

Theater: Pushing Up Daisey's....

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ALL THE FACES OF THE MOON * out of **** PUBLIC THEATER

My first experience with monologist Mike Daisey was *The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, a show I reviewed and was mixed on even before factual inaccuracies bedeviled it. But my first job in New York City was as a fact checker and I seemed more perturbed than others by that controversy. Was the brouhaha clouding my judgment of his work's value?

Here was a chance to start fresh. Daisey is doing 29 new monologues created over 29 nights, nominally tracking the phases of the moon and creating a portrait of Daisey and New York City at this moment in time. It was clear from the start that these were stories and no expectations that hold for memoirs and truly autobiographical work (ie. that the stories be essentially accurate and true) would apply. Whew. If that wasn't clear, it was clear at the end of the first night's monologue when Death rode a horse across the waters lapping Manhattan.

I saw two performances in person and anyone can listen to all of them online. (The show continues through October 3 and podcasts of his monologues are posted the next day for free on his website and via iTunes.)

One immediate advantage for this show compared to his last is the venue. Joe's Pub is an intimate space, a speakeasy/cabaret. *Steve Jobs* was performed in a much larger theatrical venue at the Public and Daisey felt obliged to fill it up vocally. He has a tendency to melodrama in his delivery, speaking in a very **LOUD** voice at one moment and *whispering* the next. Luckily, the smaller space of Joe's Pub tamped down this tendency. He still did it, but the gestures were more nuanced.

Normally with an event this ambitious and the opportunity to see only a few nights, I'd feel cheated. Wouldn't you want to see them all? Obviously the impact should be greater if you somehow attended a majority or all of the 29 different nights. But the implicit promise is that even seeing one evening should be satisfying; it should stand on its own. Having attended two nights and listened to a third online, that's far from the case. Daisey seems like that guest at a dinner party who has nothing of interest to say but won't stop talking.

On opening night, I hoped or imagined it was due to this being opening night. As Daisey rambled on in an unfocused, uninteresting manner, I gave it the benefit of the doubt. He's clearing his throat, setting the stage for 28 nights to come, I thought. But attending a second show a few days later, my initial impressions were reinforced mightily: he has no insights beyond the banal and no stories beyond the vaguely personal that don't hold our interest or head anywhere.

On opening night, he described getting out of bed late at night, heading to the docks, lying down on a pier and trailing his hand in the water. Really, I thought, trying to imagine Daisey lolling on a wooden pier? And would the water even at high tide be high enough for a hand lazily draped over the side to touch it? This sort of nit-picking is not what should occupy your mind. But Daisey had not set a scene or created a story that was remotely engaging enough to stop my mind from wandering.

In the second show I saw, Daisey centered his tale on a quest of sorts. A chubby, teen-aged black girl just 15 years old is magically summoned to a powerful woman's presence

and given a task: she must take a message from the Upper East Side and walk all the way down to Wall Street to a certain location. She must not speak to anyone or drink or eat anything or kiss anyone either; if she does, the girl will have failed. On her journey, events conspire to foil her: people keep asking her questions, a nice woman offers her cookies, accidents take place and authorities ask if she's witnessed them and so on. But the girl heads on her way with resolution.

In typical fashion, Daisey goes off on an uninteresting tangent about a Brazilian woman who works downtown and takes a camera with her on lunch breaks. It devolves into a discussion of work visas and how this makes people indentured servants to the companies that obtain those visas for them. (Social justice is never far below the surface for Daisey; indeed the black girl is plagued by vivid dreams in which she imagines herself working in a brutal factory on the far side of the world, presumably China.) The woman carries her camera with her on lunch so she still feels in touch with the artist she might have been. This explains in laborious, unrevealing detail why she has a camera with her and takes a picture of the 15-year-old black girl as the teenager rounds the corner towards where the woman is seated outdoors. The woman takes a series of pictures and then realizes her lens has just broken. In looking at the pictures she took, the woman notices that the crack on the lens begins emanating... precisely from the head of the 15 year old black girl! That is the ominous, symbolic, hoped-for telling detail on which this particular evening ends.

Except it means precisely nothing to us. I kept referring to the protagonist as the 15-year-old black girl because that's about all we know of her. It's risible not because Daisey chose to make the heroine of this tale a 15-year-old black girl but because she is nothing *but* a symbol. He never brings her to life and so her description is reductive and flat rather than a first step in describing and personalizing who this person is to him and us. She has a *Carrie*-like ability to mess with technology we witnessed earlier but this too means nothing. We don't know the girl or the message she's delivering and even the not-knowing isn't interesting, as it might be. Certainly her journey downtown isn't interesting despite all the obstacles in her path.

Daisey has a few good moments. His biggest laughs come from banal insights delivered well, such as the observation that New Yorkers always insist the city used to be better before and have always said so (he acknowledges this is a cliché). Another similar moment comes when he says New Yorkers love to give directions. It's typical stand-up material but he delivers it with verve and earns the laughs. Similarly, when the second performance I saw took place on the day of Apple's announcement of new products, he got a lot of mileage out of his obsession with that company and their products. It was the richest vein because it's so specific to him and such untrodden material. He has it all to himself.

But then he'd veer off and describe their interactions with the NSA (lying to consumers about the data they shared) as anal rape, a violent burst of venom that felt out of whack (and I really have a thing for online privacy too). He repeated the anal rape idea another night discussing consumerism and Amazon's Kindle.

Even when he lands on a vivid image or idea, it goes nowhere. The teenage girl sent on that quest is given her orders by the Grey Lady. This powerful figure -- I pictured Nancy Marchand or a steelier Kitty Carlisle Hart -- is the literal embodiment of the *New York Times*. It's a clever idea -- the *New York Times* as the Grey Lady, ensconced in her penthouse on the Upper East Side. Her requests are really commands because she's so used to getting her way and so powerful to punish if she does not. But having alighted on this idea of the Grey Lady, it goes nowhere. Daisey just rambles on about media and the collapse of newspapers, how the *New York Times* has had no real rival for decades.

Perfectly reasonable albeit unremarkable observations -- but he might just as easily have rambled on about something else. Not for a moment do we feel in the guiding hand of a storyteller who knows where they're taking us. The Grey Lady has a cough -- I immediately think of consumption, the go-to disease in old movies -- and I'm pleased when she coughs into a delicate scarf and she coughs not blood but black ink. I loved the black ink but...a "delicate scarf?" Why would a rich and powerful figure like the Grey Lady cough into a scarf? A minute later, Daisey referred to her coughing into a rag. This is even

worse. A scarf rather than a linen handkerchief is confusing. But a rag is utterly out of place. And why has it changed?

This lack of precision in the words he uses is a constant throughout the show. At another point, when talking about Apple, he says they want us to believe it's a new era at the company. But it's not, says Daisey, because Jobs is dead and everything has changed. Well, if everything has changed surely it IS a new era, not in the positive sense they meant it but still.

Again and again I found myself confounded by his choice of words and their seeming randomness, by tales that set off on tangents and then faded to a stop. I was never confident of the monologues, never certain of where we were headed or even where'd we been since the scenes slipped so easily from my memory. All I was certain about was that Mike Daisey was just as confused and unsure as the rest of us.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2

Picnic * 1/2

Opus No. 7 ** 1/2

Deceit * 1/2

Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2

The Jammer ***

Blood Play ** 1/2

Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2

Women Of Will ** 1/2

All In The Timing ***

Isaac's Eye ***

Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2

The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2

Much Ado About Nothing ***

Really Really *

Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2

The Madrid * 1/2

The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2

Passion at CSC *** 1/2

Carousel at Lincoln Center ***

The Revisionist **

Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***

Rock Of Ages * 1/2

Ann ** 1/2

Old Hats ***

The Flick ***

Detroit '67 ** 1/2

Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)

Hit The Wall *

Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2

The Mound Builders at Signature *

Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2

Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***

The Lying Lesson * 1/2

Hands On A Hardbody *

Kinky Boots **

Matilda The Musical *** 1/2

The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***

Motown: The Musical **

La Ruta ** 1/2

The Big Knife *

The Nance ***

The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice **no stars**
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical **no stars**
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise

indicated.

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