), combining stories with autobiography and journalism in a unique and fascinating manner.

And what awkward, wonderful serendipity. Daisey has been touring and refining this piece about his love of

Apple and how it collided with the company's use of child labor in China for more than a year. Now he's opening in New York just days after Jobs died and the world has turned the tech titan overnight from a brilliant and wealthy businessman into a cross between Thomas Edison and Gandhi (but better!).

We were assured by the Public that the show would go on, while respectfully offering its condolences to the Jobs family, the staff at Apple and those who knew him. It needn't have worried. This show is first and foremost a love letter to technology in general and Daisey's obsession with Apple. That love may be disillusioned by the end (Daisey compares it at one point to a battered wife and he'd only reached his frustration over "forced updates" for software). But love it is.

The set is stark and simple, with a glass-topped desk, a chair, a glass of water and a neat stack of paper, apparently with notes on them. If they were written in Daisey's own hand, consider that one more nod to



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Jobs, who Daisey tells us was profoundly inspired by a college course on calligraphy. Behind Daisey is a stark metal frame that soon is illuminated with l.e.d. lights for a vaguely technological aura that's straightforward and effective, if a little too reductive towards the end when the lights break down briefly into random patterns to reflect Daisey's confusion and unhappiness. (That effective set and lighting design is by Seth Reiser; Jean-Michele Gregory directed.)

Daisey takes to the stage and launches into his tale. He's in a lawless area of Honk Kong that I've visited and which he describes well, an area where you can purchase literally anything from drugs and sex in various combinations to pirated copies of anything and everything. Daisey's drug of choice? An iPhone that can be "jail-broken," or set free so it can be used all over the world and be unconstrained by the limits Apple would place on it.

Daisey's style is at first a little manic, but it's just like the loud Hawaiian shirts he dons when trying to bumble his way into interesting conversations a la Columbo. Daisey addresses each part of the audience, side to side and front to back, with an almost carnival barker air, transparently letting you into the pleasures of his performance. His voice rises and falls, he lets out a yowlp when necessary and after a dramatic peak is reached and a change in setting is due, Daisey quietly turns over one sheet from that stack of papers and we prepare for the switch.

Even someone like myself who enjoys tech toys but would rather run in fright than read a manual or take apart a computer can savor Daisey's obsession with Apple. He relaxes after monologues -- Daisey tells us -- by stripping down his laptop and cleaning each part with pressurized air before putting the 40 odd pieces back together again.

He garners laughter by showing himself hypnotized by one of Jobs' legendary press conferences. Daisey didn't know he needed a new router but after Jobs has spoken, suddenly he's moaning like a baby or a hungry elephant: "I wannna a new router! I wanna new router!" When an actor can get laughs by saying his current router is an 802.11G and the "G" is said dismissively and hatefully and the audience giggles helplessly, you know he's tapping into something more primal than one particular obsession. "Its soooo slooooooow!" moans Daisey. But the 802.11N -- and here the "N" is said with lasvicious, joyful, even worshipful glee -- is fasssst and we laugh again.

Where does this story go? It begins with Daisey jail-breaking that iPhone and in the end he hopes rather bluntly to jail-break us from our obsession with the latest toys and our refusal to acknowledge what we know to be true: that our Apple products and indeed much of our treasured items come from countries like China where children as young as 12 work punishing hours, where adults (meaning someone in their mid-20s) whose hands have become mangled and clumsy due to years of repetitive labor are tossed aside and where anyone daring to form a union is jailed or worse.

When Daisey is spinning his story, he makes these points far more eloquently than I just did. He travels to an economic free zone in Southern China called Shenzhen and starts talking with the employees who come out of the gigantic factories of Foxconn Technology Group, the single biggest manufacturer of electronics in the world. Daisey says literally 50% of all electronic products in the world are pieced together there. The company became infamous when a string of employee suicides garnered international attention; but China soon clamped down on its news media and the stories in the world press quickly dried up.

Daisey creates a very strong narrative, at first. The interpreter he calls "Kathy" doesn't want to believe the tragic stories of the workers but knows them to be true. A young female worker talks about her long hours and Daisey says, hey you look pretty young, how old are you and she blithely says 14. One truly remarkable passage involves a man who had been fired after his hand was horribly mangled when it was caught in a machine. (Needless to say, the man received no medical treatment and was summarily dismissed.) When this man -- who was risking a great deal to meet with Daisey -- said he had been working on the iPad assembly line when the accident occurred, Daisey reached into his bag and pulled out an iPad itself and handed it to the man.

None of the employees who work in these factories can actually afford to own an iPhone or iPad. (And the factories are massive -- their cafeterias seat literally tens and tens of thousands of people at a time.) The man's face beamed as he held the iPad. Daisey had turned it on and the screen lit up with icons. The man brushed his gnarled, useless hand over the surface and the pages flew by with app after app on display. Someone with less skill might have stopped right there, but Daisey knew the kicker was the smile on the man's face as he told the interpreter, "It's a kind of magic."

It's a pity Daisey didn't trust his own skills as a performer, the magic of theater and stories in general to get his point across. Unfortunately, as the show progresses and especially towards the end, he stops



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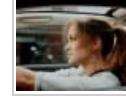
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repeatedly to chide us and tell us in bald, straightforward language what the show has been illustrating all along about these products we love and the conditions under which they're made. But the call to arms and the insistence that you really, really pay attention to what you're learning brings everything to a grinding halt in theatrical terms. Daisy tells us near the end that our keyboards are soaked in blood, a ham-handed image (however technically accurate) that isn't nearly as forceful as the people he brings to life throughout the night.

When the audience leaves the theater, they're handed a one page action sheet, suggesting what a person moved by the show might want to do next. For example, you can email Apple's CEO Tim Cook at [tcook@apple.com](mailto:tcook@apple.com) and politely call for genuine outside oversight of factories in China. (Maybe he'd like to finally return the calls of [China Labor Watch?](#)) That's exactly where such calls to action belong. On stage, Daisy lost faith not just in Apple but a tiny bit in what he does best. Steve Jobs taught everyone the same lesson: the ungainly and awkward is inherently bad and you should never release your work until it's elegant and beautiful in every way.

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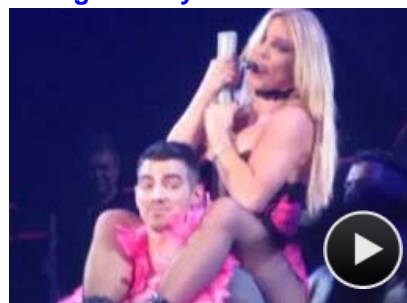
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**Note:** Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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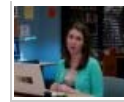
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