

Anne Bogart's 'The Medium' Explores McLuhan's Message of Change Getting Meat to the Matter of the Matter



by Chad Jones

Controversial and in demand, lesbian director Anne Bogart is bringing her bold brand of contemporary theater to San Francisco this week in the form of *The Medium*, a performance work based on the writings of '60s media visionary Marshall McLuhan.

Some would call Bogart's work avant garde, or even alienating, but Bogart insists her work is not the kind of self-indulgent performance art that leaves patrons either congratulating themselves for their ability to decipher complex artistic statements or wondering what the hell it all meant anyway.

During a recent phone interview from her office at New York's Columbia University, where she heads the directing program, Bogart shed light on her brand of theater, one in which strict narrative structures are replaced by provocative explorations of text, sound and movement.

How does Bogart herself describe this ultra-modern approach to theater?

"I'm a traditionalist," she says. "I concentrate on theater history. I'm obsessed with Vaudeville, the American musical and silent film acting. I'm steeped in traditional theater because I want to use these traditions and think about what they mean today. Connecting with the past is what theater is all about."

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INTERVIEW

Bogart

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Bogart, 43, began forming her approach to theater after she saw a production of *Macbeth* at age 15. "I didn't understand the language. I knew then that this is what I would do for the rest of my life. This production of *Macbeth* did not talk down to the audience. I understood then that theater is not just about understanding, but about tapping potential within us."

During stunts at four undergrad

universities, Bogart studied performance sociology and the anthropology of theater before getting her degree from Bard College. She then pursued a Master's degree from New York University. Next, Bogart began working her unconventional views into the plays of Brecht, Chekov and Gorky. In 1989, she became the artistic director of the respected Trinity Repertory Company, but left amidst controversy.

It was during this period that Bogart directed her now infamous version of Rodgers and

Hammerstein's *South Pacific*, a production that so incensed the Hammerstein Estate that they shut it down. "We did not violate the contract," Bogart insists. "That contract didn't say we couldn't have multiple Nellie Fourbushes. We didn't cut any songs, and the contract did not say that Emile De Becque could not be played by a woman."

Inspired by Martha Graham

In *The Medium*, running at Theater Artaud, the director has focused her vivid imagination on the writings of Marshall McLuhan, the prophetic '60s philosopher who coined the term "global village," a reference to the expanding world of telecommunications, computer networks and television.

"*The Medium* asks important questions," Bogart says. "How are all these new technologies changing us as human beings? Are they causing us to change as a species, causing us to change the way we relate to each other? These are new questions not rooted in ancient questions, but they are important human questions."

The irony in Bogart's approach is that throughout her entire show, there is no visible technology, only five actors — the "human meat" as Bogart calls them. The most high-tech element is the sound design, which has been called the sixth actor in the show. *The Medium* demonstrates the intense training Bogart requires of her actors, whom she's taught using what she calls "the viewpoints," a physical vocabulary of techniques that allow wild spontaneity within the overall structure of the show.

"One way to think about my approach to acting," Bogart explains, "is to think about how Martha Graham would have approached acting. She explored psychological gesture in her choreography, and I think she was on to something. "In the traditional American Stanislavski approach to acting,



Photo: Joan Marcus

The Saratoga International Theatre Institute performs *The Medium*.

you set the inside, the emotions, through rehearsal. What you leave free for performance is the body, but that's cheap. Emotions are the most beautiful things we have and shouldn't be set free, so I set the body and leave the emotions alone."

Unlike many of today's performance artists, Bogart says her audience is of the utmost importance, that the last thing in the world she wants to do is alienate it. "Audiences are getting more and more disenfranchised from theater as a regular activity," says Bogart. "To me the audience plays a big role in the performance because so much is left up to them. Directing is like leaving clues behind in a murder mystery. The audience has to put the pieces together. I don't care for theater that does all the work for you."

"My challenge is to organize the clues in a way that excites and titillates the audience and leaves the imagination to them. It's like listening to a great piece of music: it's structural but not narrative. You have to let yourself go and trust yourself as an audience member to pick up on the subtleties, to listen and to see — not just to search for story."

Erotically charged

As a woman and a lesbian working in a male-dominated field, Bogart says she has often

encountered resistance. "I wouldn't have been fired from Trinity Rep if I was a man. It's a problem, really. Women are conditioned to take up less space. To be seen and not heard. These are difficult habits to break. I still sit with my legs crossed not to take up much space. Men have no problem taking up space." As for being a lesbian, Bogart, who has been involved with director Tina Landau for the last eight years, says "it hasn't gotten in the way."

Sexuality is something Bogart is always concerned with in her work. "Sexual attraction is a large part of what brings people to theater," she explains. "I feel my rehearsals should be charged with eroticism, but not a consummation of that attraction. In a way, I have to fall in love with the people I work with. They are alive with potential erotic imagery, which is a wonderful, beautiful, stunning, gorgeous attraction."

Bogart says she hopes to produce some lesbian theater in the near future. "We've already passed through lesbian chic," she says. "But maybe I can usher it back in." ▼

■ *The Medium* continues at Theater Artaud through May 7. Call 621-7797 for information.