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## Interpreting for others

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## 12► Interpreting for Others

“I’m a lover of and an apologist for journalism,” Stoppard said in an interview about his 1978 play *Night and Day* (Nadel 75). Although this play can be seen as a criticism of some journalistic practices, it is, in essence, a defence of the free press, in which Stoppard is a believer. “In *Night and Day* Stoppard offers us a commercially-produced play that presents a multi-layered, if sometimes loaded, debate on freedom” (Billington 123). This persuasion is grounded in Stoppard’s early career prior to writing fiction and plays, when he worked as a reporter for a local newspaper, where he “began to cover stories as diverse as cave-ins, criminal courts and visiting theatre personalities” (Nadel 55). His writing activities as a journalist soon came to merge with his self-invention as a dramatist.

Stoppard saw journalism as a topic that he had to tackle<sup>41</sup>: “reinvented as a political playwright, [Stoppard] managed to synthesize his concern with human rights and drama into a focused and successful work which his [...] play *Night and Day* would expand, uniting it with his long-standing interest in journalism” (280). Influenced by Evelyn Waugh’s *Scoop*, “*Night and Day* fulfilled Stoppard’s need to write a play about journalists” (293). The journalist enters the stage as a type of character that meets the qualities of the new messengers.

Journalists and reporters as characters have several qualities that destine them to be the new messengers. They keep some of the attributes of the profession from the social reality, such as access to information outside the frame of action on the stage, and their learning of new facts is thus “motivated” by the definition of their social role, as the ones who are capable of knowing and delivering stories about events or facts inaccessible and/or unknown to others. Their expertise lies in their ability to be there and subsequently pass on what they could see with their own eyes in the form of a news report.

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41) It is worth noting that among Stoppard’s inspirations to write *Night and Day* was also his personal interest in the political situation in the country of his birth, Czechoslovakia. He says in an interview: “In the 70s and 80s, when I was involved in dissident stories in Russia and Czechoslovakia, my refrain was that a free press made all the other freedoms possible, and by that I didn’t just mean an uncensored press. I meant an untrammelled press. This is what got me into writing a play about journalism in 1978. I knew I’d have to write one one day” (Stoppard, “My Love Affair” n.p.).

## *Night and Day* by Tom Stoppard

*Night and Day* serves as a good example for the issue of another important role of the new messenger, besides that of pushing the action forward, which is to inform the others about facts and events from within the fictional world, to which they would not otherwise have access. Although each piece of information partially contributes to the unfolding of the plot, the primary aim of the new messenger as an interpreter of affairs from within the fictional world is to expand it by introducing new facts, which come from outside the frame of the action on the stage. This, in general, serves to create a richer context within which the story takes place, bringing in issues which do not fit the frame of dramatic action. These pieces of news take the form of reports or, small-scale narratives.

The majority of characters in *Night and Day* are journalists. Wagner sums up the core of their work: “All we need is a story” (26). There is a certain amount of cynicism in this comment and a relative amount of self-irony may be felt. It is not only in journalism where this holds true; up to a point the same holds for playwriting.

The play often makes comments about the principles of journalistic work. There are several slogans associated with journalism, which express the core issues related to this industry and which have become generally known. One of them is the well-known “a picture is worth a thousand words”, which has been so overused that it has become a cliché. Stoppard twists this proverb a little to introduce a journalist and his photographer, who twists it a little to make fun of the reporter:

Guthrie: Dick Wagner. Do you know him? (*Pause*)

Ruth: Is he a composer?

Guthrie: No. He’s a reporter. Writes for the *Sunday Globe*, in London. I take the pictures. The pictures, as you know, are worth a thousand words. In the case of Wagner, two thousand. [...] (*N&D* 17-8)

Through this dialogue the most important identity of the characters is established – that of their professions. From this identity, various other characteristics are deduced such as an insider’s access to information about developments of and details about the war in a fictitious African country.

The dictator, President Mageeba, is also a character. Wagner has the opportunity to interview him. Thanks to various satirical notes of the play which help it to criticise British media for their two-faced approach and stereotypical attitude towards a post-colonial country, the play can emphasize the difference between Mageeba’s image put forward by the press and his personality, when he is introduced to the stage. It turns out that Mageeba knows a lot about how the press works and as a prestigious British university graduate, he is also aware of its problems and drawbacks. He proves this knowledge by quoting several commentaries about journalism that had appeared in the British press:

Mageeba: “The press lives by disclosure.”

Wagner: Ah, you know that one.

Mageeba: Delane of *The Times* – we had all that at the LSE. [...] And C. P. Scott of *The Manchester Guardian*, of course – “Comment is free but facts are sacred.” (78)

In this dialogue, it is Wagner’s response that exposes his insider’s status as a journalist. He knows these slogans because he is a member of the guild and, as such, he is automatically attributed the knowledge of the principles of his trade.

As a journalist, he has access to information sources. Whilst talking to Carson he lets him know, in between the lines, that he is aware of seemingly secret facts about the country’s economical situation:

Wagner: Charming fellow, your boss.

Carson: He’s not my boss. He’s the President, that’s all, I can’t help who’s President. I’m a mining engineer.

Wagner: They’re his mines.

Carson: They were here first and so was I. They’re my bloody mines more than his.

Ruth: And more Shimbu’s than yours now.

Wagner: True.

Carson: How did you know about all this?

Wagner: I was guessing about Shimbu. On Mageeba I had my own source. (72)

Wagner here meets his expected role when he shows that he is able to get to information which is limited to a group of insiders and inaccessible to the public. This comes as no surprise, because having his own source, even to this type of information, is a part of his identity.

Later on in this scene, Wagner makes Carson one of his sources. Carson gives him an overview of the planned agreement between President Mageeba and the Marxist guerilla leader Shimbu. He confides this secret information in Wagner because he believes that he can entrust it to him:

Carson: I’ll brief you if you promise to leave.

Wagner: Sounds fair.

Carson: Mageeba wants his mines back. Last year they produced nearly sixty per cent of his copper – you read that in *The Kambawe Citizen*. The mines are no good to Shimbu because the railway goes the wrong way. You saw that on a map. So Shimbu will swop the mines for recognition of Adoma. (72)

This particular detail is exactly the type of report which does not push the action forward as it only indirectly connected with the development of the plot. The main line of the play, being reported from the battlefield front, does not alter due to the knowledge of this newly learned fact. On the other hand, it neatly expands the universe of the play, broadening the context of the fictitious civil war in the post-colonial country.

Guthrie’s report about his survival of a crossfire belongs to this category, too:

Guthrie: We eventually got to the front, which is where the cover runs out. [...] We had the headlights on, acting friendly, and a white handkerchief tied to the aerial, but it was just about dark, they couldn't see what was coming. [...] But somebody behind us got nervous and let off a few rounds. [...] I shouted to Jake to run and I got fifty yards and when I looked back he's in the driving seat trying to turn the jeep round. He got it round, and then he was hit. Knocked him into the back seat. I should have looked after him better. (88)

Although Guthrie is describing the death of his driver, he is doing so in the form of a reportage. He himself only closely escaped, but his professionalism makes him describe the event in a narrative form by way of an eye-witness message from the front to Wagner and the audience. This report serves to give the account of an event outside the time and space of the current action on the stage, thus expanding the world of the play. Here, the transformation of a character into a new messenger provides an example of how this type of character is typically employed, which is to expand the world of the play beyond the limits of the stage in a narrative form.

However, Stoppard is a critical observer of how news reports are written and he is mocking the British press for its variability of accepted standards of writing. As part of the play, mock reports from various actual-world papers are given, such as *The Sunday Times* and *Newsweek* (Fleming 141). These primarily stylistic parodies of journalistic writing show that objectivity is an illusion – information can be delivered in various forms emphasizing various aspects. Nevertheless, the play still advocates that, “Information, in itself, about anything, is light” (*N&D* 92).

While this idea seems a universally accepted notion, Stoppard was heavily criticised for his ideological background supporting this argument, by, among others, David Hare, who wrote *Pravda* (co-written with Howard Brenton in 1985) after *Night and Day* came out. It was due to the fact that Stoppard does not see that it also matters where information appears and whose interests it serves:

Whether the “information” comes in gutter tabloid form, or in the form of page three sexism, or as Sunday supplement gloss, or just plain old daily capitalist-controlled conservatism, it is worse, says Stoppard, where people are kept in the dark. So, one can conclude, quality of information, bias or distortion are all “relative” and irrelevant so long as there is “news”. (Itzin 10)

Another critic adds that “what Stoppard never really acknowledges – unlike the authors of *Pravda* – are the numerous filters that distort that light on his way to the newspaper-reader” (Billington 128). Although this criticism of Stoppard’s view of journalism is valid, it falls short when considering that Stoppard by no means claims that journalism is objective and bias-free. Stoppard gives his characters personal motivations for their reports, and they differ in their creation of news as much as they do in their personalities. Still, this remark should not be seen as an attempt to defend the lack of criticism Stoppard’s play received, of the ideological background of the 1970s British press practice.

The best-known line of the play or, in Stoppard’s words, “the only line people remember” (“My Love Affair” n.p.), ascribed to Ruth on page 60, further develops his view of the press:

Milne: [...] No matter how imperfect things are, if you've got a free press everything is correctable, and without it everything is concealable.

Ruth: I'm with you on the free press. It's the newspapers I can't stand. (60)

While no biting criticism, this stance still expresses “the discrepancy between the ideal of a free press and the way journalism is actually practiced” (Fleming 143). And as *Night and Day* is populated with reporters, the play thus admits that it also cannot produce a fully objective report on events outside the stage. These small narratives are limited by the abilities and personal motivations of the journalistic characters, who have direct access to the expanded reality. However, their accounts can never be objective as the fictional reality is always necessarily distorted due to the mode of their reporting. In this way, they also allow the audience to view them critically. The audience is aware that there are motivations behind, and limits to, the seemingly objective reports, which helps the audience understand that here, the new messengers not only present, but also interpret the fictional world.

This chapter is an analysis and a case study of one specific kind of the new messenger. It presents a journalist as a character with privileged, almost automatic access to information outside the frame of the onstage action. Furthermore, it shows that this serves to expand the world of the play with reports on new facts and events that do not need to primarily push the action forward, but rather create a richer fictional world filled with accidental information that builds up the wider context where the main plots develop. Moreover, the journalist delivers his reports from the perspective of his profession which is thematized and somewhat problematized in the play, and through these small narratives, he creates and interprets the broader image of the fictional world for other characters as well as the audience.

However, the journalist is not the only kind of character fitting the definition of the new messenger, whose function is to interpret facts and events within the fictional world. Generally speaking, any character may become one as long as its access to the offstage is legitimate (for example, a journalist obtaining information inaccessible to others). Still, in the context of commercial mainstream British and American drama that this book focuses on, there is a tendency to assign this privilege to characters whose profession defines them to do so, such as the aforementioned journalist, the politician, the reporter, the teacher, and so on. There is also one broader type which may be identified as the eye-witness; a character whose authority to report from a different time and space is based on its identity as a participant in the events it interprets to others.

## 12.1 ► The Eye-Witness Testifies

As far as the issue of legitimate reporting within the frame of the fictional world of a play is concerned, besides “experts” there is also another group of characters with this privilege. These are eye-witnesses with personal memories as their ticket to the past. While it is often the case with the new messengers that their competence springs from their

occupation, in the case of eye-witnesses, it is based on their claim of having been there. This principle follows from the ancient tradition, which goes back to *Oedipus the King*, as was shown above.

The cycle of ten plays by August Wilson *The Twentieth Century Cycle* is heavily based on connecting the present with the past. Characters telling their stories is one of the most widely used narrative techniques in Wilson's *Cycle*, where each play is full of African American inhabitants of Pittsburgh who "carry the history of the neighbourhood through personal memories" (Booker 187). To zero in on the topic of eye-witnesses and their personal testimonies about their past, three of the plays serve as a good example: *Fences*, *Two Trains Running* and *Jitney*. They cover the historical period before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement and, as such, illustrate the dynamics of a society going through a period of historical change. Descriptions of past events by characters from these plays then serve as a point of comparison for the audience to see the changes of the period from a larger historical perspective, follow developments of African American identity and, last but not least, radically influence the characters' actions.

Howard Zinn in his *A People's History of the United States* includes a chapter on the Civil Rights movement which is aptly called "Or, does it explode?" This is an obvious quote from the poem "Harlem (A Dream Deferred)" by Langston Hughes. The chapter opens with the following: "The memory of oppressed people is one thing that cannot be taken away, and for such people, with such memories, revolt is always an inch below the surface. For blacks in the United States, there was the memory of slavery, and after that of segregation, lynching, humiliation. And it was not just a memory but a living presence – part of the daily lives of blacks in generation after generation" (Zinn 435). There are some important concepts mentioned in the quoted passage that bring us closer to the topic of this chapter. They are mainly "memory", "revolt" and, perhaps more importantly, also the concept of the "living presence, the daily lives" which may serve as an appropriate frame for mapping out some of the sources of black identity in three plays by August Wilson.

The three concepts – *memory*, *revolt*, *living presence* – are important when considering the plurality of culture in the works of August Wilson. Among Wilson's achievements and works is a series of ten plays called *The Twentieth Century Cycle*, or *The Pittsburgh Cycle*. Wilson wrote a fictional chronicle of the development of the African-American community in Pittsburgh – his hometown – where he devoted one play to each of the decades of the 20th century. Centralized around the point of the trauma of slavery and pains of emancipation, the plays themselves become fictional reports from crucial points of African Americans' history:

Their historical trajectory takes African Americans through their transition from property to personhood (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*); their struggle for power in urban life (*Ma Rainey*); their dilemma over whether to embrace or deny their slave past (*The Piano Lesson*); the broken promise of first-class citizenship after the Second World War (*Seven Guitars*); their fraught adaptation to bourgeois values (*Fences*); stagnancy in the midst of Black Power militancy (*Two Trains Running*); and their historical and financial disenfranchisement during the economic boom (*Jitney* and *King Hedley II*). (Lahr 30)

Such a chronicle may be in itself understood as an attempt at a longitudinal fictional reportage from Pittsburgh. It has context, development, analysis and a good measure of catchy stories.

Zinn mentions the concepts of memory, revolt and living presence, in the context of events which took place in the US in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s (the era of the Civil Rights Movement). These three decades are covered in Wilson's *Fences*, *Two Trains Running* and *Jitney* which are set in 1957, 1969, and 1977, respectively.

In these plays, Wilson focuses on the everyday living presence of his characters – urban African Americans of Pittsburgh. There are several axes or trends that can be studied, such as memory, which has its inner dynamic and serves as motivation for some of the characters' actions. Memory can be tricky for individuals, but in order for the *Cycle* to be a chronicle of African Americans in Pittsburgh in the course of the 20th century, Wilson's characters carry both good and bad memories. This serves to capture the spirit of the time.

### ***Fences* by August Wilson**

Memory lives inside his characters, who carry their experiences through time, borrow them from their parents and their parents' parents, and through this, memory enters their lives and actions on stage. A lot of Wilson's characters look as if they were frozen in time. They let their memory influence them at the given moment. Troy Maxson, the main character of *Fences*, a play set in 1957, makes some of the biggest mistakes due to his personal memories. This is where the fictional chronicle and history come together.

In 1957, Troy works as a garbage man. He cannot drive the garbage truck because he is black – only white garbage men can drive, according to their employers. When Troy was young, he was a good baseball player, but that was at the time when the leagues were segregated in the United States. The desegregation only happened in 1947 “when Jackie Robinson finally crossed baseball's color line” (Koprince 349) – and it was too late for Troy. In describing the situation in segregated baseball, Troy becomes a speaker for a lot of actual historical former African American baseball players: “Troy's complaints echo the words of actual players from baseball's Negro Leagues” (350). He is a fictional representative, a declared participant in the segregated sport. Troy sums up the core arguments of actual former players: “I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. [...] I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were” (*Fences* 16). Although a fictional character, he makes legitimate general historical observations due to the fact that he is created as an eye-witness. Viewed from a Brechtian perspective, he is a derivative of this social-historical class.

Troy's son, Cory, also wants to pursue a career in sports, American football, alongside his studies. It is the memory of segregation that leads Troy to forbid his son to play professional sports: “The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or



learn how to fix cars or build houses, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you" (37). Cory is devastated and from this moment on, he is estranged from his father.

The main issue of unfulfilled dreams and regrets of the past has a universal appeal. This universality is emphasized in the play by its "muted African presence" (Shannon 38) resulting in that "the numerous universal emotions evoked in *Fences* make it a play that crosses boundaries of time, age, race, gender, and culture" (38). Troy's lingering in his past makes his memories more alive and, as such, more generally understandable. Sympathy for him comes from that "Troy, for all his strengths, is flawed humanity in need of grace and forgiveness" (Wessling 123). His story and personal history are even more generally appealing considering that his present perspective on his past is based on that he "was abandoned by his mother at age eight, fled a brutal, lustful father at age fourteen, began to steal for a living, and served fifteen years on a murder charge[.] One can only hope for some measure of good, and Troy exceeds a realist's expectations" (124). In this sense, *Fences* "is a tragedy" (123) and, as such, its present development is a necessary consequence of the past events.

Troy is building a fence around his house and he is also building a fence around his heart because he carries the memory of his own hurt with him as an eye-witness (thus the title of the play, *Fences*). He does not see that times change: in the actual historical reality, Babe Ruth is playing in the Major League in baseball, Rosa Parks sat down on the front seat on a bus in Montgomery in 1955 and the Civil Rights movement is slowly gaining strength. But these are elements that constitute Cory's identity while Troy's identity is different. They differ in the way they see sports – as the deferred dream, on the one hand, and as an opportunity to be successful, on the other. Two views of the contemporary reality are present on the stage at one moment. Troy, the father, has developed a different identity as an African-American, than his son. Troy lives in a world where the African American cannot play Major League Baseball, while his son hopes for a career in the National Football League. It is almost as though they belonged to two different cultures – a culture of no chance and a culture of opportunities.

Troy's status of the witness has a double edge. On the one hand, it gives him the authority to speak about the past and serve as a basis of comparison with and contrast to the present situation. On the other hand, it holds him back because it makes a fence over which he cannot escape, should his testimony as an eye-witness hold firm and not fall apart as a matter of a fleeting memory. It is possible that memory tends to idealize the past and Troy's role is to present the past with all its cruel injustice.

### ***Two Trains Running* by August Wilson**

*Two Trains Running* takes place in 1969. The play takes the audience to an environment of the historical time at the end of the decade of the Civil Rights movement when, to make another use of Hughes' poem, "it exploded". The audience are watching a bistro in an African American neighbourhood in Pittsburgh. Customers and friends meet in

the bistro and comment on political developments, personal lives of the people of the neighbourhood, as well as various other issues. The play manages to tell a number of appealing personal stories, as well as capture the variability of opinions on the position of African Americans in the USA of the time. There are those who are still sceptical – after all, they live in a ghetto; yet there are optimists, as well as some radicals. In this sense, the play spreads the basic map of the period full of revolt and change.

In this part of the chronicle of the twentieth century, Wilson does not send his characters to the streets. They do not participate in sit-ins (although Memphis' bistro may remind us of the famous sit-in in Woolworth's lunch counter, Greensboro, NC, in February 1960), they do not go to rallies (although they talk about rallies quite often – they certainly do still take place), and there are no riots in the play (although Pittsburgh also witnessed some of the fiercest, in 1967: "In the black ghettos of the country, came the greatest urban riots of American history" (Zinn 451)). The revolts are on a much smaller – because personal – scale, but perhaps equally illustrative of what had changed in the society over the previous years.

One of the main plots of the play is about the turning point in the life of Memphis, the owner of the bistro in Hill District of Pittsburgh. The house where the bistro is located will be taken by the city authorities for demolition and Memphis is only willing to clear it if he is offered the money he believes it is worth: "[...] I ain't greedy. But if they wanna tear it down they gonna have to meet my price" (*Two Trains* 15). This is in stark contrast to Memphis's past experience, when he was driven out of Jackson in the South after his contract for soil was illegally claimed void. He recounts the discriminatory practices from the past:

Memphis: [...] Jim Stovall, who I bought the land from, told me my deed say if I found any water the sale was null and void. Went down to the court to straighten it out and come to find out he had a bunch of these fellows get together to pick on me. [...] They took and cut my mule's belly out while it standing there. Just took a knife and sliced it open. I stood there and watched them. They was laughing about it. [...] Went in there, saw the judge, and he say the deed was null and void. Now I got to walk home. [...] Got home and they had set fire to my crop. To get to my house I'd have to walk through fire. I wasn't ready to do that. (*Two Trains* 67)

Memphis, in his memories, returns several times to the act of his expulsion. His recounts serve to build his past and present identities and illustrate the change in his personality, which is possible in light of the changes in the society connected with the emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement.

Memphis's report from the past not only provides evidence about the injustice he had suffered then, but it is also the key structuring element that motivates his decisions. When he testifies about the horrors from his youth, he brings the past alive. It becomes a part of the narrative of the play as such. He, as the new messenger who is the eye-witness, recreates the past in front of the audience's eyes. As soon as the past is made present, its flagrant evil calls for retaliation. At this point, after Memphis gets his money for his diner, he

must get on the train and go down to Jackson to get back what is his. In other words, the new messenger's report has the ability to make the past present. Furthermore, although the audience only hears the report from Memphis's perspective, the status of the character as the eye-witness of the events makes it indisputable, and the point is made that his trip is just and necessary. The report helps to add a symbolic dimension to the story's moral.

### *Jitney* by August Wilson

*Jitney* illustrates mundane struggles of the economic everyday reality in 1977 and the emerging African American middle class. In the play, there are African American businessmen and Vietnam War veterans such as Youngblood, the owner of the "gypsy" cab service. It describes the process of the gentrification of African Americans, their escape from the ghetto. It is not that easy: "At the time, the civil rights movement was in decline, having achieved merely a few of its major goals. While certain aspects of society had seen integration, the economy largely had not. As a result, jitneys represent the essence of black economic life" (Krasner 161). This is because official cabs at the time of segregation did not take black customers and such discriminatory practice remained, for example, among New York taxicab services as of the 1970s. As a reaction to this, "gypsy" cab services called jitneys, run by African Americans for African American customers, emerged and developed.

In *Jitney*, as in real life, however, characters cannot fully escape their past. History comes to the stage in the character of Becker's son (Becker is a driver in the jitney service). His return from prison is an intrusion of the past which defines the present and leads to its multiplicities. Another one of the drivers in the cab service, Turner, tells Youngblood the story of Becker's son Booster:

Turner: Becker's boy been in the penitentiary for twenty years! [...] When the judge sentenced him for the electric chair, his mama just fell dead away. [...] He later got it commuted to life. [...] Booster he liked that science. [...] Booster goes out to [University of Pittsburgh] and he meets this old white gal. Young gal... [...] That gal was crazy about Booster, [...] she didn't want her daddy to know she was fooling around with no colored boy. [...] The police come and the gal said [...] he raped her. They arrested Booster and Becker got him out on bail 'cause he knew the gal was lying. The first day he was out [...] he went over to that gal's house and shot her dead right on the front porch. (*Jitney* 29-30)

The story revives the social reality and sentiment of the 1950s: there is inequality, prejudice, injustice. Booster is coming back to a different society, but he will have to face new types of challenges based on personal abilities and the economic situation. His relationship with his father is damaged. The father is influenced in his judgement by the social changes that have taken place. From this perspective, he cannot accept Booster's explanations for his motives to murder the white "gal":

Booster: [...] what you got, Pop? You the boss of a jitney station.

Becker: I am the boss of a jitney station. I'm a deacon down at the church. Got me a little house. It ain't much but it's mine. I worked twenty-seven years at the mill ... got me a pension. I got a wife. I got respect. I can walk anywhere and hold my head up high. What I ain't got is a son that did me honor... (*Jitney* 41)

Booster cannot escape viewing the society from the perspective of the time when he murdered the “gal” and was sentenced to jail. He builds on his experience with everyday discrimination against blacks. In his view, his action was a just revenge for the injustice he received. He says: “I did what I had to do and I paid for it” (41).

As these two perspectives inevitably collide, Booster and Becker also diverge in their view of what the perspectives on the past mean to their present relationship:

Booster: [...] I thought you would understand. I thought you would be proud of me.

Becker: Proud of you for killing somebody!

Booster: No, Pop. For being a warrior. (43)

What makes Booster hold his position is his experience from jail where he missed the transformation caused by the Civil Rights movement. To support his stance, he often returns to the past, to the time where he resides in his memories and which is also the era that makes it impossible for him to move on and see why his father rejects him.

As far as the structure of the plot of the play is concerned, Booster is the eye-witness of the past with a clear vision which is not influenced by the later developments. To emphasize his position, he often talks about the past and reminds the jitney station workers, as well as the audience, about the past, which in some way or another still influences the current state. He talks about the society in general from his own, young man's perspective, and he also creates moving images of his personal aspirations and dreams:

Booster: [...] I don't know if you knew it, Pop, but you were a big man. Everywhere you went people treated you like a big man. You used to take me to the barbershop with you. You'd walk in there and fill up the whole place. Everybody would stop cussing because Jim Becker had walked in. I would just look at you and wonder how you could be that big. I wanted to be like that. I would go to school and try to make myself feel big. But I never could. I told myself that's okay ... when I get grown I'm gonna be big like that. Walk into the barbershop and have everybody stop and look at me. (42)

Unfortunately for Booster (and the girl), his ambition was crushed because of his girlfriend's white father's prejudice.

As in the previous two plays, the quotes are fuelled with emotion. At first glance this is a feature that is perfectly understandable, as these eye-witnesses' small narratives are expressions of memory. But Wilson does not only use the narrative mode to express his characters' hard feelings, which, in turn, create empathy among the audience. These testimonies are intertwined with “objective” reports. Commentaries about the historical

past form a part of his characters' memories and thus transcend an individual perspective. There are only bits and pieces within the narrated memories that do so, but they do still manage to reach out to the audience's consciousness about their historical past. In other words, there is information that the audience can share with the characters in the memories, although it is hidden under a layer of emotions, which seem to cover it at first glance. As such, these memory narratives serve to help to reconstruct the historical context into which the characters are placed, and they do so by implementing reports about the past inside narratives that primarily aim at the audience's sentiments. It may be said that new messengers arrive only sporadically, here and there, within the narrated memories, but when they do so, they are empowered with an emotional charge, too, which frames them.

In *The Twentieth Century Cycle*, as illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, Wilson uses several techniques to create a documentary chronicle of the development of the African American situation during the course of the century. His primary method is to build up a common life of representative types of characters that would express as many features typical of the given decade as possible. These characters then struggle among themselves based on differing views of the contemporaneous situations, and also deal with generational clashes based on their radically different life experiences. However, in order to give context to these conflicts, it is necessary to step out of the frame of the decade. For this purpose, Wilson often employs the eye-witness, who returns in his memories to the past and recounts representative stories which shed a new light on the events of the present. Be it to explain their current motivations or to accentuate the development, these stories, fictional reports from the past, are a device which expands the fictional world of a common life environment at a time defined by a specific year of that century. Characters have the ability to move across decades and return to the past due to the fact that they store their experiences in their own memory as eye-witnesses.

## 12.2 ▶ New Messengers as Political Agents

### *Alphabetical Order* by Michael Frayn

"I'm the Messenger. I'm in and out all the time. I mind everybody's business. Yours included" (*Alphabetical Order* 4). These are the words by which Geoffrey, a journalist "of about sixty" (3), welcomes the new librarian Leslie in "a provincial newspaper office" (3). The office is a mess. There is paper all around and a sense of disorder is hanging in the air. It is soon obvious that Leslie's task will be to find order amidst this chaos, organize the office and put all the collected records (mainly cut-offs from other newspapers) into alphabetical order according to topical keywords. The stage includes file-cabinets and a telephone; symbolically, the former is a database of information about the world outside the office, while the latter serves to receive requests and give answers on a variety of topics.

Act I is Leslie's first day at a new place of work, where she learns how the office works. Her senior, Lucy, comes late, and it soon turns out that "she wouldn't know whether to file a fish finger in the fridge or the airing cupboard. The nearest she gets to pigeonholing anything is to divide her colleagues into the 'all right' and the rest" (Billen, "A Comedy" 4). At the beginning of Act II, the stage direction describes the stage: "*The same. But it has been transformed*" (*Alphabetical Order* 41). All folders have labels and no spare paper lies around. Leslie has managed to put order into the life of the office as well as her colleagues. Disorder returns when the office learns that the newspaper is shutting down. People's inclination towards chaos bursts free and they throw paper around and bring the office back to the disorderly state it was in. This is the basic plot line of the comedy written by Michael Frayn in 1975.

Besides the number of comical episodes involving discrepancies among differing personalities and their inability to work together in a cosy, familial atmosphere, the play offers at least two important dimensions relevant for the topic of this book. One is a comedy from a newspaper office about journalists, who are supposed to be able to understand the world around them in order to interpret it to others; a task in which task they ultimately fail. Two, is its closed setting, where the only possibility to communicate with the outer worlds is by talking on the phone, reading newspaper headlines, and talking about what happens outside. In other words, reporting about the fictional world outside the stage, the world of the provincial office.

The journalist's work is mocked. Lucy, the head librarian, is incompetent, although she tries to explain her work to the newcomer Leslie. Her instructions, however, are shallow:

Lucy: Well, in this office we only cut *The Times*, the *Guardian*, and ourselves. Look, two copies of each. So you can cut the back and the front of each page. You're cutting this, say. (*She cuts*) Power Pay Talks Breakthrough. Cut it nice and neatly so that it doesn't mess up the other stories around it. Now, stamp it. *Times – Guardian – us. [...]* (12)

Her approach is intuitive and unsystematic. When she is supposed to file the article she cuts, she does not know under which keyword to do so.

She tries to cover her incompetence by transforming it into a piece of advice about selectiveness:

Lucy: Be very selective!

Leslie: I see. What do I select?

Lucy: You select ... (*She thinks*) ... the kind of thing that the kind of people who produce our kind of paper would want to know about to go on producing a paper of our kind. (12)

This description of her work shows that she only has a faint idea about how the newspaper works and what its main goals are. Or, perhaps, it shows that her chaotic nature is the reason why the newspaper cannot find its direction and shuts down in the end,

given the fact that its reporters' research is heavily dependent on the sources provided by Lucy's confused filing cabinets.

Stories told about the world outside then have the same chaotic nature. Still, Lucy is able to feed information to her reporters and provide them with facts and figures up to a point:

Lucy: [...] (*Into the telephone*) Twenty-three thousand, four hundred and forty-three. That's crimes of violence against the person. (21) [...] *Sexual offences?* (22) [...] Six thousand, six hundred and fifty-six. Do you want that broken down into rape, sodomy, bestiality, and so on? (23)

The world outside the office is shaped by categorizing. There are data which describe the world, but their relevancy is dubious. The audience can hear a lot of similar data packages, but has no clear idea about what they refer to. Theatrically, this effect is achieved by simple means. That is, by giving answers to requests which remain unknown, as they are placed on the other end of the telephone line, unheard on the stage. The office, together with the audience, stay in a state of insecurity about the meaning of the facts about the world. The reason for this being that when there is no question, then the answer to it falls short of belonging to a category, and thus escapes understanding.

This changes with Leslie's arrival as the new librarian. As far as the staging is concerned, there are requests for Leslie, which are also over the telephone, but she, nevertheless, repeats them, by which she informs the audience about what she is about to answer. The new information about the outer world thus fit into place. And more importantly, her tasks consist of requests placed in person by other characters, namely the journalists Geoffrey and John. Leslie is also clear on what Geoffrey needs and she gives him data in an ordered way: "You had Fish General, Fish EFTA, Fish EEC, Fish Iceland, and Fish Norway." (48)

In this way, she imposes order on her files, her colleagues, as well as the world outside of the stage. A world that had been opaque and disorderly before her arrival. Frayn comments on the main idea of his play: "We impose our ideas upon the world around us. In *Alphabetical Order* it is by classification" (Frayn, "Introduction" xiii). The uncertainty about and confusion of the outer world is manifested in the journalists' clueless requests, which are highly comical. However, they show that their ideas about the objects of their reports are only hazy and they also pass them on in the same hazy manner. John's first request is:

John: Someone, some spokesman on education, I assume in the Labour Party, only I somehow have a hunch that it wasn't someone in the Labour Party, that it was someone more surprising than that, or possibly not, [...] said something to the effect that even corporal punishment was better than selection, [...] or something equally undesirable. [...] It was reported *somewhere*, in *something*, about halfway down a right-hand page. (*Alphabetical Order* 6)

The comical effect of this request is amplified by Leslie's obvious despair as she has only just begun her work, and Lucy had yet to arrive in the office. When John returns in

Act II to open with the same request to a radically changed environment with order all around, Lucy interrupts him to stop him and get rid of him:

John: Somebody, some spokesman on education, and I have made the suggestion that he should be sought within the ranks of the Labour Party, said, or, as I proposed in my alternative hypothesis, *wrote* – [...]

Lucy: (*head in hands*) Yes, we haven't forgotten. (36-7)

It is, however, not only the outer world in general in which the characters search for reports.

Their mode of communication among themselves, when gossiping about their colleagues, is mostly in the third person. The signalling phrase used in the play is “poor old”. When somebody leaves, the others start talking about them and discuss what they do outside.

*Arnold walks heavily out.* [...]

Nora: Poor old Arnold.

Geoffrey: Poor old Arnold.

Nora: How's he going to manage while Megan's in hospital?

Lucy: (*shrugging*) Live in the “Swiss”, I suppose. [...]

[*Nora*] *goes out.*

Geoffrey: Poor old Nora.

Lucy: Poor old Nora. [...]

Geoffrey: Chasing after Arnold. [...]

[*Geoffrey*] *goes out.*

John: Poor old Geoffrey. [...] Don't forget to say “poor old John” as soon as I'm out of the room. (28-9)

Thus, the personal life of characters, which is the secondary story line of the play, unfolds mainly mediately, through reports between the employees of the office.

Similarly, when characters return back to the office from outside, they tell the others about what they were up to, or what the others were doing, in case they witnessed that. Direct exchanges deal mainly with the issue of looking for information in the file cabinets, or they are full of small talk filled with comical language and situational humour. The atmosphere of the chaotic journalistic office is strengthened by additional information delivered in the form of reports from outside. Characters do not get to speak for themselves, they are mainly reported about:

Leslie: [...] When Megan comes back from hospital ... Arnold is going to move out? He is going to go home? (*Pause*) Sorry. [...]

Lucy: Well, don't worry about Arnold. I get him out of the “Swiss” by nine every night. I get him to the hospital three times a week. (54-5)



The whole office knows Lucy is having an affair with Arnold while his wife is in hospital, nevertheless, Arnold never talks about it; the audience learns about it from others. It is only Leslie that gets to talk about her own love affair with her colleague John: “John and I are thinking of getting married. [...] Just to get him organized” (57). She is putting forward the main trait of her character, which is to organize the life of the office as well as its occupants, and in the figurative sense, the world as it has been shown above. The play moves from disorder to order and back to disorder again.

Midway through Act II, Geoffrey already starts missing the disorder of the first act, when he laments: “Oh dear me! Uproar there used to be in here! People carrying on! Everything everywhere!” (51). Yet, the world of the play needs to be restructured and get back to its initial stage. The opportunity to do so arrives when they learn that the newspaper folded, i.e. went bust. “We’ve folded. (Silence) We’ve ceased publication. [...] We’re not producing a paper tonight!” (65)

At this moment, all the characters except for Leslie, who is not present, mess up the office in an act of a small revolt. By throwing the paper all around, they return to the time before Leslie’s arrival at the beginning of the play, which is the play’s basic point of departure.

*Lucy ceremoniously sweeps all the cuttings out of the folder John is looking at on to the floor.*

Nora: I shouldn’t throw them on the floor, Lucy. Someone will only have to pick them up.

Lucy: Why? They can just stay there now. (67-8)

This return to disorder is a visual expression of a person’s unwillingness to be manipulated, categorized and organized.

By the same action, it returns to the state when the world outside, which is the world of the audience, stops making orderly sense, as all the folders that concern the outside world lose their place, and thus the ability to speak clearly about it. As Frayn says: “If things are disordered you long for them to be better – then you want them destroyed” (Billen, “A Comedy” 4). Through its incapability to speak with sense about the actual world, the play makes a strong comment about its complicatedness and, perhaps, incomprehensibility through the simple act of categorizing all of the facts that we can learn about it.

### ***Afterlife* by Michael Frayn**

The latest play by Frayn, *Afterlife* (2008), can be viewed as an outcome of the dramatic strategies employed in his previous works, mainly *Copenhagen* and *Democracy*, in the sense that it combines a thoroughly researched biographical sketch with a staged document about the character, as well as the time in which the play is set, together with an outreach to historical contexts and interpretations from the contemporary perspective. Frayn says, “My play, like the two earlier ones of mine, *Copenhagen* and *Democracy*, is based on the historical record” (*Stage Directions* 139). *Afterlife* revolves around the persona of Max Reinhardt, an Austrian

impresario and theatre director, who “by the end of his life [...] had directed some 340 productions and built or rebuilt no less than thirteen theatres” (Frayn, *Stage Directions* 127). It specifically focuses on his last production of *Everyman* at the Salzburg festival before his forced emigration to the United States, caused by the rise of the Nazis before the WWII. It draws a parallel between *Everyman* and his director’s fate, leaving “Reinhardt, a Jew, [...] as naked and vulnerable as *Everyman* himself” (*Afterlife*, dust jacket) on the threshold of Hitler’s annex of Austria comparable to the arrival of Death himself.

A reviewer praises the play for its use of verse: “*Afterlife* is the best verse drama in English since T. S. Eliot’s *Murder in the Cathedral*” (Billen, “Draw Near” 44) which is the result of the fact that it is a piece about staging *Everyman* and fragments from the classical morality are often quoted to illustrate the burdened atmosphere of the time, and also to show Reinhardt at work. Other registers are used, too, which, since *Copenhagen*, are typical of Frayn’s style. As a matter of fact, the play swarms with linguistic devices which turn the play’s characters into new messengers, and in some cases make them primarily political agents who step out of the rigid frame of the fictional environment of their play, to a degree of even becoming didactic at the expense of the dramaticity of their actions or words.

Encountered already in *Democracy*, characters are introduced to the audience by short descriptions given from a bird’s eye perspective in an informative voice. When introducing to each other, characters leave their roles and become objective commentators:

Adler: Herr Reinhardt always knows the whole play by heart before he begins.

Reinhardt: My personal assistant, Fräulein Adler.

Adler: He has the whole production in his head. All written down in his prompt-book. [...] Every inflexion, every gesture. Every pause, every breath. (4)

Such introductions do not occur only when the characters first arrive, they develop during the play, and more characterizing descriptions are given, in an objective voice. The two most important women in Reinhardt’s life define his character during the time of rehearsing a new play:

Thimig: Always late! Always exhausted! Never any time!

Adler: He doesn’t want to have any time left over, does he, Helene, with nothing to fill it? Nothing in front of him. Nothing in his head. Nothing to do. (28)

Even Reinhardt himself objectifies a similar statement about himself towards the end of the play when he comments on his own traits from a distant perspective: “I have always worked hard and late. All day and half the night. Always, always” (74). His partner Helene Thimig, in a dialogue with the Prince Archbishop, who is the patron of the Salzburg festival staging of *Everyman*, laments about offensive remarks towards her person:

Thimig: The Jew’s whore.

Prince Archbishop: Yes, the Jew’s whore. That’s what they call you. Even now you’re married. (66)

The Prince Archbishop's response shows that he is not speaking for himself, but, rather, it represents a historical fact, a detail from Reinhardt and Thimig's life in Austria, where Nazism is on the rise. It illustrates that Reinhardt is not only standing against eager Nazis, but also against the common people of Austria, who by now have adopted the hatred towards Jews, which has developed there since the beginning of the play, identified as the year 1920 by Reinhardt's informative statement in the early stages of the play: "we find ourselves living in the year 1920" (6). References to the historical context is a very important component of the play.

The historical context is included in the play in the form of short descriptions of the situation outside. It is primarily Müller, through whose eyes the audience witnesses the changing political-historical context, as he undergoes a shift from Reinhardt's close colleague, to a member of the Nazi party and a defender of its policies, including anti-semitism. He describes the Austrian society during the 1920s:

Müller: [...] We've just lost the Great War. The currency has collapsed. So we have various problems. Unemployment. Hunger. Disease. People seeing their entire life savings wiped out. [...] (16)

Krammer adds a more universal dimension to Müller's narrow perspective: "There is also a world economic crisis" (25), which is a statement that also adds to the historical lesson about the contemporaneous context of the action on the stage. Identifying entirely with the Austrian (or, as it turns out, pan-Germanic) people, Müller's role is the messenger of the defeated and suffering nations and, as such, a knowledgeable representative and a trustworthy presenter of the historical contexts.

As the time gone by progresses, however, Müller's political views change. His reports about the political situation gain a "brown", i.e. Nazi shade. He can no longer remain the impartial commentator and his assessments include various evaluative elements. For example, he uses the metaphor of light when he is watching the German side of the frontier across the valley next to Salzburg:

Müller: [...] Look at those lights shining up there in the darkness. A new world is being born on that side of the frontier.

Kommer: There's still a frontier!

Müller: Still a frontier, yes. Between Germans and Austrians. Between Germans and their fellow Germans. Still a frontier. (56)

In this dialogue, another meaning is accentuated. It is the general knowledge aimed at the audience's awareness of the historical development. Müller's sigh about the frontier involves a temporal mark "still", implying that the annex of Austria is historically inevitable, thus being a messenger from the future predicting the course of history.

Similarly, the Prince Archbishop warns Reinhardt. He also uses the future tense as if he could be personally sure about the future. Although this could be viewed as divine inspiration (he is the Archbishop of Salzburg, after all), it is more conclusive to inter-

pret his mode from a linguistic perspective. When he uses the future tense, he is not speaking for his character, but rather becoming, like Müller, a messenger from the audience's time, incorporating their knowledge of the development of historical events. This interpretation is enforced by his indirect reference to Hitler in order to ensure that the audience will get his point and see him as their spokesman:

Prince Archbishop: You take no more interest in politics than I do, Herr Reinhardt. But we both know who is up there in Berchtesgaden looking down on us.

Reinhardt: There is still a frontier between us and him.

Prince Archbishop: Frontiers can be crossed. [...] And when he does come, what will you do? Where will you go? [...] You will lose everything! Your homeland. Your home. [...] You will exchange your house for a suitcase. (64)

Within the frame of the play, his speech is a case of prolepsis, as he is in fact describing Reinhardt's fate in Act II, after his emigration to the United States, when Reinhardt finds himself in New York with only, as Krammer notes descriptively, "Seventeen dollars! His life savings!" (79) and a single suitcase.

A similar case of foretelling the future development of the play precedes Reinhardt's departure from Austria, when he promises Gusti Adler that he will come back soon, but she already announces that he will not. It is not a mere cry of an unhappy personal assistant who admires her boss. She is also an observer of the political situation outside and, as such, her reply is more of an objective statement supported by historical evidence. Furthermore, it is from her that the audience learns that the Archbishop is dead and Reinhardt, thus, has lost his protector:

Reinhardt: We shall be back very soon, Gusti. Like the swallows. [...]

Adler: You won't, you won't! The Archbishop's dead. The Nazis are just waiting for their chance. (70)

It is in situations like this that characters step out of their role and bring information on to the stage to refer to the historical context. They can rely on certain general knowledge among the audience and, in effect, they speak about future events from the perspective of the audience and in accordance with the historical situation, which lies in the future for them as characters enclosed within the frame of the stage and the action of the play. The ability to work with historical facts and events is one of the basic abilities of characters whose role it is to function as the new messengers, and more specifically, as political agents rather than dramatic ones. They build up the context and give details about historical events, building a connection between the knowledge of the audience and the situation on stage.

It is also worth pointing out that the play combines stage design with descriptive narration to build the setting. At the beginning of the play in the London première production,<sup>42</sup> "the play opens and large marble pillars move towards the front of the

42) This particular production was designed by Peter Davison and directed by Michael Blakemore. (*Af-terlife* n.p.)

stage” (Billen, “Draw Near” 44) creating the interior of the magnificent baroque Schloss Leopoldskron where most of the action takes place. Frayn keeps the setting for an important and forming element, which is also indicated for the play-within-a-play at the beginning. The setting and its history is introduced, described, and explained to the audience in detail. As a part of the commentary on the setting, further historical information or, perhaps, trivia are filled in:

Prince Archbishop: And a famous house it is. One of our great baroque palaces!

Reinhardt: Built by one of our great baroque princes. Your illustrious predecessor. There he is.

Prince Archbishop: Twice life size. Hanging in the place of honour.

Kommer: He built this house – good! Chucked all the Protestants out of Salzburg – not so good!

Reinhardt: It was one of Your Grace’s predecessors, though, who helped to give Mozart his start in life.

Kommer: And another one had him kicked out on his behind. Great chuckers-out, you Prince Archbishops!

Reinhardt: This house. The music of Mozart. They were the legacy of your predecessors to future generations. Our play could be Your Grace’s. (10)

Schloss Leopoldskron was Frayn’s motivation to write the story: “The genesis of this play was its setting” (Frayn, *Stage Directions* 123). Frayn’s, and historically Reinhardt’s, fascination with the place make it a central point of the play and explain the vast amount of information about it presented to the audience. On the one hand, the technique of supplementing the stage design with descriptions in the dialogue seems an overuse of reportage, which the play is heavily based upon, as the previous paragraphs have shown. On the other hand, it is the result of building upon the underlying layer, *Everyman*. The convention of this morality is also based on creating an illusion by the linguistic means of a dramatic dialogue. In other words, it is perfectly unnaturalistic. The difference is that the characters of *Afterlife* do not merely talk about the setting to create a representation on the stage, but rather fill in various bits of other information that has little or nothing to do with the setting needed for the purpose of the dramatic action on the stage. In this sense they are not the unnaturalistic characters of *Everyman*. They are the new messengers, historians and interpreters of the fictional world, with access to knowledge of historical facts and events outside the frame of the action on stage.

### **Rock’n’Roll by Tom Stoppard**

Tom Stoppard’s 2006 play *Rock’n’Roll* is set at two distant places, in Cambridge in Great Britain and in Prague in Czechoslovakia, and it covers the time span of over thirty years, as it begins in 1968 with the Warsaw Pact armies’ invasion of Czechoslovakia and ends with The Rolling Stones concert in Prague in 1990. In the play, Stoppard describes the

environment of a British university professor, Max, and his family, and shows how their relationship with a Czech student, Jan, develops. “Both Max and Jan care deeply about theoretical issues but differ in their view of the solution to the Czech crisis of foreign domination. Their on-going ideological debate continues as the two protagonists shuttle back and forth between Cambridge and Prague, while turbulent historical events unfold” (Rocamora 122). While both Max and Jan begin the play as Communists, Jan becomes a dissident when the secret police destroy his beloved collection of rock’n’roll records, and as a result of his activities connected with *Charter ’77* he is imprisoned for some time. This, in turn, makes Max refuse to believe in the ways of Socialism, although he does not refuse his socially critical attitude toward the capitalist society, together with handing in his Communist Party membership card.

The play does not use the technique of reportage as much in order to exchange information about events taking place in the other setting, with the exception of the very first scene depicting Jan leaving Cambridge to return to Czechoslovakia after he hears the news of the military invasion to his country. As a matter of fact, this historical incident is taken for granted as a universally well-known fact. It is only indirectly mentioned and reported as part of a wider dialogue. In other words, no proper reportage takes place. First, Max’s daughter, Esme, mentions it: “Max thinks it’s great about the Russians” (*Rock’n’Roll* 2). After a short debate between Max and Jan about the nature of reform socialism and the Prague Spring, Max says goodbye to Jan and adds: “I’m sorry about the tanks” (4). The ignorant audience can thus only put together the information about the occupation upon Max’s wife Eleanor’s scolding of Max’s ideological point of view of the Warsaw Pact invasion:

Eleanor: [...] tanks is tanks and it’s on TV, so just do what you did last time when they occupied Hungary.

Max: What did I do?

Eleanor: Ate shit and shut up. (7)

It is only after her comparison, where she mentions “tanks” and “occupation”, that the story about the events in Czechoslovakia in 1968 becomes complete.

However, there are a number of other types of reporting in the play. Although the play alternates its setting between Cambridge and Prague, there is little communication between the two places and the situation is not the same as in *Antony and Cleopatra*; events in one do not directly influence the dramatic development in the other. Reportage is mostly used to cover events that take place in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s. This way, the political map of the play is created and the coordinates which lead Jan to his dissident path are outlined. The first report is about Jan’s return to Czechoslovakia after the occupation (called in accordance with the Communist term “fraternal assistance”). It is a secret police officer during Jan’s interrogation, who describes the situation of Czechs and Slovaks who were abroad in August 1968:

Interrogator: When our allies answered the call for fraternal assistance to save socialism in this country, thousands of Czechs and Slovaks who happened to be in the West decided to stay there. You, on the other hand, [...] rushed back to Prague. (11)

The interrogator on the one hand describes his own past action to Jan, on the other, he presents a more general description of the population's behaviour after the invasion. In this respect, he, as a representative of the ruling power, is the new messenger who has access to relevant data and who then mediates them to the other characters and the audience.

Although the band The Plastic People of the Universe only appears in the soundtrack to the play<sup>43</sup>, its developments are an important part of the story of *Rock'n'Roll*. This is because one of the band's member, the actual historical I. M. Jirous, is referred to several times by Jan, who is his great admirer. As Jirous's fictional counterpart is not a part of the play's narrative, Jirous only enters the story in the form of subject matter of a messenger's reports by Jan and his circle. Jan explains to Magda why he had missed a meeting with her:

Magda: Where were you, then?

Jan: At the police station. Jirous got shoved around by a drunk outside the party, and two cops sprayed his eyes and arrested him. (29)

A report of Jirous's arrest becomes a part of his explanation. It also serves to illustrate the behaviour of the repressive regime that had Jirous in its cross hair. Later, when Jan is trying to make his friend, Ferdinand, sign a petition against the regime, Ferdinand becomes reluctant. In fact, Ferdinand is an interpreter of Václav Havel's political ideas and developments, and represents "Havel's spirit" (Stoppard, "Introduction to *R'n'R*" xiv). In a critic's words, "Stoppard [...] incorporated a number of the ideas expressed in essays by Havel and his contemporaries (including Milan Kundera and [Ludvík] Vaculík into the speeches of his characters in *Rock'n'Roll*, to dramatize the intense intellectual debate among the Czech dissidents" (Rocamora 127). Ferdinand asks Jan: "Why don't you get your friend Jirous to sign it?" (*Rock'n'Roll* 33). Jan has to explain that Jirous cannot do so because, "He's in gaol" (33). Reasons for his imprisonment are again presented in the form of reportage:

Jan: Free expression. Somebody in a pub called him a big girl, so Jirous called him a bald-headed Bolshevik, and he turned out to be state security. (33)

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43) This is relevant to the British and US productions. As a matter of fact, the Czech production (The National Theatre première 22 Feb 2007, director Ivan Rajmont) included an appendix to the textual version when after The Rolling Stones concert in Strahov in 1990, which is the last image of the play, the orchestra platform raised and the revived band The Plastic People of the Universe played a live concert in the theatre house.

Jan knows all this, because he is a member of the underground now, as he is among the regular audience to the band's concerts. And vice versa, his reports from the dissidents' activities then backfire and define Jan as a dissident, too. Jan's role as a part of the "official" opposition begins in full after an incident which he reports to Ferdinand a few years later at the end of Act I:

Jan: [...] There wasn't one policeman at Jirous's wedding. The concert was a joy. I thought – okay, so eight years living underwater did the trick. Then they arrested *everybody*. (53)

It is this arrest which, in turn, makes Max give up on his belief in Socialist ways in Czechoslovakia. He explains this change of heart when he describes what the regime did to Jan:

Max: You remember Jan. Anyone who gives him a job gets a visit next day and he loses the job. He's sleeping on friends' floors, living as a beggar. (55)

When Jan and Max meet again after 1989, Jan is able to give him more details about how the society worked and what his fate was and, how he became a baker instead of a Marxist scholar:

Jan: In September '77 I was in Ruzyně, sentenced to one year for being a parasite, which is having no work. One day my name was called and two hours later I am standing outside the prison, a parasite once more, but there's a Tatra with three cops waiting for me. [...] They drove me to the new bakery in Michle and took me into the office there. The policeman who was in charge said to the boss, "This man works here now". [...] I worked at the bakery for twelve years. (93)

This eye-witness report returns back to the time of "normalization", which Jan defines as Czechs' "arrangement with ourselves not to disturb the appearances. We aim for inertia. We mass-produce banality. We've had no history since sixty-eight" (71). He describes the situation of the 1970s and 1980s to a British journalist, Nigel, who is in Prague in search of a dissident's story. However, Jan is not really able to give him one or explain the situation clearly.

This problem of communication between the two countries, and the impossibility to transfer the reality of the normalized Czechoslovakia, is another topic of the play. Stoppard does not avoid criticism of the capitalist regime, either. He chooses selectively from the Czech reality: "Even if *Rock'n'Roll* were entirely about the Czech experience between the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution, it could only hope to be a diagram. Yet, a diagram can pick out lines of force which may be faint or dotted on the intricate map of history that takes in all accounts" (Stoppard, "Introduction to *R'n'R*" xv-xvi). As a result, the play is a specific interpretation of the history of the dissident movement in Czechoslovakia between 1968 and 1989. What connects it with Britain the most is music. Various rock-and-roll recordings are a part of the script and they mark the changes of



scenes, on the one hand, and on the other hand, their function is to mark shifts in time, as records from the staged historical period serve as time markers. “As Stoppard sees (and hears) it, rock-and-roll is the soundtrack of contemporary Czech history, the element that gives the play, as well as the Czech resistance, its powerful, pulsating vitality and central metaphor – liberating spirit transcending nationalities and political systems” (Rocamora 123). The connection is complete when a British band, The Rolling Stones, have a concert at Strahov in Prague in 1990 at the very end of the play:

Jan: The Stones are in Prague on Saturday. The Rolling Stones at Strahov... Strahov is where the Communists had their big shows. (89)

Still, besides the references to the practices and events from the normalized Czechoslovakia, as the aforementioned quote detailing historical information about Communist shows, the finale of the play does not hesitate to question the future development of the country. Jan sees the revolution as a chance for a new start for both sides of the Iron Curtain when he considers what happened in 1989: “Changing one system for another is not what the Velvet Revolution was for. We have to begin again on the scale of the individual person, and the ordinary meaning of words. I can’t use words like socialism or capitalism any more. This language belongs to the nineteenth century” (101). This appeal to return to the individual as opposed to the system, is supported by Max’s granddaughter Lenka, who speaks critically of England: “Don’t come back [to England]. [...] It’s a democracy of obedience” (104). Thus, at the end of *Rock’n’Roll*, a statement for the audience is made that a political system in itself cannot be the sole guarantor of an individual’s freedom and that individuals just like Jirous, who did not want to deal with the regime in any way and only wanted to be left alone to play his music, will always be present and needed for the free development of a society.

To sum up, reportage is used in *Rock’n’Roll* to present messages about events in Czechoslovakia for characters in England, but this particular use is very rare. It serves much more to report on events that take place in the Czechoslovak dissident community with the focus on the events related to the totalitarian police state attitude towards the band The Plastic People of the Universe and primarily its frontman Jirous. It also serves as a tool for Jan to retell the story of his personal life after his signing of the Charter ’77.

The chapter on the new messenger as an interpreter for others (as opposed to the one that primarily pushes the action forward, dealt with above) shows several instances of this use in commercial mainstream drama. It takes the examples of several plays by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson and shows how reportage operates in a selection of their plays. In most cases, the reports serve to widen the fictional space and time of the plays so that their span exceeds the needs and boundaries of the action on the stage. The characters, who qualify for such a type of reporting are identified as the new messengers, as social actors with specific privileges which grant them the access to these facts and events “out there”, and at the same time give them the authority to speak about them to the others – the other characters and the audience.

Their authority is related to their affiliations. These are, as in the analysed plays, their occupation such as that of a journalist, politician or librarian. They are also eye-witnesses and members of specific communities, such as the African American small entrepreneurs of Pittsburgh. Or they can be politicians or their opponents, radical revolutionaries or dissidents.

All these characters, at times, have the authority to step out of their dramatic identity as characters with a name, switch to a narrative mode, and testify about the world outside the stage. In this context, their reports do not primarily serve to push the action forward, In other words they are not indispensable building blocks of the dramatic narrative. Thus, they interpret the wider constituents of the fictional world to the others, shape its understanding and, in effect, become political agents.

