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Mike Daisey Unscripted

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FIRE DOOR
KEEP CLOSED
AT ALL TIMES

mike daisey. unscripted

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"I have no idea what I'm going to say to you tonight. No idea."

Mike Daisey '96 leans against a podium in the back room of the Galapagos Art Space, a converted mayonnaise factory in trendy Williamsburg, Brooklyn, that is home to regular readings and performances. The audience and performers are gathered on this Wednesday in November for an evening of tragicomic storytelling (an offshoot of Dave Eggers's popular literary journal, *McSweeney's*), based on the theme, "How to Win a Fight."

Daisey, the first performer, is newly transplanted to Brooklyn from Seattle, where his wildly successful one-man show, "21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ Amazon.com," earned him the laurel "First Internet Dot.Comic." Finishing his drink, he bangs the empty glass on the lectern and addresses the assembled audience. "I'm from northern, northern Maine. If you've ever been to Maine, you've never been to where I'm from."

Fort Kent, Maine, couldn't be farther away from the urban literary milieu Daisey currently calls home, but how he made it from there to here—with his one-man show due to appear in London's West End theater district this winter, then off-Broadway in the spring, and a six-figure book deal from Simon & Schuster in his back pocket—is only part of the story. The rest has to do with the mystery of how this thoughtful, serious-minded person arrived at a reputation as a comic.

After all, Daisey's college years, though sometimes madcap, were hardly slapstick. He spent them fashioning his own major, "Aesthetics," for which he wrote a lot of Carver-esque stories and poetry and acted in seemingly countless Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett plays. Perhaps even more vexing, however, is the question of how his newfound success (founded, mind you, not only in comedy but also in the dot-com bubble) will play here in this post-9/11 cultural climate. The answers, oddly enough, might have little to do with comedy itself and everything to do with storytelling.

Daisey's story begins in the town of Fort Kent, 200 miles north of Augusta. The town is off the radar of most Mainers and tourists alike, and with a population of about 2,000 there's not a whole lot going on. Now imagine a younger version of the present-day Mike Daisey living in this small town like some sort of misplaced exchange student.

"He was a miniature Charlie Brown," said Beth Paradis (pronounced "parody"), a neighbor of the Daisey family who remembers Mike Daisey as a 9-year-old. "He looked like him, acted like him and, I'm afraid to say, was treated like him."

Young Mike Daisey was "a real individual," she said. "He may have been young, but already he followed a different drummer, and he didn't mind one bit. He was such a nice boy, and so comfortable with who he was, even though he was picked on."

Sum him up in a word? "Eccentric," Paradis said.

Daisey is the oldest of four children. When he was in middle school, his parents—his father is a counselor for the Veterans Administration, and his mother is a meat-cutter at a deli—moved the family to the town of Etna, outside of Bangor. Etna is half the size of Fort Kent. Under "Things To Do In Etna" on the town's Web page, every single attraction is located at least 14 miles outside the town limits.

Daisey attended the regional Nokomis High School, in Newport, where he competed feverishly on the debate team and environmental science team and did a lot of drama; every two weeks he traveled with his younger sister Mary to a nearby high school for a regional program for gifted students. "I think they were pretty bored out at Nokomis," said Dennis Gilbert '72, who taught the program. "Mike and his sister had wild imaginations, and a lot of energy, and they just ate up these sorts of extracurricular activities. Mike would write long poems that were fantastical in the true sense of the word—broad-ranging and unconventional. And he had a really sharp sense of humor, a good ear for sardonic observations. And he was amazingly prolific. He could write a whole short story in an hour."

Under Gilbert's tutelage, Daisey thrived, and when he was ready to move on to college he sent out only one application—to Colby, Gilbert's alma mater. Daisey arrived at Colby in 1991, already an ambitious talent on the make. "If one was involved in the arts—even if one wasn't, actually—he was nearly impossible to miss. His talent was, even then, already well formed," remembered Professor of English Jenny Boylan.

Daisey's first year, he acted. His second year, he wrote poetry, serving as poetry editor of the *Pequod* and winning (with Meadow Dibble '96) the Katherine Rogers Murphy Prize for Original Poetry. He was no retiring scribe, however, holed up in his garret. After describing Daisey as "insane. Okay—ungrounded," friend Kathleen Wood '96 went on to recall the time he staged a series of short plays by David Ives in Foss Dining Hall and included the instruction "please throw food" in the program. "Actors were up on stage, doing a great job, but getting pummeled by finger sandwiches and grapes. We were all angry, but Mike had honestly assumed people would take it as a joke." And so Daisey plowed through his junior year and into his senior year, accumulating directing and acting credits, immersing himself in the Colby theater scene, and generally confounding and/or astounding everyone he came into contact with.

And then his world caved in. His long-distance girlfriend, whom he'd been dating since high school, became pregnant, and decided to keep the baby. "I, on the other hand," Daisey said, "was not ready to be a father." Scheduled to graduate in the spring of 1995, he instead barely skidded through that semester, failing a few classes and sinking into a deep depression, as, paralyzed, he watched his relationship disintegrate and his daughter slip beyond his reach. By summer, degree-less, despondent and sick with self-loathing, he took the only job he could find—working in a slaughterhouse. His work lugging carcasses and cutting meat, he says, was every bit as horrible as it sounds.

It was theater that turned him back around. That November Lawrence High School in Fairfield, next door to Waterville, offered Daisey a job as a drama teacher, and he loved it. It didn't hurt that his students loved him in return. "Mike was perhaps the best director I've ever worked with," said Luke Shorty, a senior at the University of Maine at Farmington and a Lawrence High School graduate. "He was very talented at making people feel comfortable with themselves on stage. He could transform a group of friends not only into an acting troupe but into a family."

Invigorated, Daisey returned to Colby that spring, made up his lost credits and, after "begging and pleading with Dean Earl Smith and generally making an ass of myself," graduated with the Class of 1996. That week, he packed his car and moved to the West Coast.

Daisey's arrival in Seattle marked both the start of a new chapter in his life and the dénouement of "Wasting Your Breath," his one-man show about separation from a child that opens with the news of his girlfriend's pregnancy—in other words, a sort of fleshed out, far more gripping version of the above three paragraphs. Though this show, the first of three, is what brought Daisey in touch with what he considers his true calling, it took a while for the idea to click and for him to consider himself "a storyteller."

"When I first moved to Seattle, people kept asking me how I'd gotten there, and as I found myself telling bits and pieces of the story, it began to cohere in my mind," he explained. After a while, he decided to write down his story and perform it. "But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I didn't *want* to write it down. I felt terribly guilty—writing was what I'd been trained to do, and to not write felt antithetical to everything I'd learned." In the end he decided to simply *tell* his story—on a stage, in front of an audience, without a script. It was a daring risk, with remarkable effect.

The show ran from October 1997 to January 1998 in little playhouses across the city. Each night Daisey would tell his story anew, drawing from a loose outline in his head. And each night, after the performance, fathers would wait behind the darkened theater to talk to Daisey about losing their own daughters. Between the energy and connection he felt on stage and the sensation during these post-show conversations of having achieved emotional resonance, Daisey understood he'd found his vocation.

"I realized that amazing discoveries can be made in front of an audience that just can't be made in the vacuum of fiction. Personally, I think writing in a vacuum is perverse. Writing can feel like a negation—like fixing it in amber—and there's something painful about that for me. But I really appreciate the idea of the living revision process, how an audience subconsciously vets your work in the way that they respond. It's the opposite of a normal author's world," he said.

Immediately he put together another show, "I Miss the Cold War," based on stories he'd grown up hearing from the Vietnam veterans his father treated for a living. "Let's just say it was my sophomore effort," Daisey said. "The material was great, but there was no backbone. I just wasn't ready yet to talk about someone other than myself."

The show ran from February 1998 to May 1998. "And then the hammer came down. I started working for Amazon."

Which, of course, was only the beginning of everything else. The story of Daisey's two years toiling first in customer service and then in business development at one of the Internet's most famous companies is best told by Daisey himself in his third—and most recent—solo show, "21 Dog Years: Doing Time @ Amazon.com." Suffice it to say, the show—directed by his wife, Jean-Michele, whom he met when they were both acting in one of those "catastrophically bad avant garde plays" in 1997 and married in July 2000—was a runaway success. "Seattle's tech-savvy population responded especially well," said friend and co-conspirator John Tynes, a self-employed writer, editor and graphic designer. "We had sellout crowds for months, and their reaction was laughter and empathy."

No sooner did the show open in February 2001 than Daisey was branded the "First Internet Dot.Comic" and featured in publications ranging from *Wired* to *Newsweek* to *The New York Times* to the London *Guardian*. In April Simon & Schuster bought the rights to the book version. In May the show closed. One week later the theater burned down. Daisey decided it was time to move.

The following month Daisey voluntarily exiled himself to Brooklyn to finish the book. He was greeted by a newly formed coterie: his Manhattan-based literary agent, Daniel Greenberg, his manager, David Foster, and his editor, Rachel Klayman. Far from working in a vacuum, Daisey was suddenly dealing with the high-pressure interests of the New York publishing world. "It was like going from being a student to being an adult," Daisey said. "I suddenly had to be very certain of whatever project I was interested in, because, once you sign on, it lasts one year, two years—far longer than a science project."

Foster, though, doesn't think Daisey will have any problems. "His media savvy is amazing," he said. "He is incredibly driven and able to think laterally about his career." He paused, then prophesied, "Mike will grow into a bigger and bigger name. This will probably be from a number of avenues: performing, books and other writing. If one door closes, another will open."

And so Daisey spent the summer finishing his book, breaking only in August to bring "21 Dog Years" to the New York Fringe Festival, where it won best solo show. He still met his deadline—September 11.

Daisey was on his way to the publishing house, manuscript in hand, when the World Trade Center was attacked. Seeking refuge in a Wendy's, he immediately logged onto the Internet and started posting broadsides to his Web site, www.mikedaisey.com. *I am writing this from downtown New York. In a perverse reversal, I have no way to contact anyone except through my high-speed wireless Internet connection,"* the first dispatch began. He went on:

The media will ultimately tell the story better than I, but I can tell you that there is massive loss of life. The sky is black with ash, the people have been panicking and fleeing in unadulterated terror. I have never seen anything like it. It is very difficult to breathe, even with your mouth covered—the ash blows down the streets and burns your eyes. It feels like the world has ended.

Later that day he described walking home over the Brooklyn Bridge, *which is unbelievably beautiful, the wires and stone of the bridge surrounding us and the bright sun ahead, passing out of darkness. No one is talking to each other, but there is a sense of warmth. Everyone has their cell phones out, fishing for a clear signal. Those who catch them talk hurriedly to families, friends, people in other cities, children in their homes. It is comforting to hear their voices, telling how they are okay, shhh, it's okay, I'm okay. As we walk out into the sunlight, I am so happy to be in this company, the company of people who are alright, those who walked out.*

Daisey's dispatches were picked up and transmitted across the world. In four days he received more than 4,000 e-mailed responses. "Mike's messages are incredibly raw, moving and real," Professor Boylan said. "And they reveal, of course, the key to his humor, which is the wise, compassionate heart beating at the center of all his work."

Boylan's sentiment is one that is heard again and again in relation to Daisey's comedy. "He's not a denier," playwright Laurence Krauser said. "He looks and thinks directly and is honest with himself and in his speech about what he sees and what it means to him. And then he steps outside again for additional perspective on these things. It's the opposite of character acting. He's funny, yes, but breathtakingly lucid."

In other words, he has the mentality of a storyteller, in addition to a comic's, and it's the combination of the two sensibilities that brings so much resonance to his performances. "I believe that humor and the intellect don't have a very amiable relationship," Daisey explained. "Being droll or sly or clever is okay. Actually being genuinely funny is seen as anti-intellectual and roundly considered an end unto itself, incapable of evoking reactions and social change the way drama or serious literature can. So there's a tension there. And I think my work thrives on that tension."

He sees "21 Dog Years," for instance, as being "more about the hows and whys of office life than the dot-com bubble. It's about being in love with work, and coming to grips with the universal battle of where priorities fall in our day-to-day lives." The World Trade Center attacks, far from diminishing these truths, made him realize that these themes were even larger than he'd first believed. "No one speaks to these simple issues, especially when the rest of the world seems to be falling apart," he said. And so, though at first he'd reacted to the attacks "the way most people did, with shock and denial and a creeping certainty that everything was meaningless about comedy and humor, especially my own," he came to realize, in the weeks that followed, that "it's important to be able to laugh at how we spend our time, and in laughing come to some discoveries."

So in the end, Daisey hasn't changed as much as it might seem. As Wood noted, "Mike is funny. But if you look behind the comedy, a lot is being said. He's still an actor, and he's still a poet. He's just using these skills in different ways."

Indeed, he's fusing these skills, and in fusing them has managed to synthesize himself. Daisey said it best when he offhandedly remarked, "The only time I'm whole, using all of my person, is when I'm telling stories."

The result is a bigger, richer brand of comic performance. As John Hodgman, the host of Wednesday night's "How to Win a Fight" gig said at the end of the evening, "Mike is very funny, yes. But as my wife pointed out, anyone who can drink gin and tonics and then essentially make up a nearly perfect, funny, resonant and complete short story is more than a humorist, and about a universe away from traditional stand-up comedy." ●