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New messengers on the stage

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10 ► New Messengers on the Stage

In the previous chapter it was established that there are various possible approaches to the issue of the new messenger. This book follows the line of thought which approaches drama and theatre as a system of signs, in other words, it resides in the semiotic tradition of analysis. That is, equal, if not greater importance, is placed on how meaning is produced, as well as what the meaning is. The linguistic approach to dramatic text and to performance, as a legible complex structure, as advocated by the Prague School with its functional approach and later developed in areas such as theories of action. A focus on what is being said and how it is being said will be the essential component of the case studies that follow.

The analytical part of this book is divided into three parts. Each of them focuses on a different aspect of the new messenger. In the first part, the messenger is mainly an agent of action. Its presence is called for and justified by the needs intrinsic to the development of the story. In cooperation with dramatic and theatrical conventions, the new messenger functions as a propeller of the action, substituting for the limitations of other characters within the logic of the development of the play. Here, the new messenger's function is identifiable with the original messenger to a great extent. Reports give information to other characters in order to push the action forward.

The second part covers a very important aspect of drama and theatre, as it is in this part where the new messenger plays the dramatic/theatrical as well as social roles in full. As a connecting point between the world of the arts, the fictional universe, and the actual world wherein the readers/audiences factually reside, it becomes the political agent. This happens through the messenger's interpretative skills, as he or she is able to comment on facts and events from both fictional and actual worlds. His or her reports are either direct political commentaries or they set up the ideological frame for the understanding of the play's plot.

The third part looks at the new messenger from the point of view of its ability to implement facts and events from the actual world into the fictional universe of the play, and thus act as a teacher who informs both the other character and the audience. The three analytical chapters follow the path of the new messenger's news dependent on

whether they are from fictional-only, fictional-and-actual, or actual-only worlds. For this reason, the new messenger's political role precedes the didactic one, although (and this is primarily the consequence of Brecht's influence) the role of the theatre as the political arena may seem to many the most important.

It needs to be noted that the authors in concern here are no revolutionaries in the Brechtian sense, nor do they perform social experiments on the stage the way Brecht did. Rather, they are reporters about events of fiction and observers of the actual world, focusing and commenting on its history, politics, and findings in a specifically creative way. For this reason, it is in accordance with the material of these analyses that the new messenger's didactic role comes last. It is worth noting at this point that the three layers are not exclusive and often overlap. The case studies in focus here, i.e. the plays by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson, offer good material for such an approach, as they work both on the level of the dramatic text as a pretext for the performance and the performative level, where meaning is produced by employing a wide scale of types of collaborating signs.

10.1 ► A Remark Concerning the Case Studies

Although this book primarily analyses dramatic texts, it works with them as pretexts for staging. Therefore, as part of the methodological approach to the texts, each of the close readings pays attention to possible – yet necessarily deducible from the text – realizations. In other words, it also takes into account properties directly found in the speeches (such as the change in the tone, style of expression and so on, working as signs of the shift to the new messenger in characters for the audiences), as well as aspects such as proxemics, the passage of time, and use of various other components of the performance in collaboration with the dramatic text.

Besides the fact that this approach stems from some of the findings of the Prague School (notably Honzl's "Dynamics of the Sign in the Theatre" and Veltruský's *Drama as Literature*), the stance here is the same as Jenkins', who introduces his collection of essays on Tom Stoppard with the following reminder, which is also valid for the next parts of this chapter: "The purpose of this introduction is to remind readers that a text, whose words appear so weighty on the printed page and assume still more freightage from the critics, is accidental both in its creation and, even afterward, in its re-creation on stage" (Jenkins, *Critical Essays on Tom Stoppard* 2). The text, although a primary source of the analysis, is not the only material, as it is subject to various changes and re-creations on the stage. Various other components, albeit following from the text directly or indirectly, are taken into consideration. In other words, the pragmatic element of the ever-present dialogue going on between the characters and audience, which is done not only on a linguistic level, but also on the level of various other constituting signs of the theatre, is taken into account.