

TOMÁŠ KAČER

New Messengers:

Short Narratives in Plays by Michael Frayn,
Tom Stoppard and August Wilson

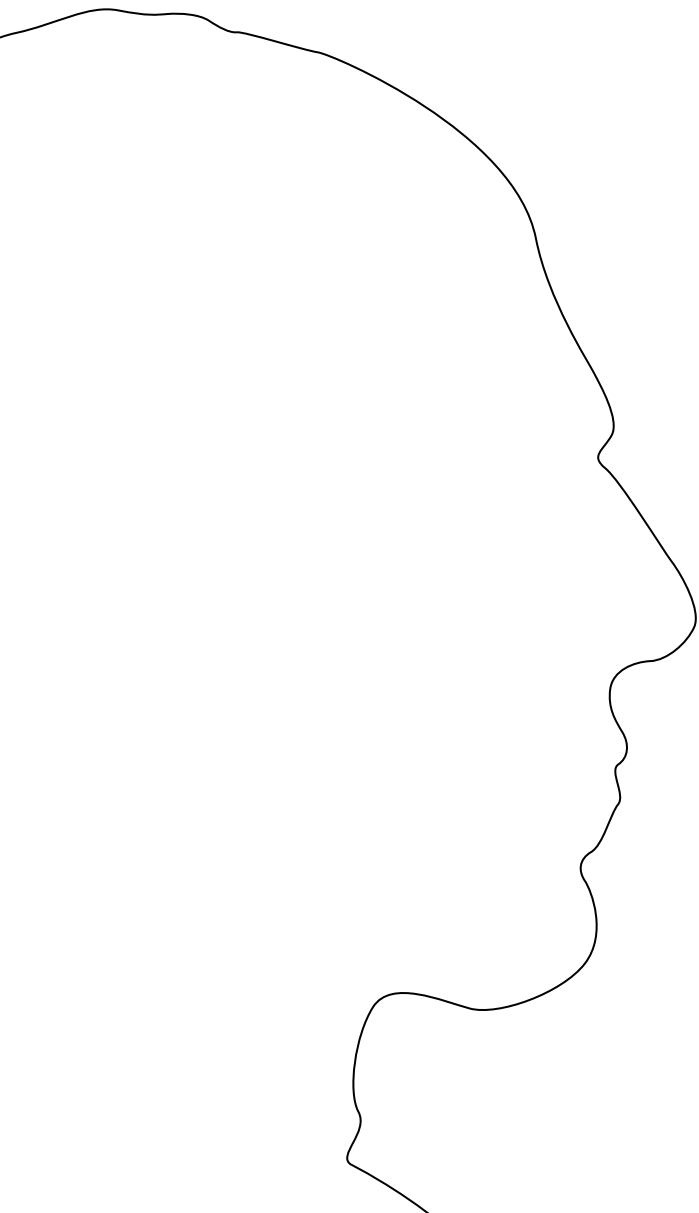
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Contents

1 Introduction	9
2 Why Mainstream.....	15
3 The Old Messenger	19
4 The Poetic Tradition.....	29
5 The Prague School Theory of Theatre and Drama	37
6 Morphology and the Theory of Actants.....	45
7 Brecht's Heritage	51
8 Reportage.....	59
9 Introducing New Messengers	65
10 New Messengers on the Stage	71
11 Pushing the Action Forward	73
12 Interpreting for Others	85
13 Informing (about) the Actual World.....	111
14 The New Messenger's Applications: a Conclusion.....	125
15 Epilogue	129
Works Cited	131
Index	137

'Tis done already, and the messenger gone.

(W. Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* III.3)

1 ► Introduction

This book began as a doctoral project at Masaryk University¹. The final dissertation that concluded my study of the phenomenon of the messenger in drama, its conventional uses and final transformation into what I take the liberty to call “the new messenger”, then has been reworked into this publication.

It presents the new messenger as a specific type of a character in the mainstream drama written in English of the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, it draws its examples for case studies from the works of three playwrights: the British Michael Frayn and Tom Stoppard, and the American August Wilson. Analyses of their plays made it possible for me to see the new type of a character in the first place and brought me to the inquiry of the nature of the function that it has in these texts. Further, it was necessary to find out where the character comes from, what the history of the development of its usage is, and what currents in the history of drama there are that enable its existence and fuel its function in the plays. The present book looks at the new messenger from several perspectives and each of them find their expression in one or several chapters and call for a different type of argument to be sound and persuasive. When taken into account all at once, they create a multi-layered picture of the new messenger as a new convention, a character-type, a specific dramatic function, and a vehicle of artistic communication.

Yet, the choice of authors and their works needs to be explained first. The choice has to do with the development of the topic of this book and the preceding dissertation project, which began as research in the field of implementing scientific issues into dramatic works. This is where the material for this topic included two English playwrights, Michael Frayn and Tom Stoppard. After looking into where their ability to explain science to theatre audience comes from, I realized that it is their journalist careers that made them skilful mediators of information. The focus shifted towards journalism and the stage, an issue which is thematically broader than “mere” science.

1) Under the supervision of doc. Pavel Drábek, to whom I express my utmost gratitude for being my teacher and mentor. The thesis was defended at Masaryk University in September 2012.

After another extrapolation, I somehow identified the journalist as a special type of the messenger as it is known from the history of drama, that is to say a character whose purpose is to inform and bring news. This is where August Wilson came in, as he had long been my favoured American dramatist. I admired his *The Twentieth Century Cycle* as a fictional chronicle, a dramatic version of a series of reports about African-American inhabitants of Pittsburgh by the decades of the 20th century. The idea was to compare the journalistic approach to “actual” issues with “fictional” ones. The topic thus became even broader.

But then, as it happens, the more I tried to identify the messenger as a unifying factor, the more the messenger alluded me, until I found that in fact there are no messengers in the plays! Yet, this moment of void proved to be a starting point for a fresh start. The messenger was gone, but he or she still lingered in the plays, somehow. He or she did not disappear completely. He or she was transformed and found new ways of entering the stage. Then the idea of the new messenger appeared as of a component of the plays, which has kept some of the properties of the conventional messenger but holds a whole set of new ones. At this moment, the applicability of the concept of the new messenger began to press onto me and I tended to apply it on contemporary mainstream drama in general. But then I decided to remain with Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson as I believe, that it is for the best to show the reader the path I myself took. After all, these three dramatists were the three Fates present at the birth of the concept.

The decision to remain with the three dramatists is based on two premises. The first one is that it was the study of their works that lead to the notion of the new messenger in the first place, as I just sketched out. The second one is that they are mainstream authors and as such they work with dramatic tools and techniques which are functional, generally understandable, and acceptable by the audience. I believe that employing mainstream authors eventually shows that the idea of the new messenger is a viable and functional concept.

This book starts with a traditional type of character in the dramatic convention – the messenger. It then identifies various transformations and variations of this character in the history of drama and studies its more contemporary uses, while understanding the messenger as a certain type of character bearing specific functions. It claims that the messenger as a character remained a crucial character type especially in the historical/political mainstream play but that it also underwent several radical transformations.

The book looks at the uses of the conventional messenger as well as its transformed appearances. It claims that in the recent decades and within the given context of the concerned dramatic works, the traditional messenger has been substituted with a follower, which I call the new messenger. These contemporary messenger-figures on the one hand carry out the basic function of the conventional messenger, which is to report about facts and events from outside the frame of the stage action, and as such they fulfil the original role of bringing new information to push the action forward. On the other hand, the new messengers have acquired several new roles, namely that of widening the

fictional world of the play when they feed the other characters and audience with supplementary information, which create the context but do not need to be directly connected with the development of the plot. This use of the new messenger is identified in connection with the concerned historical/political mainstream plays as assigning them the function of political agents. Furthermore, the new messenger also continues in the didactic tradition, when he presents information from scientific and other areas of contemporary knowledge, thus speaking directly about phenomena from the actual world occupied by the audience.

The book builds up its observations on a fusion of several theoretical traditions, when it focuses on the language and the modes of communication associated with the messenger (reportage), includes an approach capitalizing on the narrative grammar tradition (study of the structural role of the character as a type) and also attributes a great influence on the development of the messenger convention to Brecht's Epic Theatre (shift in the general understanding of how certain dramatic conventions work on the stage).

The book presents a definition of the new messenger as a possibility of a main character with a name to become the new messenger. To do so, such character must possess specific qualities that grant him exclusive and legitimate access to information outside the scope of the logic of the dramatic action while remaining a useful and widely used type of character. Focusing on the linguistic and narrative levels, the book gives a number of examples of characters that legitimately leave their roles for a short while to switch to the narrative mode in order to deliver a reportage from a sphere of their expertise, such as hands-on experiences from the past in the case of eye-witnesses, political and historical commentaries in the case of politicians and journalists, as well as lessons in various areas of science and history of the Western thought in the case of scientists and philosophers.

To show the conventional messenger and the variability of its traditional uses, *Oedipus the King*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Glass Menagerie* are analysed in a separate chapter. As far as the various types of the new messenger are concerned, this book focuses on the plays by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson, capitalising on the success of their plays which signals an understandability of the application of a transformed type of conventional character, the new messenger. Case studies of, for example, Frayn's *Democracy*, Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* show how the new messenger retains the main function of the traditional messenger, which is to push the action forward. Analyses of, for example, Stoppard's *Night and Day* and *Rock'n'Roll*, Wilson's *Fences*, *Two Trains Running* and *Jitney* and Frayn's *Afterlife* identify a role of the new messenger which already separates it from its conventional older counterpart, when the new messenger interprets facts and events from the fictional (and sometimes actual, too) world to the others, thus becoming a political agent. Finally, case studies of, for example, Stoppard's *Hapgood* and *The Coast of Utopia* trilogy, as well as Frayn's *Copenhagen*, show the new messengers in these plays in the light of the didactic tradition of the stage when they operate as teaching agents.

Although the need for a messenger and its traditional function survives, the application has undergone a radical structural change which lead to the abandonment of the

conventional messenger and introduction of the more dynamic figure, the new messenger.

1.1 ► Structure of the Book

It is perhaps necessary to admit here, and thereby prepare the reader for it, that the argument of the present book does not unfold in a clear-cut, straightforward fashion. There are several types of argument structures employed. Chapter 3 “The Messenger as a Convention” is a historical overview; chapters 4 “The Poetic Tradition, 5 “The Prague School Theory of Theatre and Drama” and 6 “Morphology and the Theory of Actants” are theoretical; chapter 7 “Brecht’s Heritage” studies the role that Brecht’s Epic Theatre’s radical transformations played in understanding the old dramatic and theatrical conventions from a historical perspective; chapters 8 “Reportage” and 9 “Introducing New Messengers” are deductive, building up on the principle of what the new messenger is; and finally, chapters 10 “New Messengers on the Stage”, 11 “Pushing the Action Forward, 12 “Interpreting for others” and 13 “Informing (about) the Actual World” consist of case studies following the analytical, inductive tradition. The reason for this methodological eclecticism is that there are a number of ways that lead me to the subject matter, which is the character of the new messenger.

In greater detail, the chapters of the book are arranged in the following order. This “Introduction” is followed by chapter 2 “Why Mainstream”. As I have already indicated, the whole idea of the new messenger is based on the study of the works by three mainstream authors. For this reason I find it important to explain what I mean by mainstream and why I consider it useful to study authors that belong there. The chapter thus deals with the relevance of dealing with mainstream for a theoretical study of drama. It also supports the claim that the new messenger has become a widely used dramatic convention.

Chapter 3 “The Old Messenger” introduces the classical convention used throughout the history of drama. It is a historical overview of what I consider the most influential uses of the messenger in the history of drama and as such it presents analyses of *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare, and *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. The chapter explains how the convention of the messenger works and shows its three various uses. It is in breaking away from the conventional usages of the messenger that the new messenger could begin to function as a new convention.

Chapters 4 to 6 could be included under a shared title, as they present the theoretical background of this whole book. They introduce theories that have shaped the theoretical understanding of the new messenger as it is handled here. Chapter 4 “The Poetic Tradition” capitalises on Aristotle as a part of the Western approach to the study of drama, which views a piece of art as structure that can then be analysed. This view contributed to a concern of the new messenger as a component of the dramatic structure with its specific place and purpose.