



No String

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By Ross Wetzsteon

The Medium
By Anne Bogart
New York Theatre Workshop
79 East 4th Street
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At the end of one of Marshall McLuhan's lectures in the '60s, a member of the audience asked, "You've given us a number of pearls, but where's the string?" "String," McLuhan responded, to the delight of the audience, "is cheap." At the time it seemed like the perfect riposte, but on reflection you have to wonder who was right. String may be cheap, but without it you have to keep your pearls in a box.

A brilliant phrasemaker—"the medium is the message," "the global village"—McLuhan was an almost incoherent thinker, his kaleidoscopic books crammed with half-truths, preposterous claims, and hundreds of contradictory aphorisms passing as provocative

ideas. It'd be hard, in fact, to imagine a more unreliable guide through the media maze he so ingeniously labeled. And when the McLuhan figure announces near the beginning of Anne Bogart's *The Medium* that his work is "value-free," we know that the guide himself is already hopelessly lost. Not only is the assertion false—for one thing, he's largely responsible for the pejorative connotations of "linear" thinking—but in celebrating McLuhan's work Bogart both misrepresents his values and endorses values he called into dispute.

According to McLuhan, "The banal and ritual remark of the conventionally literate that TV represents an experience for the passive viewer is wide of the mark. TV is above all a medium that demands a creatively participant response." But Bogart, though hardly an example of the "conventionally literate," almost immediately stages a scene demonstrating the zombie-like effects of TV viewing and using the remote as a kind of stun gun. Throughout the piece, in fact, her stance is relentlessly technophobic, a position she seems to attribute to McLuhan but one far more typical of his detractors.

McLuhan constantly stressed the significance of form and the irrelevance of content, and if Bogart's medium were her message all misgivings about her muddled ideas would give way to admiration for her imaginative direction. *The Medium* bombards the audi-

ence with 90 minutes of McLuhan quotes and paraphrases, while the five performers illustrate the words in stunning images, dancery movements, and evocative tableaux. (Tom Nelis gives an extraordinarily energetic performance as McLuhan, particularly poignant when enacting an articulate man struggling to speak while suffering a series of strokes.) But the overwhelming irony of the evening is that such an innovative, "experimental" production should express such conventional, unexamined values. Bogart replicates McLuhan's mosaic, concentric form with rigorous precision and quirky grace—but in the service of an anti-electronic content he would have deplored.

The list of issues McLuhan foresaw is complex and multidimensional—from the role of television in the collapse of Communism to the psychopolitical implications of cyberspace, from the redefinition of creativity by postmodernism to the moral ambiguities of a virtual-reality culture. Yet the list of responses Bogart makes to his work is simplistic and traditional—complaints about the dehumanizing effects of technology, dismay at the degree to which the simulacrum has replaced the real, and so on.

Perhaps it's only natural that a theater practitioner should vigorously deny the life-enhancing potential of the electronic media, but McLuhan, whatever his failings, was more interested in increasing awareness than in validating the past. And that's what's most distressing about *The Medium*—that one of our most visionary artists should seem so fearful of the future. ■