

# Mixed Messages

*The Medium* lacks a dramatic raison d'être; *Angels* remains thrilling theater

By Mari Coates

"All media work us over completely," said Marshall McLuhan, the social philosopher best known for his pioneering exploration into the effects of electronic media on the human psyche. As conceived and directed by Anne Bogart, and presented by the New York-based Saratoga International Theater Institute, *The Medium* has a similar mission. But while the performers display amazing virtuosity of voice and movement, the show itself remains remote and mechanical.

The character of "McLuhan" appears on the bare stage, apparently in the throes of a stroke that in real life robbed McLuhan of speech at the end of his life. The actor's voice, electronically projected, barrages us with the first wave of quotes that provide the thematic refrains over the course of 90 minutes: "The medium is the message" is served up over and over, along with "Only by understanding change can you ease the burden of experiencing it"; "Why is man so unhappy that he wants to change his world?"; and, finally, "I want to study change to gain power over it." The latter caught my attention as the possible seed of dramatic action: quotable quotes aside, this is theater, and theater requires action.

Appropriately cued, the company makes its slow-motion way onto the stage, carrying their chairs warily, like lion tamers, to the musical strains of "Ave Maria." McLuhan continues to dispense wisdom while he orchestrates their movements with his ever-ready remote control. "Hello, I'm Marshall McLuhan. I haven't seen you before. Are you new here?" he asks, over and over. "You can't go home again," he repeats sorrowfully, as he channels surfs from vignette to vignette.

There is brilliant lighting (Michitomo Shiohara), a spare streamlined set (Anita Stewart), evocative costumes (Gabriel Berry) and a powerful "soundscape" (Darron L. West). The Saratoga International Theater Institute company — J. Ed. Araiza, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and Stephen Webber — is a remarkable group whose physical skills suggest unlimited resource of instrument. They seem to be able to do anything, from amazing contortions of body to effortless projections of voice. But even more impressive is their ensemble work, which enables them literally to breathe together.

*The Medium* introduces San Francisco to the work of expressionistic director Anne Bogart, considered by some to be a radical visionary of the American theater. A self-proclaimed advocate of the deconstruction of

familiar texts, Bogart produces work clearly intended to surprise us and upset our expectations as audience. I would very much like to see such a production — for instance, Bogart's take on *Hamlet*.

The problem with *The Medium* is its subject: The text is itself a deconstruction; there is nothing inherently dramatic about the writings of McLuhan. As provocative as they are, they are observations and, as such, are intended to explain action rather than create it. That leaves McLuhan's subject matter as the vehicle for drama, which is a huge flaw theatrically. Why? We have grown too familiar with the language of electronic media. We process instantly the show's message as conveyed by its visual metaphor of channel surfing — the alienating, impersonal world of repeated sound bites — and within minutes have slipped into the hazy hypnotic state of the veteran TV watcher.

If anyone could bring this material to life, it should be the SITTI company. And for 40 minutes or so, the visually interesting staging and design keeps us focused. But, as we are reminded over and over, the point is to grasp the nature of change, "to study change to gain power over it." When nothing occurs, when

times seems more about his imprint than Tony Kushner's brilliant and beautiful play.

This impression starts with the set, a claustrophobic construction of steel, credited to designer Kate Edmunds. Edmunds' work has always struck me as strongly harmonizing the play with the physical context she creates — I'm particularly thinking of *Othello*, now playing at the Stage Door. Since *Angels*' set seems to work against the writing, I suspect Wing-Davey had a hand in it. (If this is not the case, apologies all around.)

Edmunds' set — especially in *Millennium Approaches*; it opens up considerably for *Pere-stroika* — encloses the stage in impersonal, inflexible metal, as though boxing the action in a giant Erector Set. But Kushner's play (in which gays grapple with AIDS, Mormons grapple with homosexuality and everyone grapples with the villainous Roy Cohn) is about expansion, about the pain inherent in change. The language is expressive, enormous; the message is overwhelmingly human. So why this mechanistic, impersonal, future-world view? Beats me. Unless one takes the ungenerous stand that this is a director who is competing with the playwright, who needs to serve his own vision



Ellen Lauren and Will Bond take their places in *The Medium*.

repetition is the design, when everything seems locked behind a screen of bluish light, we glaze over, as well.

Theater is about live human beings onstage creating a unique and irretrievable event with live human beings in an audience. Its appeal is its protean nature, that its experience cannot be fixed onto film or tape, but happens in the now, creating a vivid shared moment before disappearing. It is the human element — the synergy of actors and audience — that causes theater to transcend its technological boundaries. Paradoxically, these limits create a sense of the unlimitedness of human experience. We come for the blood and flesh of it. At the end of *The Medium*, I felt as if I had spent too much time watching television: numb, a bit distracted, off center. To pull another pithy McLuhan quote from the show, "Obscenity begins where there is no more theater." Agreed.

I returned to *Angels in America* this week to revisit the work of another director, Mark Wing-Davey, because ACT's production at

rather than the play's.

There have been some cast changes since last fall, with more to come now that the show has been extended yet again (through June 4). I very much liked Colin Martin as Prior Walter and Doug Tompos as Joseph Porter Pitt. I also happened to see understudy Louis Parnell as Roy Cohn in *Millennium*; except for an opening scene in which he was unforgivably limp-wristed (editorial choice again? As I recall, Peter Zapp, who usually plays the role, also sports a distinctly fey attitude, which is wrong, wrong, wrong for the closeted Cohn), Parnell added depth and dimension to the role.

The others — notably Gregory Wallace, Lise Bruneau, Julia Gibson and Cristine McMurdo-Wallis — are still delivering solidly memorable performances. And despite my quarrels with director Wing-Davey, *Angels in America* is still the theatrical experience of a lifetime.

*The Medium* continues through May 7 at Theater Artaud in S.F.; call 621-7797. *Angels in America* plays through June 4 at Marines Memorial Theatre in S.F.; call 749-2ACT.