

# THEATER

## The message is 'The Medium'

Anne Bogart's experimental theater takes on the Wexner

BY JAY WEITZ

"T heater begins with the disagreement between what you see and what you hear." When you hear director Anne Bogart say this during a phone interview, however, you should know that what you see on stage is going to challenge your eyes *and* your ears, as well as most of the region behind and between them.

"I love this old Sanskrit saying," Bogart chuckles, "that says theater should do three things: please the drunk, answer the question of how to live, and answer the question, How does the universe work?"

Bogart and her Saratoga International Theatre Institute (SITI) try to do all three in *The Medium*, based on the life and lessons of Marshall McLuhan. But this is no staid PBS biography of the man Bogart calls "the granddaddy of philosophers about the new technologies."

Today most people remember McLuhan mainly, if at all, as the guy who said, "The medium is the message," but his two seminal works, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*, which made for dense reading when they were originally published in

the '60s, sound like current events in the '90s.

Bogart says that most of her works start with an overriding question about what it means to be human. "With *The Medium*," she says, "I wanted to ask: How are all the developments and revolutions in new technology affecting us as human beings? It's happening so fast." As a vibrant example, since Bogart and SITI created *The Medium* in 1993, the languages of virtual reality and the Web have become lingua francas, so ubiquitous that even someone as rooted in the past as Bob Dole can refer you to his Website.

Toward the end of his life, McLuhan (1911-1980) suffered a series of strokes that destroyed his ability to communicate through speech. Bogart set the play at the moment of his stroke, when this great talker was rendered silent. Then she armed him with a remote control, setting him loose among the media he so presciently explained to us. "He goes like Alice in Wonderland down the whirlpool that is television," Bogart continues. "He switches from station to station, and each station is very familiar. You're flipping from cowboy westerns to a talk show to a family comedy." As part of Bogart's method of using



"cultural things we know to get at things we don't know," the visual element comprises a series of these TV clichés. Simultaneously, the spoken words are 60 percent McLuhan and the remainder, various "pop notions of technology" such as advertisements.

"There's a quote by McLuhan," Bogart recalls, "which I think is one of the most profound things anyone ever said. He said there is no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening. In other words, these huge cataclysmic changes are happening, but can we stay awake to then?"

As long as such visionaries as McLuhan and Bogart help us to see *and* hear, the answer can be a wide-eyed yes. **CG**

Anne Bogart presents *The Medium* in the Wexner Center Performance Space, N. High St. at W. 15th Ave., November 7-9 at 8 p.m. & November 10 at 3 p.m. For tickets and information, call the Wexner Center Box Office at 292-3535.