

Bogart's 'Medium' is a low-tech message

By Mike Steele
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Anne Bogart's remarkable theater piece "The Medium" takes its audience on a wild, high-voltage journey into the nature of reality — which these days means virtual reality. It's a high-density trip brimming with information, mostly provocative epigrams that challenge us to confront the technological beast and make it our servant rather than our master.

For a high-tech piece exploring today's daunting cyberworld, "The Medium's" greatest asset is that it's extremely low-tech and simple, relying on a fast-paced text and the awesome energy of its superb five-member cast.

To get perspective on her subject, Bogart has built this theater of ideas around the writing of Marshall McLuhan, the "oracle of the electronic age," whose major works came out in the 1960s. It was McLuhan who turned pop culture and TV into subjects of valid intellectual discourse. TV wasn't just radio with a picture, it was a medium that created its own environment, a medium so strong that it overwhelmed and often trivialized the message; in fact, the medium became the message, and one that would change us all.

Bogart, like McLuhan, has an ambivalent attitude towards technology. In part, McLuhan was a tweedy, pipe-smoking in-

Theater review

The Medium

- ▶ **Who:** Created and directed by Anne Bogart with the Saratoga International Theatre Institute, presented by Walker Art Center and Southern Theater as part of the "Out There" series.
- ▶ **Where:** Southern Theater, 1420 Washington Av. S., Minneapolis.
- ▶ **When:** 8 p.m. today.
- ▶ **Tickets:** \$12. Call 375-7622.
- ▶ **Review:** This rich, dense look at the cyberpresent through the eyes of '60s guru Marshall McLuhan is presented by an extraordinary troupe of five with unlimited energy and range.

tellectual who would just as soon have seen change stop so people could finally dig into what they had. But a recurring theme in his work, and in Bogart's, is the refrain, "You can't go home again." The media are extensions of ourselves, said McLuhan, and now that we've extended into cyberspace we can never return. So now what do we do?

Bogart isn't a Luddite trying to destroy all the machines. She's a provocateur who wants to understand change, "to ease the burden of experiencing it." Above all, she wants to put it into perspective. She wants to know whether



Photo by John Nation

Anne Bogart

the media are presenting reality or representations of reality like instant replays and reruns. As fewer and fewer moguls control more and more media — and thereby, the tools for defining reality (what are cities like? gay people? politicians?) — it behooves us all to approach the media with a critical eye.

Most of the text of "The Medium" is pulled from McLuhan's writings, tracing the world from preliterate and tribal to the media age, a visually oriented global village that has moved beyond written language. McLuhan, who seemed terrifically difficult in the '60s, is easy in the '90s, now that so much of what he predicted has come true.

Stroke of a genius

Bogart steps into the story late in his life (he died in 1980) when McLuhan had a stroke that left him speechless. As he is struck, he fights to find a reality in a suddenly chaotic world. Armed with only a remote control, he pushes forth. He enters a world of TV banality where everyone mouths his epigrams, then switches to a fiber-optics future that sounds like a reading by Microsoft mogul Bill Gates.

Repeating and repeating key phrases, McLuhan bashes forth, at times aggressive — "charge and kick it in the electrodes" — at times passive and bewildered.

The production communicates a sensory overload that keeps cranking higher and higher, until one actress screams, "What's that buzzing?" The bottom line is that electronic media have revolutionized the way we see, feel, think and sense reality.

"The Medium" is a cautionary tale but not an antitechnological one. There's no nostalgia for the days of language dominance; Bogart actually makes a good case that the dominance of language is far from over. Although she accepts that we're caught in a computerized world, she doesn't see it as the end of history, as McLuhan speculated. Instead, she reminds us that by understanding our media, we discover much about ourselves.