

Kačer, Tomáš

Pushing the action forward

In: Kačer, Tomáš. *New messengers : short narratives in plays by Michael Frayn, Tom Stoppard and August Wilson*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2013, pp. 73-83

ISBN 9788021063396

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129064>

Access Date: 20. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

11 ► Pushing the Action Forward

On the level of the narrative structure of a play, the new messenger retains the most important function of the conventional messenger up to a level on which the two are virtually undistinguishable when pushing the action forward. Attributes such as the social identity of a character with a name allow it to step out of its role and become the new messenger for a short period of time. This transformation is marked by the switch into the narrative mode of the speech. The purpose of the new messenger's action becomes equal with that of the conventional messenger, which is to inform others about facts or events from outside the frame of the on-stage action in order to push the action forward.

Among the most typical features of the messenger is the switch to the narrative mode in the form of reportage. From the perspective of the action, one of the most effective uses of this technique lies in its application at the beginning of the dramatic action, when it composes the dramatic exposition in the sense of a dramatic introduction (see Pfister 86-8). When it comes to reporting, the purpose is different to classical drama, where the aim of the exposition is to set off the action (by posing a problem to be solved). In the case of the new messenger, it often means feeding in background information about characters and/or events, providing a social-historical context, which in its entirety is not necessarily related to the action on stage. Also, references to the actual world are common – aiming primarily at the audience and setting the context for them in order to illustrate, rather than motivate the characters' actions.

Democracy by Michael Frayn

Frayn's *Democracy* begins with a rather complex, structurally intertwined scene, where at least three levels merge: a document, the birth of a fictional dramatic situation which develops later into the main plotline, and reportage. The play begins with the Voice announcing the successful election of the new West German chancellor: "Ladies and gentlemen, I declare the result of the vote to be as follows. Those in favour: 251. Those against: 235" (Frayn, *Democracy* 3). This line is delivered in a "documentary [mode] of

presentation, allowing events themselves to speak to the audience in a direct and immediate style” (Kritzer 155). In this scene, Brandt, who is also present on the stage, participates in a dialogue with the Voice, thus re-staging the historical event. Brandt says: “Yes, Herr President. I accept the election” (Frayn, *Democracy* 3). Meanwhile, Guillaume and Kretschmann begin to unfold the main plotline, which revolves around personal relationships among Brandt’s closest collaborators and unravels Guillaume’s motivations for becoming a Stasi agent under Kretschmann’s commission:

Guillaume: [...] Willy Brandt had finally done it!

Kretschmann : And you were there in the Bundestag to see it. (3)

At the same time, both characters are describing the events following immediately after Brandt’s election, building a vivid image of the political situation of that time and the personalities involved. Kretschmann, for example, reports about events and comments on Guillaume’s thoughts from that era: “You never seriously expected to see Willy Brandt elected Chancellor. Not in your wildest dreams, though, can you have imagined that three weeks later they’d be sending for you to join him” (4). Although this line is in the second person, it is a statement and a description of facts. Neither does it add to building a dramatic situation, as Guillaume never responds, nor is this line developed.

It is, again as a documentary, merely demonstrated in a scene where Guillaume meets his new collaborators Ehmke and Wilke for the first time. This documentary scene has dramatic features as it is able to express the nature of the characters, but it is, nevertheless, filled with “estranging” self-introductions which are rather artificial and too-informative. “Characters are identified like trains coming into the station” (Brustein 31) and repeated each time a new character appears on the stage:

Ehmke (*with Guillaume*): Ehmke. Horst Ehmke. Willy’s chief of staff. Running the Chancellor’s office for him. Getting the whole enterprise up and running... (*With Wilke and Bauhaus.*) Thank you, Uli. Very helpful. Over there, if you would, on the desk...

Wilke: Not over there, if you please, Herr Bauhaus! Not on the desk! (*Democracy* 4)

As the play begins to develop further, Guillaume continues his brief reports about the past and about his new workmates, as well as Brandt. His insider’s information describes details from working for the Chancellor, the social atmosphere, and he also mentions some historical facts. The latter, especially, is clearly unmotivated – whether he says this in a commenting mode to himself or in a quasi-dialogue with other characters, they are all too obvious for all present on the stage, while their only role is the creation of context for the audience. The most obvious – dramatically absolutely unnecessary – is: “When the Wall went up in sixty-one no one in Bonn lifted a finger” (10).

After all the necessary contextual feeding-ins, a turning point finally sets the action going. Again, it has the form of a report about the past activities of former East Germany agents (described by Guillaume) and a message from East Berlin (delivered by Kretschmann):

Kretschmann (*with Guillaume*): Now, here's how we're going to work [...] All photographs or photocopies of documents you'll hand over to your wife. She'll be your courier.

Guillaume: Poor Christel. She was the star of the show, not me!

Kretschmann: She did very well.

Guillaume: A job in the Hesse State Chancellery in Wiesbaden! What more could anyone hope for?

Kretschmann: One in the Federal Chancellery in Bonn.

Guillaume: Pure blind chance, Arno! A gift from the gods! [...] (11-2)

The two spies recount the past activities of the East German intelligence service in West Germany so that they can move on to the next, more important mission. Kretschmann stands in between agent Guillaume and the East German Ministry of State Security (Stasi), handing him directions and orders from "Mischa". Here though, at the beginning of the action, Guillaume is already "split by conflicting motives and seems to have no dominating ideology" (Brustein 32), as his use of the familiar form of Brandt's first name suggests:

Kretschmann: Nevertheless, all written material to Christel. What Mischa really wants from you, though, is all the things that politicians and civil servants don't write down. The gossip. The background. The smell of things. The way they think. Who's in, who's out. Who's got their knife into whom. Copier and camera, certainly. But, above all, eyes and ears.

Guillaume: Willy keeps saying he wants to open their working procedures to public scrutiny.

Kretschmann: Here's how we can help him. And of course what we want to know about most of all is...

Guillaume: The Eastern Policy. (*Democracy* 12)

In this expository situation, Frayn manages to reawaken concepts from the history of the Cold War, namely of Brandt's "*Ostpolitik* policy of reconciling West and East Germany" (Brustein 32). This frame of action, together with an atmosphere of distrust and treason, which goes together with the world of espionage, is "to remind us of a time when political leaders were driven by humanitarian concerns rather than military and religious obsessions; and when the left was energized by the courage of its convictions" (33). For doing so, recapitulations of historical facts and exchanges of reports about what happens in the Chancellery in Bonn and in the Stasi headquarters, together with insights into characters' thoughts, are necessary.

All the characters throughout the play become, on various occasions, new messengers, when they bring in information about events or facts from this historical period. In the initial stages, the play presents historical context to the audience. The new messenger (transformations of Guillaume, Kretschmann and others), on the one hand, presents historical facts from the audience's actual world to make up the context propelling the actions of the fictionalized characters, and, on the other hand, assumes the role in order to transcend the fictional frame and reach out to actual history.

Arcadia by Tom Stoppard

In the context of pushing the action forward, reports have a specific role. As the chapter on *Oedipus the King*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Glass Menagerie* shows, the traditional messenger appears as a conventional tool in order to bring a new impulse and “push” the development of the on-stage action, when he comes and announces new facts from “out there” yet unknown to other characters. As far as the new messenger is concerned, he does not appear as someone else, another character, who is without a name, but he forms a part of already existing characters, who, as a rule, have names. It is rather specific attributes of these characters that enable them to become messengers, or that involve the ability to become new messengers when the action needs it, because the attributes guarantee the characters, among other things, privileged access to information outside the frame of action on the stage.

Such is the case, for example, in the final scenes of *Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard. This play is full of potential (and real) new messengers as it deals with scientists and researchers from various fields who often lecture one another (or, independently of one another directly to the audience) about their areas of expertise or “discoveries”. In the time line, which develops in the present and intertwines with the early 19th century, Bernard Nightingale – a literary scholar – is a rude and annoying character who hopes he has discovered a new fact about lord Byron’s life – namely that he killed a young poet named Ezra Chater in a duel which took place at Sidley Park, the venue where both time lines take place. This “split time frame” makes Bernard a kind of detective “who search[es], discover[s] and tr[ies] to make sense of the events that occurred in the house two centuries before” (Rousseau, par. 4). Hannah Jarvis is a writer doing her research on the hermit of Sidley Park. She dislikes Bernard and she found conclusive proof that Chater could not be killed in a duel as he later died of a monkey bite in Martinique. Her research activities give her exclusive access to various materials dealing with the past of Sidley Park, which other characters have a limited access to, or, perhaps better put, she has access to materials in her field while other characters access materials from theirs. In this way, Bernard builds his theory upon a piece of information acquired from the British library:

Bernard: [...] There’s only one other Chater in the British Library database.

Hannah: Same period?

Bernard: Yes, but he wasn’t a poet like our Ezra, he was a botanist who described a dwarf dahlia in Martinique and died there after being bitten by a monkey.

Hannah: And Ezra Chater?

Bernard: He gets two references in the periodical index, one for each book, in both cases a substantial review in the Piccadilly Recreation, a thrice weekly folio sheet, but giving no personal details. (*Arcadia* 35)

This passage shows a tricky feature of reportage. On the level of its references, it is difficult to identify whether they refer to fictional or extra-fictional contents. However, in this

passage, actual historicity of the database entry and the monkey bite that killed Chater is irrelevant to the development of the story. In other words, it is sometimes irrelevant to the logic of the plot whether reportage is referring to the actual historical world, or only pretending to do so.

Rousseau writes, “*Arcadia* postulates the unreliability of the written sign. Bernard’s deciphering errors are evidence of the impossible transparency of texts which are always subject to various interpretations” (Rousseau, par. 16). When Bernard publishes his misinterpreted “discovery” about Byron, Hannah can disprove it with expert knowledge from her field:

Bernard: [...] Am I fucked? What do you think, Valentine? Tell me the truth.

Valentine: You’re fucked. [...]

Bernard: Show me where it says. I want to see it. [...]

Hannah: (*Reading*) “[...] The dahlia having propagated under glass with no ill effect from the sea voyage, is named by Captain Brice ‘Charity’ for his bride, though the honour properly belongs to the husband who exchanged beds with my dahlia, and an English summer for everlasting night in the Indies.”
(*Pause.*)

Bernard: Well it’s so round the houses, isn’t it? Who’s to say what it means?

Hannah: (*Patently*) It means that Ezra Chater of the Sidley Park connection is the same Chater who described a dwarf dahlia in Martinique in 1810 and died there, of a monkey bite. (*Arcadia* 125-6)

Reconstructing events from various sources and building up on her expertise as a researcher and writer, Hannah becomes the messenger of the bad news for Bernard, as her message is well-evidenced and, in effect, indisputable.

At the same time, this scene is the final push of the action in “the present” time frame of the play, leading to the conclusion where the two temporal worlds meet on the stage in a dance of waltz which, as the audience knows, ultimately leads to death by the burning of Thomasina, the main character of the 1809/1812 plot time frame.

In pushing the action forward, new messengers play a similar role in the structure of the narrative of a drama, to that of the conventional messenger. The difference lies in the fact that the new messenger is a function acquired by one (or more) character that has specific qualities, namely justified exclusive access to information outside the frame of the onstage action. Such are Guillaume and Kretschmann as officers of the Stasi recapitulating old secret service operations and planning new operations in West Germany of *Democracy*, and Hannah Jarvis, a writer and researcher with an experienced analytical mind, enabling her to reliably reconstruct events nearly two centuries old. In this sense, *Democracy* and *Arcadia* illustrate one structural use of the new messenger, which builds upon the main function of the traditional one, which is to push the action forward.

11.1 ► The Voice from the Gadget

This chapter describes deanthropologized characters such as various technological devices and means of mass-communication that subscribe to the messenger function in the plays concerned. It focuses on identifying their common features, with a personified messenger as a side character in a storyline, as well as differences. Among the shared features, there are, for example, the convention of privileged access to information outside the stage, and the accepted truthfulness of the delivered message.

The greatest difference between these two types of the messenger is the structure of the dialogue with the protagonists, where a personified messenger actively interacts with the receiver of the message, while the dialogue between an inanimate messenger and protagonists is structured so that it is seemingly passive. Another difference lies in the fact that while personified messengers are understood as representatives of a specific character type, inanimate messengers such as a newspaper and the radio are present on stage as ostensions and therefore relate to the audience's everyday experience and associations with these media. In other words, there is yet one more step between the reliability of a personified messenger as a witness from the part of the fictional world beyond the stage, and of "written" or "aired" words as definitive statements about it. This is connected with the stylistics and pragmatics of such reports, which are entitled to be more factual and to the point, seemingly escaping the aesthetic dominant entirely.

The last point made in this chapter is connected with such deanthropologized messengers whose humanity depends on the perspective from which they are viewed – they are perfectly human from the point of view of the developments of the plot, but not so much in comparison with other characters, as these are ghosts or dead persons talking from the past and the like (unless we are believers in the supernatural, of course). These ghostly messengers belong to the chapter about gadgets as they are not supposed to be materialized on the stage by an actor "under a sheet", to put it bluntly, but rather as a pre-recorded voice heard from an object or a hidden place (the piano and the attic in *The Piano Lesson*).

The Real Inspector Hound by Tom Stoppard

Stoppard's 1968 play *The Real Inspector Hound* opens with a dialogue between two critics, Birdboot and Moon, waiting for the beginning of a play-within-the-play to watch. As soon as they lead the audience into the action by introducing, in a Brecht-like fashion, the entering character of the play-within-the-play, "Mrs Drudge the Help" (*Hound* 13), the action which is to run parallel is begun by a line delivered by a technological device – the radio.

Upon being switched on, the radio announces: "We interrupt our programme for a special police message" (13). The announcement catches Mrs Drudge's attention, who hears, in horror, the follow-up warning that, "The search still goes on for the escaped madman who is on the run in Essex" (13). Here, in the opening scene, the radio voice

establishes itself as a messenger that will reappear to change the course of events and inform the characters about developments “out there” throughout the entire play. *The Real Inspector Hound* uses the messenger in the form of a gadget, the radio, in the most conventional manner, and the whole play may be read as a play on theatrical conventions as such. When the play-within-the-play opens, it begins with a straightforward exposition. This is, indeed, a common use of the messenger as a tool for a narrative composition. The radio broadcast sets the here and now on several levels, namely it is expository information for the audience (it gives the location with its spatial/temporal specifics), for the critics-spectators Birdboot and Moon (it grants them their position outside of the play-within-the-play plot) as well as all the characters of the play-within-the-play, mainly Mrs Grudge, who is listening to the news.

Once the setting and the main plot are defined by the report on the radio, that is, the detective investigation to be soon taking place in the theatrical here and now, “in as realistic idiom as possible, the drawing-room of Muldoon Manor” (9), Mrs Grudge continues the exposition while talking on the telephone. She speaks to an unknown caller, astutely further specifying characters and the setting and time: “Hello, the drawing-room of Lady Muldoon’s country residence one morning in early spring?” (15) followed by short descriptions of characters present at the residence including their brief characterizations, among others of “Magnus, the wheelchair-ridden half-brother of her ladyship’s husband Lord Albert Muldoon who ten years ago went out for a walk on the cliffs and was never seen again” (16). The radio broadcast and the telephone call are two instances of the use of technology which are mirroring one another as far as their speeches are concerned: the radio is seemingly a monological utterance coming from the gadget while the telephone call is seemingly a monological utterance going into a gadget.

The messenger in the gadget, the radio, pushes forward the action of the play-within-the-play several more times in *The Real Inspector Hound*. As the play consists of at least two layers (critics and *Mousetrap*), the critics’ chatter is seemingly unstoppable. The action of the *Mousetrap* is blocked by the critics. Simon must thus push forward the action and he does so when “A strange impulse makes Simon turn on the radio” (18). This time, another police message makes one of the critics, Birdboot, comment on the action of the *Mousetrap*, which finally continues to develop after another character, Felicity, enters, after a tennis ball, with the scream: “Out!” (20).

Democracy by Michael Frayn

Quoting headlines is one of the main turning points in *Democracy* by Frayn. Towards the end of the play, the pressures on Willy Brandt emerge from various directions and he finds himself pushed towards resignation from his office as the Chancellor of West Germany. Besides the main plot line, that is, the presence of an East German spy amongst his closest collaborators, pressures come from the serious and tabloid press. In a dialogue with Ehmke, Wilke quotes from another politician’s statement for a newspaper:

Ehmke (*with Wilke and Guillaume*): Can you believe he actually said it? Even Herbert Wehner?

Wilke: 'What the present German government lacks is a head.'

Ehmke: At a press-conference! In Moscow, of all places! We've only just established normal relations! The entire world waiting to hear what he's going to say!

Wilke: 'The Chancellor's asleep on his feet. He's lost in a world of his own... Quite frankly I have never taken this government seriously as a government...' (*Democracy* 74)

In this exchange, Wilke loses his identity as a character at the expense of becoming the borrowed voice of the newspaper. No matter whether he is reading it from the paper or quoting it from his memory (this is purely up to the director as there is no prescriptive *Nebentext* included regarding this particular excerpt), a change in Wilke's role is indicated. It is made visually clear by the use of quotation marks in the dramatic text, but it is also clear from the switch in his register. His response is not dialogical, he clearly speaks for the newspaper. In his first quote, he is giving another person's statement as it was printed in the press. He is quoting a quote in the paper, summoning the "messenger" of the paper to the stage and lending him his own voice.

When Ehmke continues in his lament ("At a press-conference! [...] " (74)), Wilke does not respond in order to create a dynamic dialogue that would push forward the action in this scene. His second utterance is an illustration in support of Ehmke's claim. Wilke again gives up his character's identity in favour of an informative statement, becoming the voice of the newspaper which enters the stage for this short moment as the messenger from a distant space and time, namely from a press-conference in Moscow some time before (undefined more precisely by the text).

These switches are easily understandable for the audiences at this moment, who are, from the first lines of the play, used to a constant switching between situations (the action among characters alternating with commentaries and ideas inside the characters' head) as well as on-stage referencing of, quoting from or paraphrasing (presumably non-fictional historical) sources, such as the case of the newspaper quote, which caused a certain clumsiness in the American Broadway run of the play. "Frayn's technique is a fluid mix of re-enactment and narration, docudrama and memory" (Zoglin 111). This intertwining language of the play enables Frayn to keep a variety of fictional realities present together at the same time. Leaving aside the conventional technique of the aside (no pun intended), quoting, as well as reporting, from a source such as a newspaper has a specific function in the play. Not only does it bring in alternative points of view of present situations and of Willy Brandt, due to the fact his circle consist of collaborators who fall under his spell and admire him at the same time, without a necessity to create situations of conflict for secondary plot lines, it also meets the primary function of the messenger, which is to bring in reports from outside the frame of the stage. Thus, newspapers, as in this case, widen the world of the stage by adding context and other views related to, but not necessarily a part of, the action as played out on the stage.

The Piano Lesson by August Wilson

In Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, there is yet another type of a messenger figure which is present on the stage as an inhuman character. The house of the Charles family is haunted by a ghost. Although this is not accepted by several members of the family, Boy Willie in particular, it turns out that the ghost figure rests in the attic as a witness of past events, namely a murder of a former white slave-owner and an oppressor of blacks, Sutter. History remains alive. Sutter and other whites who murdered a group of young blacks, all died later. Rumour had it that their ghosts went out and killed them to get revenge, which to many seems more an urban legend than a real story. Most of the family and especially its youngest generation, see it like that. However, "that the white men who had a hand in killing Boy Charles, their father, have all been murdered is a probability that the presence of Sutter's ghost makes a certainty" (Morrison xii). The appearance of Sutter's ghost is, in itself, a report on historical events, as it gives some proof of what happened.

At first Boy Willie does not believe in the ghost's existence:

Doaker: She [Berniece] say she seen Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the stairs.

Boy Willie: Seen what? Sutter? She ain't seen no Sutter.

Berniece: He was standing right up there.

Boy Willie: That's all in Berniece's head. Ain't nobody up there. Go on up there, Doaker.

Doaker: I'll take your word for it. Berniece talking about what she seen. She say Sutter's ghost standing at the top of the steps. She ain't just make all that up.

Boy Willie: She up there dreaming. She ain't seen no ghost. (*The Piano Lesson* 18)

Being an entity from the netherworld, the ghost has no voice of its own. Its presence is "felt" (or unfelt) by other characters, who discuss the past events when the ghost influences them to do so (they retell the past typically to confirm or refuse the ghost's existence). This way, the ghost becomes a medium for presenting the past events from outside the frame of the stage and the present action. After the story of the murder of Boy Charles and others by the white men, and their subsequent revenge for justice murders by the murdered boys' ghosts is told, the ghost's presence works as a mute testimony. In the stage directions, the ghost's presence is mentioned on several occasions, such as at the end of the first act: "*The sound of Sutter's Ghost is heard again. They all hear it as Berniece enters on the stairs*" (52). It then becomes obvious that to accept the ghost's existence means facing the heritage of the past, namely that of the racial struggle, including former owner – slave relations, racial murders, and their solution, so that the past may be laid to rest.

To do so, Boy Willie needs to revive the past. He enters into a fight with the ghost: "Hey Sutter! Sutter! Get your ass out this house! Sutter!" (104). He and the rest of the Charles household try to get rid of the ghost (they even invite Priest Avery to expel it with holy water) so that they can live on without the presence of the former slave owner and a subsequent victim of a revenge murder. A fight is necessary: "*There are loud sounds heard from upstairs as Boy Willie begins to wrestle with Sutter's Ghost. It is a life-*

and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror. Boy Willie is thrown down the stairs" (105). But it is not physical strength that can overcome a ghost. It must be a source of higher justice.

"Berniece realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. [...] A rustle of wind blowing across two continents" (105). Berniece's music is her attempt to settle with the spirits of her ancestors. Through music, she manages to find peace for those slaves who crafted the carvings on the piano and it is this symbolic scene of summoning her ancestors which makes it possible to get rid of Sutter's ghost, who till then still claimed the piano. In her "piano lesson", Berniece connects Africa and America⁴⁰ and finally exorcises the ghost. The piano thus remains a witness of the Charles family history, its music being a messenger from the past, a connecting point between the unsolved issues of the past and present alike.

Although the ghost and the piano cannot speak themselves, they are still inhuman creatures responsible for reports of the past, as their mere presence makes the other characters recall and retell history. And as such, they also lead the way to a reconciliation with the slavery past, at least for the Charles family of 1936, which is when the story of *The Piano Lesson* takes place. The tones of music not only revive the spirits of the original land and the painful past from the present one, its music full of harmony is a metaphor for a starting point of a future, which can only begin with coming to terms with the past, however painful it may be. And as the source for such settlement lies in the sphere of emotions and suppressed memories, it is things and immaterial beings that may become the messengers of the reconciling message, which remains beyond common human capabilities.

The above examples of the use of the messenger as a type of character show that it is not limited to human characters, quite to the contrary, its application may also lie in the use of "gadgets" that can speak for themselves such as the radio or a TV, inanimate objects that require a borrowed voice from some of the characters, or other ways of making their message accessible, such as a newspaper read out loud or shown to the audience, and even in objects that have no voice and whose message is untranslatable into standard speech and must find a means of expression, otherwise, usually by a context explanation by other characters prompted by the object, such as a ghost, or in music, as was the case of the piano. Still, it is necessary to stress that this chapter also serves as an example of a possible case-study application of the view of the new messenger, that is to say, a certain specific character type which has retained its main function (reporting on facts/events from out of the frame of the stage action) but has been transformed due to changes in the understanding of this conventional figure, or aesthetics of the stage

40) It is worth noting that the text of the play explicitly includes this explanation of Berniece's song refraining with "I want you to help me" (105-6) in the stage directions. The connection of the two continents is not clear, for example, from the final scene of the film adaptation (directed by Lloyd Richards, with Alfre Woodard as Berniece), which does not clearly explain how distant an ancestry Berniece is pleading, leaving it to the viewer's belief that she is calling her American enslaved ancestry (*The Piano Lesson* film, last scene).

representation. In other words, the standing of a newspaper or a TV or a radio is in this sense incomparable to that of a letter, for example, because although, on the surface, the letter is also a powerful messenger, it cannot do without its sender, unlike the media which do not necessarily have a specific author behind the news and, as such, act on their own account.

