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TBA:08 • Mike Daisey

Savvy performer weaves intrigue, surprise in ever-changing sharp-witted monologues

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Mike Daisey reinvents storytelling with far-ranging topics seamlessly merged into entertaining, provocative monologues.

One of the highlights of the Portland cultural calendar, the Time-Based Art Festival is like a breathless scavenger hunt with avant-garde art as the prizes stashed throughout the city.

In its sixth year, the event invites you to race from one venue to another, discovering the latest the country – and the world – has to offer in music, dance, storytelling and visual art. If it's hard to know precisely what you'll see when you arrive, it's because much of it simply defies description.

From performers of site-specific theater and music to white rappers to offbeat raconteurs with stories of daring personal journeys, TBA's artists share one driving principle: Boundaries have no place in art.

The Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, which launched TBA in 2003, kicks off the party by resurrecting modern dance pioneer Anna Halprin's "Blank Placard Happening," which debuted in San Francisco in 1968.

Participants will either bring or be given a blank sign, which they then will carry across the Broadway Bridge to the Works (240 N. Broadway) – the eastside venue with an outdoor beer garden, cafe and art installations – that also hosts a number of TBA events.

Then it's party time, with all invited to a free bash featuring the music and video collaborators Deelay Ceelay, DJ Acidophilus, the Flash Choir and the opening of TBA's On Sight galleries.

In other words, it's on.



Mike Daisey is a funny man. Not funny in the way Ron “Tater Salad” White is funny or Chris Farley — Daisey is not a comedian, per se.

But no one tells a story quite like Mike Daisey. His fleshy lips savor words as others might a succulent pear or chicken wing. Intelligent eyes signal intrigue, conspiracy and surprise. Disparate themes and historical anecdotes fuse together flawlessly, for Daisey is a master storyteller. But he calls himself a monologist.

“ ‘Storyteller’ has a wonderful, old-world resonance,” he says. “But the term has been emasculated in our culture. People imagine children’s fairs with storytellers in velvet breeches drinking mead.”

Daisey will give Portland a taste of his subversive wit in two pieces performed at TBA. First up, Friday and Saturday, is “Monopoly,” a piece that comments on a culture that recognizes only profit and loss and the choices individuals make in that system.

In the process he weighs in on the battle over electricity between inventors Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison, Microsoft’s antitrust lawsuit and the secret history of the board game Monopoly.

At the end of the festival, Sept. 11 through Sept. 14, he will perform “If You See Something Say Something,” about the secret history of the Department of Homeland Security, what it means to be secure, and the price we pay for it.

Before first performing a piece, Daisey makes notes on a legal pad, organically crafting stories that gestate over time. The power of his monologues is that they are not scripted or frozen.

“The text is generated in front of the audience when it’s spoken,” he explains. “I think audiences can feel that. In our modern age, we have tremendous power to access information, but we have a short supply of intelligent, reasoned conversation.”

He has performed both of the TBA pieces before. “It’s the same in that I’m telling the same set of interweaving, interlocking stories,” he says. “But 10 to 15 percent of the text is different from performance to performance. Sometimes I set a piece aside for awhile. When I pick it up again it alters.”

Ignores fork in career path

A vociferous reader, Daisey forages on the Web for ideas — his themes take root much as a Google search might, one window after another opening on views on a particular topic or digressing magnificently.

There is a strong tradition of storytelling in northern Maine, where he grew up. Participation in high school speech and debate further honed his ability to assimilate data and speak authoritatively. The 35-year-old has been writing and performing his monologues for 12 years.

“I did a lot of traditional theater and a great deal of writing and was told by many people that while I am talented at either, I would have to choose,” he says. “I refused to choose and kept forging ahead. I refined it going forward.”

The opportunity to hear the arc of one story line, drawn out and in full, is increasingly rare in a society weaned on jump cuts and dissolves. While preachers, professors and politicians deliver speeches, lectures and sermons, the American public often is accused of having short attention spans.

“It’s funny,” Daisey says, “you would think that there is this cultural loss or atrophy — that when we’re never asked to concentrate in this way, we would lose the ability. I’m finding the opposite, provided the work is compelling. I think the absence of this kind of communication, the sheer absence of it, makes people extremely hungry for it, and particularly the technophiles.

“Actually what happens is people are rediscovering something they always knew. Listening to ideas, if they are compelling and spoken in *that* space to *these* people, are things that charge the people in the audience with a kind of electricity.

“Storytelling is so innately hard-wired into the human condition. It’s how our consciousness works with our continuous need to write and rewrite the story of our lives. All the decisions we make are a continuous story line in our own consciousness.”

Dark, light create catharsis

There is an undeniably dark thread that runs through Daisey’s pieces, which he admits is a big part of his personal aesthetic. But he shrinks at calling it dystopian.

“The highest form of artistic expression, for me, the thing that pulls that audience together for catharsis, is when comedy and tragedy are close together without blurring the lines,” he says. “So they alternate in close proximity — much like life itself. At our best, if fulfilling our mandates as artists, we will reflect the universe as we see it.”

Some may argue that theater no longer matters because it doesn’t reach enough people. Daisey counters that the right kind of theater touches people deeply, and that matters more than many people touched lightly. He embraces the new technology to provide a human experience.

“We all spend a lot of time staring into screens and cell phones,” he observes, “the human experience of communication is lost. But rather than mourn it, I think we can use the tools of today to take the best parts for ourselves. We are still human, and we can still speak for one another. We can work at saying it, polishing it until we give it out as a gift.”

Daisey, who lives in New York City with his wife and director, Jean-Michele Gregory, came to Portland in 2005 to perform “21 Dog Years” at Portland Center Stage. This will be his first appearance at TBA.

“Monopoly,” 8:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Sept. 6-7, Portland Center Stage, Gerding Theater at the Armory, 128 N.W. 11th Ave., 503-224-7422, www.pica.org, \$15-\$20, mature audiences

“If You See Something Say Something,” 6:30 p.m. Thursday-Sunday, Sept. 11-14, Portland Center for the Performing Arts, Winningstad Theatre, 1111 S.W. Broadway, 503-224-7422, www.pica.org, \$15-\$20, mature audiences