



The Accidental Futurist Ensemble: SITI Company's "The Medium" At BAM

by Cindy Sibilsky - March 21, 2022



The year is 1993: Bill Clinton becomes president of the US; the World Trade Center is bombed by Islamic Fundamentalists; the FBI raids Branch Davidians, a religious cult in Waco, TX; Russia and the US sign a treaty; an earthquake and tsunami devastate Japan; brush fires ravage Australia; ethnic fighting causes turmoil in Bosnia; Ty introduces plush toys called Beanie Babies; the tech company Intel launches its Premium Processor. And an ensemble-based theater company called SITI Company devises the play *The Medium* in Toga-Mura, Japan. *The Medium* returns almost 30 years later to BAM Fisher, Fishman Space from March 15-20.

As Shakespeare wrote in Hamlet's speech to the players, good theater holds "a mirror" to nature and society. It seems like the SITI Company had a crystal ball instead. *The Medium* was created in 1993 but the themes it explores are undeniably current today and frighteningly possible in the near future. So, during their ensemble-driven process of creating *The Medium*, I wonder if they imagined the work would be so shockingly relevant nearly three decades later? Or perhaps the

collective that has always been on the cutting-edge of theatrical explorations didn't know they were accidental futurists?

The Medium is a fictional ensemble play with absurdist elements based on the life and predictions of Marshall McLuhan. Active before terms like "Futurist" were thrown around as they are today (though the term was coined by a group of Italians in 1909), McLuhan was a communication theorist who rose to fame and notoriety in the 1960s for his studies and theories regarding the effects of mass media on thought and behavior. He proposed that the medium, not the message, should be the focus of investigative study.



Ellen Lauren, Gian-Murray Gianino, Will Bond, Violeta Picayo, and Stephen Duff Webber in *The Medium* at BAM.
Photo by Steven Molina Contreras.

Some speculate that McLuhan predicted the Internet when he spoke of the electronic age and a "global village" where everyone had access to the same information through technology. He also noted, "The next medium, whatever it is — it may be the extension of consciousness — will include television as its content, not as its environment, and will transform television into an art form."

Television, not the Internet, is the basis of SITI Company's exploration of McLuhan's theories, predictions, and outlook of what the future may hold. After all, television was invented and active during McLuhan's lifetime (1911-1980) and is still an

important medium of media today. *The Medium* imagines McLuhan in his post-stroke state (McLuhan had a stroke in 1979, lost his speech, never really recovered, and died the following year). McLuhan (played by the marvelous Will Bond, a founding member of the SITI Company who performed another role in the original 1993 piece) enters a trippy television world à la Alice Through the Looking-Glass. He's greeted there by four players (the truly excellent ensemble of Gian-Murray Gianino, Violeta Picayo, Ellen Lauren, and Stephen Duff Webber). The ensemble members and McLuhan transform themselves into characters from multiple genres seen on TV like film noir, family sitcoms, medical dramas, daytime dramas, westerns, religious shows, cooking shows, news programs, and commercials. Bond's McLuhan controls the various vignettes as best he can through the click of his remote control.

The text, repeated throughout by the performers in different sequences like an evening-length Meisner Technique exercise, is clever, potent, profound, hilarious, and eerie. I tried to write down as many quotes as I could in the darkened theater but finally gave up. (I managed to catch one of my favorites, "Narcissist Narcosis"). That futility reminded me of feeling bombarded by too much content in our electronic age of information. It's exhausting to keep up, and that's very much the point *The Medium* is trying to make. I can't be sure how the actors accomplished what they did, but they looked like they were having a blast doing it.

The ensemble, including Bond, are vocal, physical and emotional acrobats. Bond and Lauren, both founding members of the SITI Company and the oldest performers on stage are particularly notable. They are fearlessly irreverent yet thoroughly grounded. But the entire ensemble works as a team to create something in which the heightened sense of grandiosity and melodrama only softens the blow of how uncomfortably real much of this nightmarish world is. *The Medium* has us all in its grips, and it's too late now; there is no way to escape.



Ellen Lauren and Will Bond in *The Medium* at BAM. Photo by Steven Molina Contreras.

The soundscapes provided by Tony and Obie award-winning sound designer Darron L. West, who has been with SITI since 1993, add another layer. Each scene changes so fast (at the click of McLuhan's remote control) that it would be impossible to transform the sets. Instead, the blank canvas has strategically placed walls and rapid pace lighting cues by Brian H. Scott adapted from original scenic designs by Neil Patel. That offers a canvas for West's soundscapes that vary from music that immediately clues you to the TV genre to sound bytes from the news to electronic beats and underlying ominous noises.

Another significant contribution to the suspension of disbelief as we bounce from station to station is costuming by Gabriel Berry. One could forgive the company for resorting to a single costume with a prop or two per actor due to the quickness of scene changes. But Berry (who has clothed performers for Samuel Beckett, Christopher Durang, Peter Sellars, Charles Mee, and Tennessee Williams, among others) has crafted a walk-in closet worth of garments that establish the scene the moment the performer appears. I quickly lost count of the number of costumes and props for each ensemble member, but I felt great sympathy and admiration for the stage manager in charge, Ellen M. Lavaia.

The actors do the rest. The Medium's cast possesses an almost superhuman ability to seamlessly switch channels and embody another person and era entirely in the blink of an eye. *The Medium* is a wild ride in a made-up world that feels all too familiar. It would be terrifying like an episode of *Black Mirror* if it wasn't so darn entertaining.

Of course, I would be remiss to sing praises of the SITI Company without mentioning its co-founder and co-Artistic Director, Anne Bogart. Bogart created SITI in 1992 with Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki and championed the Suzuki method across the world for three decades. Bogart conceived and directed *The Medium* in 1993 and helmed its incarnations over the years, including the present-day production. These moving parts would be messy mayhem if not for her deftness for creating environments of controlled chaos that give way to an explosion of creativity and meaning.



Stephen Duff Webber (front) and Will Bond in *The Medium* at BAM. Photo by Steven Molina Contreras.

Bogart's work has given her such a legendary status in the global theatre world that I got to witness attendees come to pay homage before the show began. A young woman came up to her and said, "I came from Mexico just to see *The Medium*." With trailblazers like the SIT Company entering their third decade and still inspiring new generations of theatre-makers, one can't help but wonder what the next theatrical Futurists are brewing and what their ensembles might look like?

McLuhan's ideas may have seemed rather outrageous, even on the verge of science fiction in the 1960s, but they seemed less so in the '90s. Today, many have already happened. Some of the most outlandish statements made by characters in *The Medium*, like "humans will live on other planets, and Earth will become a tourist attraction," are what Futurists would deem "possible" or even "probable" future scenarios. (It is interesting that Futurists consider very few theories as "impossible." Time travel and teleportation are two of those).

The Medium loses its focus and meanders a bit toward the end, leaving you to feel like McLuhan, lost in a bombardment of stimulus without a clear exit. But it raises vital questions: Will these devices that consume our time and energy continue to control us? Are we able to flip the switch for a brief time and share a collective experience together, like watching a play, without needing to reach for our phones once it's over? Or will we, like McLuhan's character in *The Medium*, be lost forever, consumed not by the message but by the medium?

In the spirit of the past, present, and future colliding, this engagement is part of SITI Company's Legacy Plan that includes multiple activities and events to honor and celebrate SITI Company's 30 years of achievements in global theatre before "the sun sets" on SITI at the end of 2022. Under the Legacy Plan, there will be a Finale season, the creation of the SITI Living Archive, information-sharing activities to the theater community, and grants to help the ensemble members transition in their artistic careers. So even as the sun is setting on SITI Company, the ensemble looks toward the future.

SITI Company's The Medium plays BAM Fisher, BAM Fisher, Fishman Space from March 15-20. For tickets and more information visit [BAM.org](https://www.bam.org). For more information on SITI Company and the Legacy Plan, visit [siti.org](https://www.siti.org).