



Moral Issues Behind iPhone and Its Makers

Tuesday, October 18, 2011

By Charles Isherwod,

Theater Review ^ 'The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs'

I hate to tell you this, but your best friend has a dark secret in his past, the kind of shameful history that might just have you looking at him (or her?) a little sheepishly, with a furtive, sidelong glance instead of the former adoring gaze.

I speak not of a human being, mind you, the walking and talking kind of best friend, but of your cherished electronic companion, that stylish helpmate, warm intimate and source of delightful entertainment known as an iPhone [☞](#). As I look at mine this morning, I can't help feeling a bit guilty, and a bit betrayed. I fear some of the magic has gone out of our relationship.

This seismic shift in my consciousness came about thanks to Mike Daisey, whose latest theatrical monologue, "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," is a mind-clouding, eye-opening exploration of the moral choices we unknowingly or unthinkingly make when we purchase nifty little gadgets like the iPhone and the iPad [☞](#) and the PowerBook.

To be fair, while Mr. Daisey's particular obsession is the product line of the Apple corporation, the ethical problems he explores are not exclusive to owners of MacBooks and iPods. As he points out in this meditation on our wonderful world of technology and the troubling economic imbalances that underlie it, any number of other electronic gizmos filling up our homes and taking up our time are similarly morally tainted goods.

About half of all consumer electronics sold in the world today are produced at a single mammoth factory campus in Shenzhen, China, according to Mr. Daisey. His illuminating trip to this campus, the sprawling Foxconn Technology plant, forms the dramatic spine of his smart, pointed and often very funny exploration of the rise of Apple and the career and vision of Mr. Jobs, who died this month after a long battle with cancer.

Mr. Daisey has been creating monologues on various subjects — "How Theater Failed America [☞](#)" and "21 Dog Years [☞](#)" are among his best-known — for more than a decade. His methods are simple. Here he sits, behind a glass-topped table with just a few pages of notes and a glass of water before him, looking like a big boy who never lost all his baby fat. (Or maybe any of it.) His performance style mixes the quiet reflectiveness of Spalding Gray with more histrionic colorings.

In relating his giddy relationship with his Apple products, and impersonating fellow obsessives, Mr. Daisey transforms into a cackling mad scientist of creaky thrillers, and at his most fervid he recalls the jabbering, slightly unhinged aspect of the comic Lewis Black of "The Daily Show With Jon Stewart." When it comes to discussing the sobering discoveries he made at Foxconn, which employs some 430,000 people in its compound in Shenzhen, Mr. Daisey speaks more gravely and with a charged intensity.

"The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," which opened on Monday night at the Public Theater in a production directed by Mr. Daisey's frequent collaborator (and wife) Jean-Michele Gregory, is pretty equally divided between the two heated emotional states of the title. Most of the ecstasy derives from Mr. Daisey's misty-eyed recounting of his own highly charged relationship with Apple products, which dates back to an early model of an Apple computer that was given to the family by a wealthy uncle, and that was treated with such deference and awe that it was provided its own room.

For Mr. Daisey, as for many others, affection for Apple products evolved into reverence for Mr. Jobs, the Apple co-founder whose identification with the company and its products has been much remarked upon, and worried over, since his illness made news several years ago.

Mr. Daisey has been performing this show since July of last year, and while the death of Mr. Jobs lends the evening a certain eerie timeliness, it also means that many in the audience will be familiar with the life and career of Mr. Jobs from reading obituaries and tributes.

The hippie-meets-tech-geek ethos, the founding of and then ouster from Apple, the triumphant return and the revolutionary series of consumer products that followed: Mr. Daisey covers this material fluently and with amiable humor, mixing obvious hero worship with some pointed skepticism. (Mr. Jobs, he notes, was the kind of imperious guy who divided the world's population into "geniuses and bozos.")

But the show is most engrossing, and most disturbing, when Mr. Daisey delves into the grim realities of workers' lives in Shenzhen, a city that he memorably describes as looking as if " 'Blade Runner' threw up on itself." Here is where the agony of the title enters the

picture.

The Foxconn campus is tightly controlled, its entrance secured by gun-wielding guards. A series of suicides at the plant [several years ago](#) made international headlines. When Mr. Daisey's attempts to visit through official channels were rebuffed, he simply rented a car and a driver and translator, and showed up at the gates to interview workers as they emerged from their shifts.

He had to wait quite a while. As he notes, while the official Chinese workday is 8 hours, the norm at Foxconn is more like 12 and even longer when the introduction of a product is at hand. One worker died after a 34-hour shift. Some of the workers he meets are as young as 13, and because of the repetitive nature of the labor, their hands often become deformed and useless within a decade, rendering them unemployable.

Mr. Daisey does not go all "j'accuse" on Mr. Jobs himself, but he does observe that Apple and other American corporations have been shamefully lax in taking responsibility for the treatment of workers at the overseas plants that manufacture their products. (He does not refer to an investigation Apple made [into worker conditions at Foxconn this year](#).)

But of course the responsibility shouldn't stop there. The conveniences and pleasures that all these gadgets have brought to our lives have been purchased at the cost of considerable human suffering, of which we remain willfully ignorant or simply choose to ignore.

Mr. Daisey pushes the notes of quiet outrage and guilt-mongering perhaps a little too hard in the show's culminating moments, although he avoids full diatribe mode. But he doesn't really need to bang the drum so hard; he has made his points clearly and powerfully already. Anyone who sees Mr. Daisey's show — and anyone with a cellphone and a moral center should — will find it hard to forget the repercussions that our casual purchases can have in the lives of men and women (and children) half a world away.

Uncomfortable reflections along these lines have certainly been springing into my consciousness a lot since I saw it, like psychic pop-up ads that just won't go away. I can't seem to find a little box that says "Skip this thought."

THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY OF STEVE JOBS

Created and performed by Mike Daisey; directed by Jean-Michele Gregory; sets and lighting by Seth Reiser; production stage manager, Pamela Salling; acting general manager, Steven Showalter; associate artistic director, Mandy Hackett; associate producer, Maria Goyanes; director of production, Ruth E. Sternberg. Presented by the Public Theater, Oskar Eustis, artistic director; Joey Parnes, interim executive director. At the Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, at Astor Place, East Village; (212) 967-7555, publictheater.org. Through Nov. 13. Running time: 1 hour 50 minutes

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