

Review/Theater; McLuhan's Old Message, As the Medium Mutates

By BEN BRANTLEY

Published: May 17, 1994

Oh, Marshall, if you could only see how it all turned out.

In "The Medium," a Saratoga International Theater Institute production at the New York Theater Workshop, the ever-prolific director Anne Bogart has resurrected Marshall McLuhan to examine how the communications theorist's prophecies have and have not been fulfilled.

McLuhan, who died in 1980, is generally remembered as a hopeful proponent of the belief that electronic communications would knit an alienated world into an all-embracing global village. But in interviews, he also spoke ruefully of the dominance of technologies. "I wish none of these had ever happened," he once said.

Ms. Bogart, seldom one to accentuate the positive, picks up on this element of doubt, presenting a mechanistic universe of brain-scrambled automatons, who demonstrate the ways in which we have become technology's slaves in the 20-some years since McLuhan was on the best-seller lists. This is scarcely startling news. But the director and her ensemble and technical team have created a vivid, surprisingly diverting piece of expressionist theater.

Like McLuhan, Ms. Bogart eschews linear exposition. "The Medium" is a visual and aural collage that exists both in the Op-and-Pop past of McLuhan's heyday and the present of virtual reality and a galloping communications industry that turns yesterday into instant nostalgia.

While McLuhan (Tom Nelis) spouts gnomic epigrams, the other four performers, lacing McLuhanisms with more contemporary references, act out a jerky, robotic ballet that gives the lie to the pundit's optimism. Wearing Gabriel Berry's graphic Mod costumes, they cross the stage in hunched postures suggesting windup Quasimodos, respond to zapping noises as if they were electrocuted frogs and collapse stiffly onto brightly colored vinyl chairs. A Max Headroom-like stand-up comedian "from cyberspace" talks about virtual reality, and a Vegas-style ventriloquist finds his identity usurped by his shrill dummy.

The precise choreography ranges from ritualistic waltzes that turn into strangleholds to joyless voguing. Blithe 1960's pop music tinkles ironically in the background.

Some of this is pretty heavy-handed (the actors chant, "Numb, numb, numb," and say darkly, "Are we having any fun yet?"). But as a piece of stagecraft, "The Medium" is

great fun to watch. The lighting, set and sound designers -- Michitomo Shiohara, Anita L. Stewart and Darron L. West -- have used limited resources with inspired efficiency. The cast, even at its most anesthetized, exudes a compelling, expertly harnessed energy.

Mr. Nelis's manic, vaudevillian McLuhan bears little resemblance to the real thing, who was by all accounts a low-key presence. But the performance ingeniously captures the publicity-fed showmanship inherent in the writer's fragmented later work. Gamely and repeatedly, Mr. Nellis barks out what might be an epitaph for this singular blend of academic and pop star: "You don't like those ideas? I've got others!"

The Medium Inspired by the life and predictions of Marshall McLuhan; conceived and directed by Anne Bogart. Set by Anita Stewart; costumes by Gabriel Berry; lighting by Michitomo Shiohara; sound by Darron L. West; dramaturge, Gregory Gunter; production manager, Susan R. White. Presented by New York Theater Workshop and Saratoga International Theater Institute; at 79 East Fourth Street, East Village. WITH: J. Ed Araiza, Will Bond, Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer and Tom Nelis.