

Written by Thom White

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Ed Villarreal deserves plenty of props for successfully completing a 90-minute monologue without any noticeable flubs – and with a few audience-specific ad libs – during Friday’s performance of *The Agony & the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* at the District Theatre. Memorizing and delivering an hour-and-a-half’s worth of text is no small feat, let alone delivering it with the inflections and nuance that Villarreal does.

Directed here by Tristan Layne Tapscott, author Mike Daisey’s one-man play is both a humorously-told history lesson (one spanning from Apple’s development in Jobs’ garage to his invention of the iPad) and a tale of Jobs’ gonzo-journalism discovery of the poor treatment of Chinese laborers making Apple devices. Daisey’s script is loaded with timely and relevant material, particularly regarding universal personal experiences with technology: our usage of early computers; our need to have cell phones always at our side; our coveting of constantly-churned-out new devices. There’s sharp, witty humor throughout the piece, as well as pointed disapproval of Jobs’ leadership of his company, and of his cruelly-managed Chinese factories.

And Villarreal proves a fit choice to deliver Daisey’s diatribe, most notably for the actor’s natural and ever-present geniality. It’s easy to want to hear his tale because Villarreal seems so friendly and connects with his audience from the moment the play begins. Despite there being an obvious separation between the actor and his listeners, Villarreal closes that gap and creates an

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air of "just sitting together and talking with each other" about Jobs' experiences in China and his excitement about technology.



Villarreal's amiability is a constant, even as the actor adds interest to his monologue by throwing a childlike tantrum over wanting to replace his 802.11 *N* router – all the while admitting that his personal computer habits don't require the advertised speeds of this new piece of tech. There are also numerous moments throughout the performance in which Villarreal lets loose with dynamic deliveries, such as his mimicking of a holy-rolling, hands-waving church experience while comparing technological advances to religion. At one point, the actor even imitates the movements and sounds of a dot matrix printer. In *The Agony & the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs*, Villarreal is affable, comical, and committed to the material.

Unfortunately, while it's notable for Villarreal to deliver a 90-minute monologue with such nuance and intensity, Daisey's story evolves into a morality tale in the later portions of the play, and does so with a preachiness that I found a bit difficult to sit through. (Then again, I generally struggle to focus all the way through sermons, lectures, and speeches.) Daisey has a definite message he wants to deliver and, by describing atrocities at Apple's Chinese factories, the playwright tries to drive that message home by way of instilling guilt in those of us who've purchased tech devices – namely Apple products – without considering the impact on the people who made them.

Fortunately, though, Daisey's writing is so clever and sharply written, and Villarreal's delivery is so fluid, unforced, and friendly, that the moralizing in the District Theatre's *The Agony & the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs* proves easy to forgive. And accept.

Upsetting the Apple Cart: "The Agony & the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," at the District Theatre through October

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The Agony & the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs *runs at the District Theatre (1611 Second Avenue, Rock Island) through October 13, and information and tickets are available by calling (309)235-1654 or visiting DistrictTheatre.com .*