

Colby



Colby Magazine

Volume 100
Issue 4 *Winter 2012*

Article 8

January 2012

The Apple of His Ire: For monologist Mike Daisey, the death of Steve Jobs was another defining moment in a remarkable career

Neil Genzlinger

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine>



Part of the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

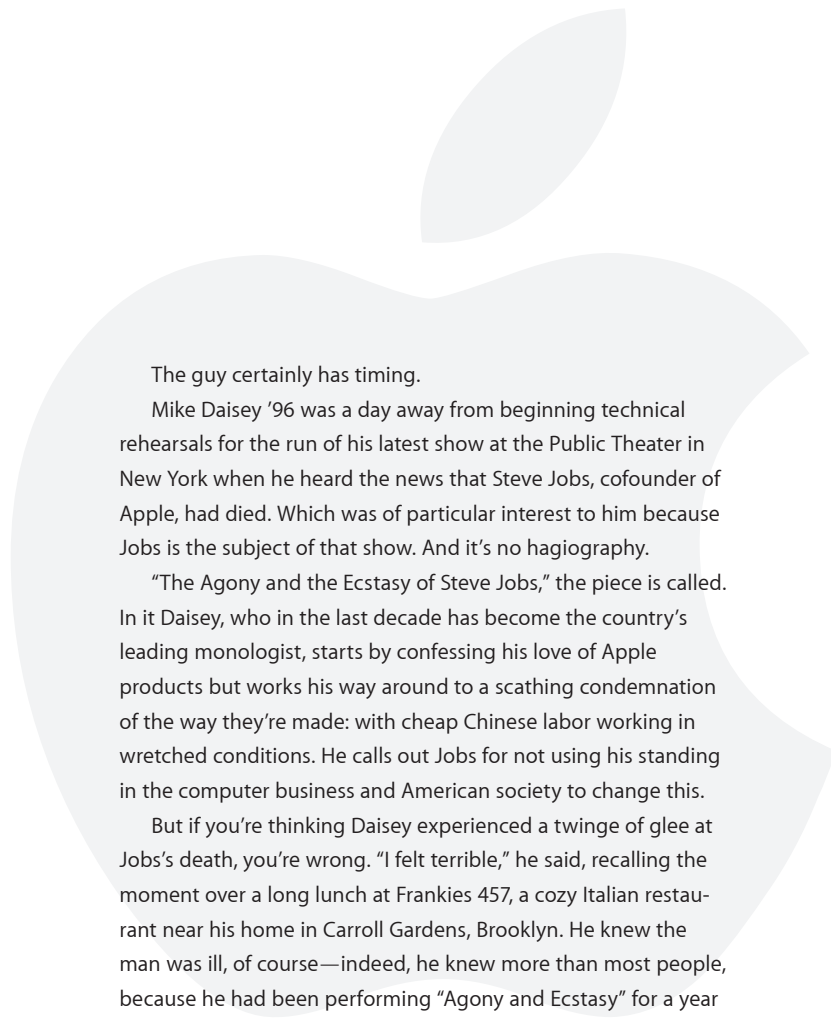
Genzlinger, Neil (2012) "The Apple of His Ire: For monologist Mike Daisey, the death of Steve Jobs was another defining moment in a remarkable career," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 100 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol100/iss4/8>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the Colby College Archives at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

The Apple of His Ire

For monologist Mike Daisey, the death of Steve Jobs was another defining moment in a remarkable career





The guy certainly has timing.

Mike Daisey '96 was a day away from beginning technical rehearsals for the run of his latest show at the Public Theater in New York when he heard the news that Steve Jobs, cofounder of Apple, had died. Which was of particular interest to him because Jobs is the subject of that show. And it's no hagiography.

"The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," the piece is called. In it Daisey, who in the last decade has become the country's leading monologist, starts by confessing his love of Apple products but works his way around to a scathing condemnation of the way they're made: with cheap Chinese labor working in wretched conditions. He calls out Jobs for not using his standing in the computer business and American society to change this.

But if you're thinking Daisey experienced a twinge of glee at Jobs's death, you're wrong. "I felt terrible," he said, recalling the moment over a long lunch at Frankies 457, a cozy Italian restaurant near his home in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn. He knew the man was ill, of course—indeed, he knew more than most people, because he had been performing "Agony and Ecstasy" for a year around the country, and people with connections to Apple who had seen it would pass him tidbits of information.

"But I didn't make any preparations," he said. "It's like dealing with someone who's dying in your family. In an abstract way you're like, 'Well, one day they'll die, but that one day is solidly in the future; no matter where we are, it's in the future.' So it's still shocking when they actually die."

Daisey was in his living room October 5 when the news came over the wires. He took a few quiet moments to reflect before going to tell his wife, Jean-Michele Gregory, who is also his director, so they could begin figuring out what the death meant for their show. Then, within 15 minutes, the *New York Times* was calling asking him to write an oped piece about Jobs, which he did (annoying the Apple faithful, since the article was not the worshipful mush everyone else was writing in those first days after Jobs's passing). "In a way, I was grateful to be busy," he said.

Story Neil Genzlinger

Photos Stan Barouh



That Daisey was in a position to have this high-profile theatrical moment was a result of another instance of serendipitous timing. Ten years earlier in Seattle, Daisey, still largely unknown, began sending out publicity for a new monologue he was about to unveil about his relatively brief tenure as an employee at amazon.com.

"The day after I sent out the press releases," he said, "phones started ringing, and it just never stopped."

It was the bursting of the dot-com bubble, and that show, "21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ amazon.com," captured the moment perfectly. It ended up playing all over the world, including at the Cherry Lane Theater in New York. "He frequently seems

"It was really charged; it was like there was a thunderstorm in the room, or there was about to be one. It made for a difficult launch. It really was like a weather system—six days after his death was different than doing it seven days after his death, was different than doing it eight days. Each night the level of tension and dislocation was different."

to have wandered way wide of his narrative path," Bruce Weber, reviewing the show for the *Times* in 2002, wrote of Daisey's style, "only to swing satisfyingly back to it through an unexpected door." The show and a subsequent book also earned him an appearance on *The David Letterman Show*.

Daisey's monologues are remarkable feats of extemporaneous speaking. The Steve Jobs piece runs about two hours, no break: just Daisey in a chair talking, with some minimal lighting effects helping him out. And no script.

"There's definitely an element of feeling like you're falling off a cliff," he said of this type of performance. "There's a real terror to it." But terror is

the monologist's friend. "If I ever don't feel any terror before a show at all," he said, "then that's a very good sign that I'm about to have a really bad performance."

When Daisey first arrived at Colby in the fall of 1991, poetry, not performing, was the main thing on his mind. He had grown up in Fort Kent, in Aroostook County, but the family had moved to Newport, in central Maine, just as he was starting high school. Dennis Gilbert '72, a teacher in a regional gifted-and-talented program, encouraged his writing, which was mostly poetry, and since Gilbert had gone to Colby, Daisey applied there. He was accepted. His vision of his future as he started college was nothing like the future that actually came about.

"I thought the sexiest thing that could happen

to me was, I'll be an English professor," he said. "One day I'll be wearing those jackets, and I'll be walking across the campus, and I'll be teaching."

He fashioned his own major, in aesthetics, and, continuing an interest he had developed in high school, took a lot of theater courses and participated in stage productions of all kinds: full stage shows and one-acts; Shakespeare, Brecht, Beckett, Restoration comedies. For many theater students, a standard college career consists of three years of working backstage and playing small parts, then one or two big roles just before graduation. At Colby Daisey was on stage far more, playing roles of significance throughout.

"One of the things that's a problem with the American theater today is that performance is a lot like flying," he said, and learning to fly involves a little instruction and a lot of hours in the air. "People don't get enough flight time. The only flight time that actually counts is on a stage in front of a paying audience. Colby gave me a tremendous amount of flight time."

Daisey made the Colby theater program a central part of "How Theater Failed America," a monologue that features a riotous description of Emeritus Professor Dick Sewell, then adjunct associate professor of theater and dance. ("Recalling his college days at what he calls a micro-Ivy in New England," Caryn James wrote in her *Times* review in 2008, "he combines a sense of the ridiculous—an inspiring acting teacher resembled Gollum in 'Lord of the Rings'—with an unsappy yet powerful sense of the wonder of theater.") All that stage time and the tutelage of Sewell and others, he said, gave him something many people trying to fashion careers in the theater these days lack.

"It's a wonderful experience to live all those lives," he said. "I didn't realize how far outside the norm it was. It really made me the performer I am now." And if you think a monologist isn't performing, but merely talking, you haven't seen Mike Daisey work. With gestures, variations in his voice (this guy can be very loud), the well-timed pause, he conjures characters and creates momentum as well as any show with a large cast and budget.

Colby had other lessons to teach Daisey, who is from a family of modest means. "Not everything about Colby was positive, and the nonpositive parts were also very influential," he said. "I had not truly realized what privilege was until I went to Colby. And the experience of being around people with money, real money, was shocking and startling for me."

That made for a certain tension—wishing he too had that wealth, but simultaneously being ap-



palled by it—that is often reflected in his monologues. In “Agony and Ecstasy,” for instance, he confesses to loving Apple products—the “wealth,” as it were—but is infuriated that they are made through exploitation.

After Colby, Daisey made his way to Seattle, “primarily because it was very far away from Maine,” and made an effort to shed the performing bug. “I tried not to write and I tried not to do theater,” he said. “And I failed at both. I really did conceptualize it that way. I saw it as falling off the wagon.”

It’s an apt analogy, because the leap to his current career occurred at a bar.

“During that period I would go to bars after shows,” he recalled. “And people would say, ‘Where are you from?’ I’d say Maine, and they would say, ‘Maine? That’s a long way from Seattle. What brought you here?’ And I would say, ‘Well, blaaaawwg,’” making a sound as if disgorging everything from his brain.

“I would tell the entire story,” he said. “It was like ‘The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.’ I would fix them with my hoary eye, and they’d be trapped there, those poor people at the bar, until I released them, a painfully long time later.”

Acquaintances started suggesting he try the same thing on stage, so he rented a small theater, booking a late-night time slot. Then he sat down to write his show. Nothing came. A friend, though, helped him around that roadblock.

“He just said, ‘Maybe you don’t want to write it, maybe you want to tell it,’” Daisey said. “It sounds ridiculous, but it was like bells going off.”

So that’s what he did—and it seemed to work. “The show was very successful, that first monologue,” he said, adding, “Let’s be clear: it was very successful in the context of late-night garage theater in Seattle. That means, namely, that we were pulling in, sometimes, as many as twenty-five people.”

The crowds have grown—the “Agony and

Ecstasy” run at the Public, one of New York’s most prestigious theaters, has been a tough ticket and was extended—but the way he works hasn’t changed.

“The pattern from that very first monologue has remained substantially the same,” he said. “I like to think that I’m better at it now, but the core is the same. I wrote nothing, not a single word, but I thought about it endlessly, until about twenty-four hours before the first performance. And then I made an outline. And then, opening night, the lights came up. I had no idea what I was going to say, truly, but began to speak, and I performed the show.”

That there is no script means his shows are different each night. It also means he has the luxury of learning from reviews and making adjustments based on them. That was something he had to learn; a negative review of an early monologue drove him from performing for three years (and, fortuitously, led him to take the job at amazon.com).

“The same way that a critic maintains a critical distance when they write the reviews, it’s so important to maintain a critical distance when you read your reviews,” he said. “They’ll eat you alive, in every direction. If they’re positive, they’ll destroy you. If they’re negative, they’ll destroy you.”

“One thing that has come out of that distance,” he added, “is that I think we”—he and his wife—“are the people in the American theater who have the highest track record of making changes in our work based on critics’ feedback, because there is no playwright; everyone’s integrated. If we read reviews that actually touch us, changes tend to happen.”

More important in the shaping of a piece, though, is that mysterious inner voice that creative people have. The subconscious, Daisey calls it. The monologues may not be scripted, but they do have a structure. Yet each time they’re performed, the shape changes because an element or a phrase that he didn’t realize was there makes its presence known.

“Sometimes something will be consciously built

as a framework to get somewhere,” he said, “but then something new will flower in a performance. The things that flower tend to stay. The things that were built tend to be superstructure, and they get removed as other parts get stronger, until there’s almost nothing in it that’s not from my subconscious. Because generally my subconscious is better at being spontaneous and inventive than I am. I’m not bad, but my subconscious is much better.”

And so he found himself, on Oct. 11, six days after Jobs’s death, giving the first performance of “Agony and Ecstasy” at the Public. And yet another element that can change a show was felt, dramatically.

“It was really charged; it was like there was a thunderstorm in the room, or there was about to be one,” he said of that first performance. “It made for a difficult launch. It really was like a weather system—six days after his death was different than doing it seven days after his death, was different than doing it eight days. Each night the level of tension and dislocation was different.”

Daisey sees a parallel between his years at Colby—entering as a poet with visions of being an English professor; emerging as something completely different—and the evolution of his monologues.

“You change more, you find out who you are more, when you’re young,” he said, and so do the monologues. “It’s very similar to that arc we have, in that when we’re young we don’t know who we are, we don’t know what story it is we want to tell. Shows change twenty percent, twenty-five percent, from performance to performance. But then you start to figure out what it is you want to say. It gets to the point where it’s a fully mature adult monologue. It’s still changing, but now it’s changing very little.”

“Agony and Ecstasy,” he believes, reached its adulthood in those days after Jobs’s death.

“I didn’t have the insight to know this ahead of time,” he said, “but until he passed away, the show was not done.” 🍏