

Skidmore performance really clicks

BY MICHAEL ECK

Special to the Times Union

SARATOGA SPRINGS — "Hello, I'm Marshall McLuhan. I haven't seen you before. Are you new here?"

The Saratoga International Theater Institute opened its second brief season this weekend at Skidmore College with Anne Bogart and the institute's

REVIEW

ensemble collective piece, "The Medium" — a challenging portrayal of the theories of the original media watchdog, Marshall McLuhan.

Click.

"Infomania erodes our capacity for significance."

The work, done in Bogart's trademark marriage of dance, expressionism, and vaudeville, takes place in the conceived reality of McLuhan's brain while he suffers a stroke — clicking away at a remote to find the mockery of one TV show after another spewing his own ideas (and a plethora of newer theorists' as well) back at him.

Click.

"You don't like these ideas? I've got others."

Layer after layer of quotation, information and stimulation is poured over the audience, in a stream as fast-moving as McLuhan predicted it would one day be — an "ecstasy" of communication so endless, so ebb and flow, it's "obscene."

Click.

"What's that buzzing?"

As such the play is as much an alarm call for the world to wake up to what it's doing to itself as it is a biography or a play or a pop culture thrill ride — Bogart's director's notes, simply a full quotation of the "Theme from Valley of the Dolls," pray for an end to the ride ("Gotta get off, gonna get, hafta get off this ride.")

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"Violence is a quest for identity."

The conception and construction of the play is brilliant; achieving Bogart's description of the work as a kaleidoscope or a hallucination. The spiraling text repeats and rewinds itself, coming at every turn from a new character's mouth; game show host, cowboy, and televangelist. all

regurgitating theory in place of 'who's the next contestant,' "this town ain't big enough for both of us," and "put your hands on the screen."

Click.

"Ever tuck your kid in from a pay phone?"

The ensemble — and this is an ensemble piece — is faced with the giant task of reeling out the brain-babble while enduring Bogart's notoriously physical choreography — flitting from slow-motion to hip-hop dance, freezing in position to throwing one's self on the floor, turning a table into a human turtle to . . .

Click.

"The earth will be a tourist attraction."

Tom Nelis' McLuhan is the perfect combination of visionary thinker and scared simple man. He is the highlight of a truly impressive cast filled out by Puk Scharbau, Will Bond, Kelly Maurer and the wonderful Mark Corkins.

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"The age of writing has passed."

The five also find the humor in these words and situations, turning one heck of a stuffy, heady play into a funny, stuffy, heady, and mightily enjoyable play — from blackout to blackout, right through a rather hilarious, but telling, final fast-forward of the entire show. They hold the audience tight throughout. Michitomo Shiohara's lights and Darron L. West's sound were equally weighted as members of the cast.

Click.

"I don't pretend to understand my theories."

An explosive standing ovation seemed the only option.

Click.

"You can't go home again."

Click.

T H E A T E R

If medium's the message, examine the messenger

"We live in this age, you and me, and because of technology and the huge changes that are happening with communications media, I think that we are changing as human beings; kind of drastically."

While others toy with a plethora of new electronic gadgets, gizmos and whiz-bangs, from e-mail to virtual reality, Anne Bogart toys with where they're taking us.

This concern is expressed in her new play, "The Medium," which makes its American premiere this weekend at Skidmore College, a presentation of the Saratoga International Theater Institute.

The play is based on the work of famed author and theorist Marshall McLuhan, who rocked the world's vision of itself in seminal works like

"The Global Village" and "The Medium is the Massage."

"I wanted to do a piece about the human aspect of it," the director says, "so I decided to do two things. One was to go back to the granddaddy of the philosophers of this direction, which was McLuhan — who was really the first person who started thinking profoundly and in a very poetic way about what this is doing to us. The other — to show that this is about us and not the machines — was to do it with absolutely no technology onstage."

SITI's resident company will perform the intensely physical dance/theater piece.

"I had five questions I wanted the piece to answer," Bogart says.

Finding the answers involved

months of research into McLuhan's works, words and life, as well as corraling information from almost 150 sources including current pop social thinkers.

Those questions were, "What does this new discarnate landscape that's developing look like? What is the role of art in this world of technology? What is the effect of new technology on our psychology? What is the effect of new technology on our relationships? What does the future look like — in a nuts and bolts, actual kind of way?"

The answers are held within what she calls the "hallucinogenic voyage" of "The Medium."

Bogart doesn't paint a pretty picture of McLuhan the man.

"He was a Catholic, right-wing,

homophobic who was afraid of the television. He could barely turn the channel, yet he spent his life studying the media. People would ask him, "Do you like television? Do you like the media?" He would answer, well it doesn't really matter what I think about it. . . . He didn't like the TV or the telephone but he felt we had to face off with what they are."

McLuhan was a talker, she says, to the point that his books were simply recorded speeches.

His stroke and ensuing loss of speech left her with a starting point.

"The stroke facilitates a sort of kaleidoscope of things that can happen to him theatrically. During the stroke he has a remote control and every time he hits it he gets

bounced into another TV program and his theories are thrown back at him."

Scenes shift abruptly, "At times manically, suddenly lyrically, as in the blips and bleeps of electronic media," she said.

"You're seeing him propelled through his life and his theories until at the end he loses his voice."

"It's a little like one of those dreams that happen in a split-second but feel like they go on for a year. This is an hour-and-25-minute piece that happens in an instant in his mind."

The play debuted to extremely positive response (according to the playwright) in Japan last month, at Bogart cohort Tadashi Suzuki's Toga International Arts Festival.

— Michael Eck