



Future shock: Ellen Lauren (left) and Will Bond focus on the message.

Bogarting McLuhan

Anne Bogart's new work,
The Medium, fries our senses
in an avalanche of audiovisual
input. **By Dennis Harvey**

THE 20TH-CENTURY urge to identify God is almost as strong as the one to play He/She/It. Achieving mass fame in a post-war, pre-entropic era suddenly self-conscious about its affluence and speed, theorist Marshall McLuhan spoke to both impulses: Inasmuch as anyone could understand what he was saying, the notion that our pervasive "media environment" was now (perhaps always had been) more profoundly influential in shaping human experience than any ostensible "content" seemed soothing or disturbing, take your pick. We were inventors of our telecommunicative era; therefore we were true masters of our universe, no?

Of course, deep suspicion has settled into public consideration of

ever expanding technological progress since McLuhan's 1980 death. His cautious optimism — that advances could bring on a positive, collective "consciousness of unconsciousness," a sort of One Brain Order technotopia — grows darker in hindsight.

Avant-garde director-choreographer-innovator Anne Bogart's new work, *The Medium* (performed by her Saratoga International Theater Institute company, in an Artaud residency presented by San Francisco's Modus Ensemble), uses McLuhan's life and ideas as a focusing device for 90 minutes of electronic-age overload. Engaging and exasperating, this show's relentless stop-start dynamism truly makes the medium the message: Our synapses fry from the sheer crush of audiovisual input — just

as they seem to be doing every day, albeit in less overt ways.

Her McLuhan (Will Bond) is stroke-scrambled, stuttering and spasming through theoretical sound bites as if his hard drive were undergoing a tortuous, continual reboot. His statements are alternately helpful ("Only by understanding change can you ease the burden of it") or alarmist ("We are in an ecstasy of communication, and this ecstasy is obscene"). But Bogart's hand is tipped: Her expressionist stage riot suggests infomania curdling to chaos, numbness, and impending future schlock.

The five performers — Bond, along with J. Ed. Araiza, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, and Stephen Webber — extend McLuhan-esque musings verbally into the cyber age while physically channel-surfing: Gabriel Berry's black-and-white costumes help them morph through cartoon images of a TV chat show, a newscast, a cowboy opera, an absurdist sitcom, and even a hip-hop dance interlude. Darron L. West's soundscape likewise flips the dial, from *Taxi Driver* and *Dating Game* themes to Chet Baker.

There's a great deal of provocative, sometimes exhilarating energy to this onslaught. But it's exhausting as well — which may be the point, of course. As a cogent meditation on a dense body of thought, *The Medium* is a muddle. As a determinedly free-associative kaleidoscope, it has a kind of orgiastic integrity unlike anything else. "What's that buzzing?" McLuhan keeps asking. The impending implosion you hear, Bogart signals, could be your own.