

Anne Bogart's 'The Medium' McLuhan is the Message

by Chad Jones

If the medium, as Marshall McLuhan tells us, is the message, then Anne Bogart's *The Medium* at Theater Artaud is one mighty message indeed. Inspired by the life and predictions of McLuhan, a pop culture philosopher who emerged in the '60s as "the oracle of the electronic age," *The Medium* is a frenetic, wildly involving theater piece – the kind of performance art that deigns to include the audience rather than lose them in avant garde pretensions.

Conceived by Bogart (with input from her astute cast of five) and based on McLuhan's work, *The Medium* is an expressionistic journey through McLuhan's media-fixated mind as it suffers the violent jolts of a stroke that, ironically, led to McLuhan's loss of speech communication. As McLuhan loses control of his mind and body, his thoughts and words are personified by the other cast members. One scene blends into another as the actors use McLuhan's thoughts as dialogue.

While the actors may be playing a scene in the style of a family sitcom or a newscast, the words they use are McLuhan's. The sounds of their voices and their performances are specific to the scene, but the actual words they use are McLuhanisms such as "infomania erodes your capacity for significance" or "media eases the burden of experience."

Focuses on prophet's ideas

The text of the show is a repetitive recitation of McLuhan's amazingly accurate appraisal of the ways in which media – from computer networks to cable television to telecommunication innovations – have, for better or worse, revolutionized mankind's entire being. The success of *The Medium* rests in part on the accessible, powerfully pertinent content of McLuhan's message, which is even more amazing given that McLuhan died in 1980, before cable television, videos, the Internet, laptops and cellular telephones took over the country. The onslaught of these media brought McLuhan to the "chicken little" conclusion: "the sky is falling – this is the end of history."

That the work of this contemporary thinker could be brought to life so vividly is a tribute to the skill of Bogart, her actors – J. Ed Araiza, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and Stephen Webber – and the training they received at the Saratoga International Theater Institute, which was created by Bogart and Tadashi Suzuki.

The SITI training focuses on creating a precise vocabulary of movement that requires total body control, and the extent to which this training succeeds is apparent through the entire 90-minute show. Tortured, humorous, graceful and jarring, the performers are quite literally acting dancers throwing themselves fully into the kinetic tableaux of Bogart's creation. Aside from the pithy bite of McLuhan's message, *The Medium* offers the pleasure of watching multi-talented performers, whose control of their physical being is awesome.

Cumulative emotional impact

The overwhelming talent and skill of these actors does not stop at mere movement, however. The ensemble is as vocally dexterous as it is physical. As the individuals play out their scenes from a noirish murder mystery, a cooking demonstration, and a stand-up comedy act (among others), they exhibit glorious vocal ranges and expert timing. The result of these combined skills is a



Photo: Richard Trigg

Ellen Lauren and Will Bond in *The Medium*.

poignant ambiguity that brings the bizarre, non-linear, non-narrative nature of the show into the world of emotion.

From the excellent ensemble, two performances stand out. Bond's McLuhan is wondrous. Physically crippled by his stroke, he wanders through the media-afflicted landscape of his mind, sometimes merely observing, sometimes participating, but always offering up endless commentary: "I am not by type or conviction a revolutionary," and "There is no new world order, only new world chaos" are frequent refrains. Bond's agonizing physical depiction of McLuhan concludes with the debilitated philosopher crammed into a small wooden crate – an apt metaphor for man's retreat into a non-user friendly world overrun with empty communication.

Among the supporting players, Maurer stands out as a virtual master of her craft. Her range of expression – both vocally and physically – is phenomenal. Maurer's showpiece is her bit as a ventriloquist's dummy, in which she displays not only the skill of a consummate actor, but also the depth and universality of a well-trained clown.

Bogart's direction has wrought an intensely complex, fascinating and artful exploration of one man's thoughts on the current and future state of mankind. Bogart demands a great deal of her audience – especially in terms of concentration – but she rewards them with coherence, visceral impact and, most importantly, a good show.

Because the show leaves the audience mentally drained, it could be shorter, but this is a minor complaint. Beyond its intellectually challenging composition, its masterful use of incredibly talented actors and its overall sensory onslaught, Bogart's *The Medium* is a necessary, stimulating exercise for our media-addled brains. ▼

■ *The Medium* continues at Theater Artaud through May 7. Call 621-7797 for information.