

Draw, Marshall

The Extensions of McLuhan

Some people cry at *Old Yeller* or *Sleepless in Seattle*. I cried at *The Medium*, an Off-Broadway play about Marshall McLuhan. But as I wept (only a little), I laughed: A tearjerker about Marshall McLuhan? About communications theory? Yes! Tears have been jerked for so much less. In fact, few subjects could field more passion. Whatever else one says about McLuhan—a controversial thinker, portrayed here in a debatable interpretation—he was passionate about “needing the somnambulists.”

McLuhan used to be my goosebump man: wielding the lightest of touches, he made me heady; his broad, tantalizing generalities were counterpointed by direct hits to the brain. As he says in *The Medium*, “The only way you reach people is to hurt them. You really have to cut to the bone to reach them.” Misunderstood or over-understood, obscure or bracing, McLuhan just wanted to play ball: “You don’t like these ideas, I got others.”

The Medium—which unfolds in McLuhan’s own recursive style, his aphorisms repeated in different “media,” from a *Valley of the Dolls* fantasia to cowboy, rap, and rave scenarios—makes clear that the man who said the medium is the message is himself a medium. Actually, McLuhan’s twice a medium: He’s the loose theoretical construct we still use to (just barely) understand the effects of our televisions, telephones, and computers, and he’s also that other kind of medium—a channeler, a poet who conjures technological myths to explain and to warn. When one sensory mode dominates, he explained, it allows us to experience the previous one as an “art form.” (When TV appeared, movies became art.) Technologies, or the “extensions of man,” he said, numb man. (Each extension is a “self-amputation”: to survive an amputation, systems go into shock, numb out.)

Director Anne Bogart, by tilting toward McLuhan’s more dire pronouncements (“I wish none of these technologies had ever happened, but I want to study change to conquer it.” “This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss.”), presents him as a medium who eventually caved in under the weight of electronic weightlessness—as if the series of strokes he suffered toward the end (he died in 1980) resulted from being psychically overwired. “What’s that buzzing?” he asks repeatedly in *The Medium*. “What’s happening?” Until finally, the communications guru is unable to get out the next syl...la...ble. In Tom Nelis’s astounding (and Obie-winning) performance, the seemingly detached analyst spends minutes stammering out the one idea he held to fervently: “There’s no inevitability as long as there is our will to contemplate what is happening.”

It was at this point I cried. McLuhan’s breakdown might have been the death of a friend, not by disease or accident, but by the banal buildup of beeping phones, computers, faxes, answering machines, and voice-mail menus. Indeed, the full extension of man, as *The Medium* suggests, may not be anything as mysterious as cyberpunk, but the stifling pleasures of home shopping.

But is that hint of causality in McLuhan’s stroke fair? Am I personally so stricken over technol-



“I’ve caved in under the weight of electronic weightlessness—and I can’t get up!”

ogy—haunted by images of tumbling alone toward death in a 2001-like fall through space, mocked by a waltz and my space suit—that I am only too glad to see this fear given such dramatic form? This, of course, is the sticking point for some critics, like my colleague Ross Wetzstein, who wrote in these pages a few weeks ago that Bogart’s “stance is relentlessly technophobic, a position she seems to attribute to McLuhan but one far more typical of his detractors.”

Phobe or phile, what would McLuhan have made of the Net, virtual reality, e-mail, and the corporate tic, “When In Doubt, Spout ‘Interactive’”? Would he have maintained that chipper attitude that seemed to endorse each technotease, or would he have found a numbness too great to bear? To find out, I spent an evening seeing the play again and dining out with two deep-dish McLuhanites.

My Dinner With...? Nelson Thall and Bob Dobbs each describes himself as McLuhan’s “chief archivist.” Along with McLuhan’s daughter Mary, these two Canadians are the center of the Marshall McLuhan Center on Global Communications, a research/consulting group of which Nelson, who studied under McLuhan, is president. Bob (who, in case you were wondering, says he is the inspiration for the Church of the SubGenius) performs a mixed-media radio show for Pacifica’s KPFA in Los Angeles, urging listeners to go on a “media fast.” Actor Tom Nelis came, too, in-

trigued that these guys had actually (though unsuccessfully) asked Henry Kissinger—who “half” sits on the McLuhan Center’s board—to attend this night’s performance. As Nelson’s limo swept us uptown to the Park Avenue Cafe, Tom and I listened incredulously while these, well, aggressive Canadians spun a conspiracy theory of Octopus proportions. While I’m not at liberty to reveal details, suffice it to say that the connections whipped through McLuhan, Kissinger (whom McLuhan once dubbed “the Kissingner of Death”), *The Exorcist*, Lennon, Elvis, laser beams, and the French. Conspiracy, oh. But Bob and Nelson’s answer to my sigh was one of that night’s many McLuhanisms (these two know each other so well they finish each other’s quoting): “Only puny secrets need protection. The big secrets are protected by public incredulity.”

“There’s a McLuhan revival,” Bob is saying, and it’s not just in the theater. It’s in *Wired* magazine, which lists McLuhan as its “patron saint” and runs a tiny McLuhan photo and quote in its masthead. It’s in cyberbooster Timothy Leary referring now and again to the Big M. It’s in the fall of the Berlin Wall and the faxes from Tiananmen Square, when the post-Cold War world suddenly woke up to the “global village,” practically asking travel agents to book flights there. (“Actually, Marshall talked about a global theater,” Nelson corrects. “Satellites made the planet an art form by framing it.”) And mostly, of course, the McLuhan revival is

stimulated by fascination with the Internet, the Superhighway, etc., etc., etc.

As the liveliest piece of revival so far, is *The Medium* fair to suggest some McLuddite in the McLuminary? “The answer to that,” Nelson says, “is what Marshall would say: ‘If you don’t study the effects of technology, you become its slave.’”

Some of the dissonance over the play lies in the times, says Bob. “Marshall inventoried the services and disservices of technologies on different cultures with suspended judgment. But in the optimism of the utopian ‘60s, people projected onto McLuhan an optimistic interpretation. The whole media environment was such that because he was talking about TV seriously, people thought he was ‘for’ it and ‘against’ print.” It’s true—the sheer exuberance with which he expressed his ideas, an exuberance sparked whenever he slapped together concepts, television against radio, village against globe, electron against paper—transferred to the content of his ideas. (The medium is...)

“But these are more pessimistic times,” Bob continues. “Anne is emphasizing the disservices of the electronic environment, disservices which Marshall predicted.” (Bob and Nelson prefer “services” and “disservices” to “good” and “bad.”)

But neither was McLuhan merely a nonjudgmental prophet that society misinterpreted depending on the decade. “The negative, depressing view of technology is accurate in relation to the

really knew about until the letters came out,” Bob tells me by phone a few days later (Many of the play’s quotes come from the letters.) “He was a deeply religious man, a convert to Catholicism who went to mass every day. In the ‘70s [after his ‘60s heyday], he would be talking to colleagues or priests and he’d almost be in tears describing the effects of the satellite environment. I heard him say we were doomed. He said television is much more dangerous than the atomic bomb. He spoke of how we would be collectively numbed for the next hundred years. He called the devil ‘the prince of the air,’ a master of both software and hardware, a great electric engineer, a genius of public relations. Privately, he hated technology.”

“But Marshall also felt that his personal point of view may be wrong. He wasn’t willing to base his interpretations on it. This new technology would do things to people that they were in no way equipped to understand, and he felt foremost that he had to describe it without personal identification. Also, he was genuinely intrigued—there could be new things out there that are going to save us.”

In that sense Anne’s play is a disservice to the actual McLuhan who stood calmly at the center of the storm. It’s an incomplete image, just as the portrait of McLuhan as an optimist is an incomplete image. The people who knew Marshall don’t like *The Medium*—except Nelson and me, but we’re perverse. It’s very hard to present Marshall. The play’s not Marshall, but who cares? All humans are inside this electric environment, we’ve disappeared into this electric virtual landscape. It’s an extension of us, we made it, but the effects for most human cultures are just devastating. It’s a pretty negative view of it, but [the play] shows how prescient Marshall was on the disservice level. Knowing the play’s incomplete, bravo. It might make people look into his ideas a little more.”

To cry at *The Medium*? Well, as Bob and Nelson say Marshall says, “The user is the content.” One McLuhan could magnificently manipulate technological theory; the other McLuhan may have been emotionally wracked. This is not a contradiction but just different extensions of McLuhan. As a hiccup of haiku beeped throughout *The Medium*: “Hands have no tears to flow.” ■

The New York Theater Workshop production of The Medium closes June 12. Information: 307-6989.

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