

THEATER

Nightmarish message inspires hope

By ERIKA MILVY

Media guru Marshall McLuhan is sucked up into the vortex of the very forces he had spent his life probing in "The Medium," an expressionistic theatrical movement piece created by esteemed avant-garde director Ann Bogart.

A frenetic — should I say, wired — production, Bogart has used the writings and predictions of McLuhan to make a theater piece that is a febrile nightmare of a media-ordered world where humankind has become a passive victim to the technology it has created.

The whole of the evening's ~~tem~~ is an endless, repetitive rash of McLuhanisms and variants thereof.

From McLuhan's notions that the medium is the message as well as the message, to his dictum that we must study change to gain power over it, the

performance exudes beady maxims, theories and philosophies, but McLuhan's teachings have become nonsensical gibberish in this absurdist environment, where style has replaced content.

McLuhan, who suffered a stroke that left him, ironically, speechless in later life, is seen here as a sputtering, stuttering oddity as he jerks across the stage in spastic movements.

"The Medium" recalls the hyper-intelligent, jittery weird world of a Talking Heads music video. Erratic, electric and at odds with the world around him, Will Bond plays McLuhan as neurotic nomad resembling a David Byrne persona, a victim of too much stimuli.

McLuhan hawks ideas like a salesman peddling his wares: You don't like these ideas? I've got others! he promises. Electronic technology is reshaping every aspect of our life, he warns. Infomania erodes capacity for significance, he cautions.



JOAN MARCUS

The Saratoga International Theater Institute performs 'The Medium' at Theater Artaud in San Francisco.

All media work us over completely. They leave no part of us unaltered, he pronounces.

Although, the conceptual design of the show is perfectly original and exciting, the heralding of doom is becoming all too common.

Like "Box Conspiracy," last year's warning of the overgrowth of technology by George Coates, "The Medium" is a half-hearted alarm.

These cautionary voices do not appear totally sincere. Like a child picking at a scab, they (Coates in particular) are fascinated with that which they deem detrimental.

And the message is received like a mother's overprotective command to not go in the water after eating — partly understood, mostly ignored, ultimately ineffectual.

As if to mock and mimic and otherwise drive him crazy, the rest of the cast reiterates these sentences, rendering them meaningless.

McLuhan seems to have fallen into a skewed world of total television in which each situation he encounters is a TV genre. From a detective drama to a Western, stand-up comedy to a news program, the other performers parody these familiar formats, inserting McLuhan's words in place of dialogue.

With hyper-bright lighting and a sparse emptiness recalling the avant-garde works of Robert Wilson (Michitomo Shiohara's lighting and Anita Stewart's set design) the mood is highly stylized as the actors move with mechanically rigid gestures and slo-mo action.

The superb ensemble — Stephen Webber, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and J. Ed Araiza as well as Bond — offer a neurotic energy, as if they are stuck on a high-speed carousel, incapable of stopping.

Hysterical laughter, jerky reflexes and rampant desperation and fright consume the performers who enact scenes which recall the loopy comedies of the 50s and 60s, the inane talk shows of more recent years as well as pulp archetypes like German

Massaging the media



The event: "The Medium"
Dates and times: 8:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, with matinees at 3 p.m. Sundays, through May 7
Location: Theater Artaud, 420 Florida St., San Francisco
Admission: \$13.50-\$19.50
Phone: (415) 621-7797

thugs and one-armed madmen (a la "Dr. Strangelove").

Audience applause and an incongruous laugh-track work to create an eerie effect much like the discordant inclusion of the sitcom style in the recent "Natural Born Killers."

Somehow, the hypnotic familiarity and the stupidity of this benign and banal form is nearly frightening when taken out of context. It reminds us of how easily mesmerized and placated we can become.

Indeed, as McLuhan has said, the media massage lulls us out of our critical acumen.

The dissing of the electronic age through the theatrical form is certainly intriguing. The persevering success of this low-tech endeavor is a testament to the notion that high-tech communication is by no means necessary.

If theater can command an audience and engage them, then McLuhan's most pessimistic promises have yet to be realized.

As he states, through painfully difficult sputtering, there is no inevitability, as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.

Erika Milvy, a free-lance writer living in San Francisco, reviews Bay Area theater for The Press Democrat.