

## Review: ‘The Medium’ takes a wild ride through the mind of Marshall McLuhan

ON JANUARY 30, 2022 • ( 0 )

By Sharon Eberson

### After seeing *The Medium*, you may rethink your relationship with technology.

As I write this on a laptop, with my smartphone at the ready and smart TV within view, I realize more than ever that I am a part of “the global village” that Canadian philosopher **Marshall McLuhan** foretold 20 years before the birth of the Internet. Like the messages it delivers, SITl Company’s mesmerizing *The Medium* is both time capsule and timeless, so powerfully does it capture and reflect back on us the essence of humanity’s relationship with technology.

Returning to its place of origin, at City Theatre through Feb 13, *The Medium* explores McLuhan’s views on the dehumanizing nature of technology and the effects “on our perceptions, our psyches and our personal lives” when gizmos and gadgets become the idols we worship.



Cast members of SITl Company's *The Medium*, now at City Theatre, from left: Stephen Duff Webber, Giam-Murray Gianino, Ellen Lauren, Violeta Picayo and Will Bond. (Photo by Kristi Jan Hoover)

It can't be overemphasized that McLuhan's groundbreaking book "The Medium Is the Message" first appeared in 1964, and SITI first performed this astoundingly kinetic and penetrating work at the South Side theater in 1996, when the iPhone was still 11 years in our future.

The cast of six is led by **Will Bond** as McLuhan, an intense portrayal achieved in seemingly perpetual motion while catapulting fits of wisdom at the audience. McLuhan, a soundbite machine, has been described in Wired Magazine as "a skeptic, a joker, and an erudite maniac ... who never allowed his fun to be ruined by the adoption of a coherent point of view."

Bond's electrifying performance takes all of that into account, along with McLuhan's standing as a prophet of the Information Age.

I was not in attendance for that inaugural production, but so much of what is on stage in 2022 seems of the moment that I had to ask what, if anything, had been altered for today's audiences.

City's co-artistic director, **Marc Masterson**, who was at the South Side company for the debut in 1996, said any changes from then to now were "small and for flow, and not content."

"The text is both from McLuhan and from sources like Wired Magazine and other futurist thinkers," Masterson said. "When we did it originally, it was all farfetched whacky imaginings, and now we are living in it. That is the main difference – us, not the text."

As the show opens, Bond enters as McLuhan in what might be a Ted Talk, before he leads his castmates through a wormhole of sensory McLuhan-isms.

Bond is surrounded by the dSITI ensemble of **Gian-Murray Gianino**, **Ellen Lauren**, **Barney O'Hanlon**, **Violeta Picayo**, and **Stephen Duff Webber** in whirls of intermittent chaos and clarity.

Each ensemble member comes armed with only a colorful chair as a prop on a minimalist set, allowing for entrances, exits, and framing the action. The high-voltage energy derives entirely from the actors.



Ellen Lauren and Will Bond as Marshall McLuhan, in SITY Company's "The Medium" at City Theatre. (Photo by Kristi Jan Hoover)

Conceived and directed by SITI co-artistic director **Anne Bogart**, *The Medium* delves into its subject's erratic playfulness and allows his scholarly brilliance to shine through. Bond's McLuhan is constantly reminding those around him, "You don't like that idea? I've got others."

There isn't a hint of monotony in the repetition of those ideas, with their impact evolving through changed scenarios, or rather, changing the channel, from a Western to a noir to stand-up comedy – different delivery methods with the same warning signs about following where technology may lead us.

For much of it, the future is now. The prescient representation of virtual reality, for example, allows that we can be – take a stroll as a dinosaur and leave the real world behind, all through the marvels of technology.

Bond starts out as a virtual puppet master, in control of the ensemble as the keeper of a remote control that flips the switch on where technology can take us until it seems to turn the tables.

A turning point arrives when we hear Dionne Warwick singing "(Theme From) Valley of the Dolls" ... When did I get, where did I / How was I caught in this game ... The volume increases and overtakes Bond's spilling of words ... When will I know, where will I / How will I learn who I am ...

Got that earworm stuck in your head now? There was a time when Marshall McLuhan's catchphrase "the medium is the message" was like a musical earworm. He became a sort of celebrity scholar, even appearing in the movie *Annie Hall* to explain himself. His lectures on the subject are available on YouTube, where you can hear him answer to such notions as media leading to "an electrical retribalization" of society.

So much of McLuhan's vision is stunningly accurate nearly 60 years after his influence began to spread. And now, 25 years after SITI Company put its stamp on his words, that vision has been manifested once again on City's stage. The revival next moves on to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York City, delivering the messages of a 20th-century iconoclast through the dynamic medium of theater.

At City Theatre, 13 Bingham St., South Side. Tickets: 412-431-CITY (2489)  
or [CityTheatreCompany.org](http://CityTheatreCompany.org).