

BACKSTAGE

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THE PERFORMING ARTS WEEKLY

JUNE 13, 1987

THE MEDIUM

REVIEWED BY

ROBERT SIMONSON

The subject of Anne Bogart's "The Medium," which recently played Columbia University's Miller Theatre, is '60s pop philosopher Marshall McLuhan's writings on the media, and its transforming and, in his opinion, ruinous effect on our culture and methods of communication. The title comes from his famous dictum, "The Medium Is the Message." To Bogart's mind, that message—even more than 30 years later—is still bad news.

The piece's text is nearly wholly made up of a few repeated passages from MacLuhan's writings (plus Bogart's noticeably lesser, added observations). Bogart renders the rhetoric fresh each time by filtering it through all the imaginable genres which television and film have stamped upon our brain. First the players deliver MacLuhan's theories as a sanitized sitcom family; then as game-show contestants; then as characters in a Western, old Marshall tinkling away on the saloon piano while muttering his dogma.

But even such a lively concept could be deadly and dry in the hands of a garden-variety auteur director. The key to this production's utter vitality is the thrilling physicality of the five-person cast (J. Ed Araiza, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Tom Nelis). The performers jerk, twist, glide, and careen through the piece, every word connected to a motion, every motion perfectly under control. So complete is their combined commitment to the show's rigorous choreography and its mantra-like text that the cumulative effect is quite shattering, and in its way, as insidious as any medium McLuhan might warn us against.

The permeating aural design by Darron L. West is as integral as any aspect of the show. The searing lighting is by Mimi Jordan Sherin. The entire cast is excellent, but Nelis, as McLuhan, is particularly affecting. Rail thin and limber, he leans into his role as into the wind, creating not so much a professor but an electric prophet howling in the wilderness.

Presented by the Saratoga International Theater Institute at Columbia University's Miller Theatre, 116th Street and B'way, NYC, May 29-31.

SMALL LIVES/BIG DREAMS

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ROBERT SIMONSON

Theatre directors love to mess around with Chekhov. Only last season, we saw Richard Schechner's time-traveling dissection of "Three Sisters," in which each act was played in a different period in modern Russian history. Now we have Anne Bogart's stirring "Small Lives/Big Dreams," which recently ended a short run at Columbia University's Miller Theatre.

"Small Lives" is Bogart's Dadaist poem to Chekhov, in which each of the actors on stage represents one of the playwright's five major plays. Kelly Maurer, for instance, in gown and broken parasol, is recognizably Madame Ravenskaya of "The Cherry Orchard." Barney O'Hanlon, meanwhile, wears the head bandage of "The Seagull" 's Konstanin. Each performer utters only lines from his or her respective play, arranged in thematic and not necessarily comprehensible sections. The performers trace carefully choreographed meanderings about the stage, sometimes marching in grim, backlit single file, sometimes breaking into desperate comic dance. Other times, they are devastated by a

red light and earsplitting cacophony, which could signify their perpetually smashed dreams or the terror of the coming 20th century. As one character says, looking into a light up ahead: "What a mess!"

Why the eternal obsession with Chekhov? Perhaps it's the Russian dramatist's richness of subject which plants the seed of concept in so many auteur's brains. Certainly, Bogart has great fun with Chekhov's themes of yearning and stasis, particularly "Three Sisters" 's Tuzenbakh and Vershinin's inflated talk of the future, and Constantin's rants against the stage. ("The theatre's gone to the dogs," says O'Hanlon, self-deflatingly.)

Truly, Bogart's cut-and-paste textual juxtapositions make for both easy laughs and easy solemnities. But her direction is insightful, and the cast (which also includes J. Ed Araiza, Will Bond, and Karenjune Sanchez) is thrillingly committed: exact in gesture and expertly comic. Darron L. West's sound design is amusing and terrifying and Mimi Jordan Sherin's lighting is starkly moonlit and autumnal.

Presented by the Saratoga International Theater Institute at Columbia University's Miller Theatre, 116th Street and B'way, NYC, June 5-7.