

# SFGATE

Entertainment

## 'The Medium' Has a Message / Inventive theater imagines McLuhan in a future world

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predictions of Marshall McLuhan. Directed by Anne Bogart. (Theater Artaud. Through May 7.)

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'What's that buzzing?' the five tormented souls in "The Medium" keep asking, as they whirl and stagger and free- fall across the stage at Theater Artaud.

In director Anne Bogart's neoexpressionist theme-and-variations on the writings of media prophet Marshall McLuhan, the extraordinary performers in this Saratoga International Theater Institute production channel-surf through a cyberspace of the collective late 20th century mind, abuzz with prophetic messages.

Many are epigrams drawn from the works of McLuhan, from the famous notion that the medium is both the "message" and the "massage," to ideas about a preliterate age when "all the senses were simultaneous."

Add an epistemological shrug for good measure: "You don't like these ideas?" asks McLuhan (played in a heroic turn by Will Bond). "I got others."

There's also plenty in "The Medium" that was never dreamed of in McLuhan's philosophy. In a Swiftian catalog that comes near the end of the show, the performers seat themselves in bright 1950s kitchen chairs and lovingly recite, like acolytes in church, their dreams of a computer-dominated world of "global teledemocracies," "modular ultra bodies" and "asexual reproduction."

Dense as it is with verbiage, "The Medium" is anything but just a head trip. In this frantic yet rigorously choreographed piece, Bogart and her company fuse the cerebral to the visceral in 90 minutes of exhilarating, funny, exasperating and surprisingly moving theater. Performed in Bogart's singular style that draws on 1920s American Expressionism, modern dance, Japanese avant-garde theater, the somber performance art tableaux of Robert Wilson and other influences, the show embodies the "hot" and "cool" images of McLuhan's media taxonomy.

It was Bogart's intriguing goal to make a show about technology 'MEDIUM': Page C13 Col. 1 'MEDIUM': Looking Into the Future

From Page C1 that involved no technology, no video cameras or projection screens. The result is a kind of virtual stage reality, more teasing and abstract and scary than any construct of hardware and software. "The Medium" gets under your skin as no media event could.

The show is structured around a medical sci-fi speculation. What if, at the moment he suffered one of the strokes that deprived this great talker of speech late in life, McLuhan were to spin into a kind of multichannel universe?

Armed with a remote-control device that can zap him from one television realm to another, Bond's McLuhan sails from talk shows to detective dramas, a televangelist hour to "The Dating Game," where the discussion dwells on Faust

and Prometheus rather than the bachelorettes' taste in a man's height and hair color.

Dressed in high-water pants and a bow tie, Bond turns the media theoretician into an unlikely hero, roaring out his predictions like some electronic age Lear or bravely staggering his way through a simple sentence. His limbs twisted and forehead furrowed by the stroke, Bond is a tragicomic clown wandering a bleak cyber-highway littered with sitcoms and regret, contentless forms and gloomy visions of a dehumanized future.

Thanks to the vivid performances and richly layered visual and aural style of the piece, "The Medium" sets up a lively counterpoint to the looped, sampled and mechanically repeated text.

SITI company members J. Ed. Araiza, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and Stephen Webber all project a kind of ferocious automaton energy in everything from ventriloquist and dummy to newscast talking head and stand-up comic. The hyperkinetic jolts are balanced by slow processions across a simple set of black curtains and brushed metal frames.

Darron L. West's multivalenced sound-scape abruptly blurts out TV jingles, launches into a Dionne Warwick song and underscores Schubert's "Ave Maria" with an amplified heartbeat. Michitomo Shiohara's lighting has its own hot and cool rhythms.

"The Medium" does grow tedious in spots, as it hammers home its vision of an alien and electronically attenuated world. But it ends with a somber and painfully inspiring coda. His speech once again snarled by the stroke, McLuhan struggles to express a hope that "there is no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to articulate what is happening."