

‘You looked quite different without a head’

A Slight Ache Revisited across Media

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Introduction

In his 2005 monograph *Harold Pinter and the Twilight of Modernism*, Varun Begley made an important plea for transmedial approaches to the author’s work, resonating wide across the field.¹ In view of the fact that “Pinter’s career has taken frequent iconoclastic turns towards radio, television, and film”, Begley cautioned against “any sweeping interpretation that rests on the singularities of one medium” (113). *A Slight Ache* in particular, “[o]riginally a radio play, later staged and televised [...], announces aesthetic promiscuity at the outset of Pinter’s career”, so that it “emerges as a key problem text” (97). This controversial status is largely due to “the silent match-seller, whose unverifiable status on radio and hulking presence on stage position the play on a fault line of medium difference” (99). By drawing attention to this “problematic media-flirtation that is partially suppressed” in Pinter criticism, Begley argues that it “should be placed in the foreground” (2005, 98). Indeed, most critics of the play seem perfectly content to analyze the published text, geared towards theatre, while making either tokenistic, abstract references to radio that ignore the broadcast and its script – which differ significantly – or applying radiophonic parameters to the stage and television versions. This article avoids such a lack of media awareness and expands the enquiry to BBC Radio 4’s re-recording of *A Slight Ache*, broadcast on 13 October 2000 to celebrate Pinter’s 70th birthday.

What made this new version stand out was the clearly defined acoustic presence of the matchseller, Barnabas. The first recording, which premiered forty years earlier on the BBC’s Third Programme (29 July 1959), was more ambivalent in this regard, initiating decades of scholarly debate as to whether the character is really there. What makes the recent production even more significant is that Pinter himself was closely involved in it, primarily by taking on the role of Edward, but it also put him in a position to advise director Ned Chaillet, affording the author a chance to revisit his play. I aim to analyze this remarkable shift in sonic portrayal of the enigmatic matchseller through the context in which *A Slight Ache* was first produced, its later incarnations for the stage and the screen, as well as the changing academic climate in which it has been critically received. In doing so, I will argue that the most recent recording facilitates an understanding of the play’s inherent transmediality, further shifting the emphasis

away from treating it as an essentially radiophonic phenomenon that can only be diminished through adaptation for theatre and television, as has so often been the case. In keeping with my transmedial methodology and to counteract the dominant trend of analyzing *A Slight Ache* on the basis of the published text, I will foreground the audiovisual in my article, paying close attention to sound and image as well as the divergences between the various texts of the play.

With regard to the figure of the matchseller, three main strands can be discerned in the critical response to *A Slight Ache*: 1) that he doesn't exist; 2) that he exists; 3) that it doesn't matter – which, to some extent, reflects a chronological evolution as well. These three stages I will use to structure my analysis, each centering on particular media: 1) radio; 2) theatre and television; 3) radio once again.

He doesn't exist: the original radio recording

Martin Esslin, the prominent radio scholar and former BBC Head of Drama, was one of the first to doubt the character's existence, claiming in his widely influential book *The Theatre of the Absurd*: “As the silent matchseller is never heard, [...] he might equally well be a figment of the old people's imagination. The audience of the radio play will never be able to verify whether he was real or not.” (1961, 251) In his subsequent publications about Pinter, Esslin continued to voice – and defend – this idea (1970; 1980; 1986), garnering quite a following over the next few decades until this day (see Hinchcliffe 1967; Burkman 1971; Miller 1974; Imhof 1977; Burkman 1984; Stevenson 1984; Cahn 1993; Guralnick 1996; Chignell 2019; Smart and Wrigley 2022). He backed up his argument by pointing to the fact that “nobody was cast in the part of the Matchseller, although, in the *Radio Times*, he was billed as a third character with the name of a fictitious actor in order to make listeners who referred to the cast list during the broadcast keep expecting him to utter some audible sign of life”, all “in order to enhance the suspense of the play” (Esslin 1986, 48). Indeed, Barnabus is credited as “David Baron”, the stage name Pinter adopted as an actor in the mid-1950s (Carpenter 1997, 209; Billington 2007, 47). While later billings would sometimes just omit the character from the cast list (see below), the use of this alias liminally poised the matchseller on the edge of the real and the unreal, although Pinter did not actually play him at the time. That the ploy had worked is shown by the BBC's audience research report, which indeed mentions that many listeners felt “cheated” (1) by the *Radio Times* billing.²

Stating that the matchseller never says anything is correct, but claiming that he makes no sound would be a gross overstatement. Even Esslin finally had to concede as much about the 1959 production, although the lengths he was willing to go to, so as not to have to give up

his original stance about the character's imaginary status, is quite astonishing. Eventually, he revised his account in the following terms:

Admittedly, the props he is supposed to be handling can be heard: when he drops his tray, when matches are being placed back onto it, his steps coming up the stairs, the closing and opening of doors as he enters or leaves the room. There is thus a deliberate contradiction in the information the listener is given about the existence of the Matchseller. No *human* utterance comes from him, but there are noises emanating from *things* he might be handling or touching. But such noises might be caused by other influences, or they might exist merely in the imagination of the two characters of the play. (1986, 49)

Leaving aside the question of whether Esslin was deliberately and conveniently ignoring the noises that the matchseller makes in his earlier publications on *A Slight Ache*, for a radio play “it has astonishingly few sound effects”, as Ronald Hayman astutely comments (1970, 29). Indeed, to borrow Mark Taylor-Batty's eloquent phrasing, “the production seems deliberately to promote an economy of silence” (2014, 39):

There are no domestic sounds of knives on plates, tea being poured or teacups meeting saucers in the opening conversation over breakfast. These are notable omissions, and suggest that an artistic decision was made about the auditory behaviour of both interlopers, wasp and matchseller. It is only when Flora steps outside to address the tramp figure, and we hear distant birdsong and the sound of the garden gate creaking as she opens it, that the production finally established the kind of sonic atmosphere that would have been expected in broadcasts of this sort. (40)

According to Taylor-Batty, the result is “a kind of opening out, as though Flora has stepped out of some sterile world into a real, recognisable panorama of countryside sounds”, which implies that “the matchseller inhabits the real world, and that Edward and Flora are distant from it” (39–40). Such an interpretation, unusually attentive to the soundscape, is fascinating in that it upends Esslin's point about the matchseller's nonexistence and in turn exposes the couple as unreal, phonies suppressing their desires and anxieties under a thin veneer of upper-class refinement. Taylor-Batty also points out that Edward, while sitting in his study, counts out Barnabas's audible footsteps on the stairs, a moment only found in the radio version and

its script. “This purposefully indicates that the matchseller is a real presence”, he concludes, “and not a grotesque figment of the troubled mind” (41). Then again, Edward might just be “producing the tapping sounds himself”, as Janine Hauthal suggests (2021, 58). Regardless of whether we may consider these sounds as definitive proof of his existence, the old man is still, as Esslin is correct to insist, motioned up and summoned in by the other two characters, so his movements are not intrinsically motivated.

Another sequence in the original broadcast, curiously not mentioned by either Esslin or Taylor-Batty, is significantly different in this respect. Where the published theatrical text just stipulates that the matchseller “*rises*” (Pinter 1991, 183), the radio script has a few extra lines, spoken by Edward, with cues for additional sound effects. He observes how Barnabas moves of his own volition, getting up, taking off his balaclava, and opening the curtains as well as the blinds (27).³ It is striking that this scene has been overlooked in the criticism on *A Slight Ache*, not only because it is unique to the radio version, but also because Pinter singled it out as pivotal during a rarely cited interview with Donald McWhinnie for Carl Wildman’s “Talking of Theatre” series, broadcast by the BBC Third Programme on 7 March 1961, soon after the theatrical premiere:

We only had to make one alteration really. That was the point of climax in the play where the tramp, who doesn’t speak, does make a positive action. On radio what I had to do was to emphasise his action, which was the turning-point of the play, to make him go through various motions, stand against the curtains, draw the curtains, take off his hat and do various things which were reported by the other man. On the stage we found this was quite unnecessary and that a simple gesture, i.e. standing, was quite enough. (qtd. in Wertheim 1986, 66)⁴

While this moment was clearly intended for the matchseller to come into his own on radio, it was treated rather anticlimactically in the original broadcast. Quite difficult to make out, more so than his movements in earlier scenes, these actions are decidedly fainter than Edward and Flora’s execution of the same gestures, almost as if they are reluctantly made, which cancels out the assertive notion of agency that Pinter had in mind. Considering radio broadcasting’s practical circumstances in the late 1950s, when reception could still be bad and clarity was of the utmost importance, this is surprising, all the more so since the play’s acoustic texture was designed for this moment to stand out. We are thus confronted with a clash between Pinter’s intentions, on the one hand, and McWhinnie’s handling of the production, on the other. As

Kate Whitehead notes, in spite of the BBC's general amenability to authors, "once a script has been handed to a producer it becomes a team effort; the writer must to some extent bow to the judgment of the professional broadcaster" (1989, 39). Any radio production is always a kind of compromise, the translation of a textual document into sound. How freely a producer can interpret that document depends on the detail of the cues or "stage directions" in the script, as well as an author's involvement. Here, a comparison with Samuel Beckett is insightful.

A month before taking on *A Slight Ache*, McWhinnie had produced Beckett's second radio play, *Embers*, aired by the BBC Third Programme on 24 June 1959. It features a man, Henry, who is having conversations with imaginary interlocutors while sitting on a beach. His father, he tells us, has come "back from the dead, to be with me, in this strange place", but "he doesn't answer" (Beckett 2009, 35). The presence of his wife, Ada, is more uncertain. On the one hand, she speaks, sometimes in a way that makes it seem as if she is there with Henry in the flesh: "Raise yourself up till I slip my shawl under you." (39) At other times, she appears to be absent, for example when unable to feel the cold: "Chilly enough, I imagine, I hope you put on your jaegers." (39) Unlike Henry, she never makes a physical sound. In fact, Beckett very explicitly stipulated this in the script: "*No sound as she sits.*" (39) By comparison, when Edward makes the matchseller sit down in his study, the script neither calls for a sound nor its absence. He merely states that Barnabas is sat at last, without further ado (17). To Beckett, this was the crux on which the entire success of *Embers* as a radio play hinged and the reason why he opposed every form of stage or screen adaptation, explaining to his trusted French director Roger Blin: "When you listen, you don't know if Ada exists or not, whether she only exists in the imagination of the character Henry." (qtd. in Blin 1994, 310) In Pinter's case, the situation is more complicated. Not only did he authorize – if not actively encourage – *A Slight Ache* to migrate freely across media, the sparsity of his sound directions in the script also left McWhinnie with a lot of room for interpretation.

In any case, *Embers* could not have acted as a source of inspiration for Pinter, as it was broadcast after *A Slight Ache* had been submitted to the BBC. He did hear Beckett's *All That Fall*, aired several times on the Third Programme in 1957 and also directed by McWhinnie, finding in it "all the best things in radio" (qtd. in Wertheim 1986, 69). Interestingly, Maddy Rooney, the protagonist, shares a few traits with the matchseller. For example, she affirms to the listener that she still exists even when not making any sound: "Do not imagine, because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on." (Beckett 2009, 17) She is also embodied in a protean, somewhat shapeshifting sense, referring to herself as "a big fat jelly" (5), among other things.⁵ A strikingly similar phrase resurfaces in *A Slight Ache*, when

Edward states about the matchseller that he is “like jelly”, a “great bullockfat of jelly” (Pinter 1991, 173), which Flora contradicts by saying that he is “a solid old boy [...]. Not at all like a jelly.” (176) If Pinter envisioned the matchseller as an extreme exaggeration of Maddy, never uttering a word and only making the occasional sound to confirm his presence, McWhinnie portrayed him in a way that was more akin to Ada, i.e. not there but materializing irregularly through the imagination of others. Contrary to Beckett, who was a more established author and met as well as corresponded with McWhinnie in addition to supplying him with detailed production notes, there is no clear indication that Pinter was consulted to the same extent at this budding stage in his career. As such, we cannot rule out that the original broadcast of *A Slight Ache* was more a reflection of the producer’s vision than the author’s, largely of the same mind as Esslin’s understanding of the radio medium, promoting ambiguity.

He exists: the stage and television versions

Some critics, such as Ronald Hayman, already questioned Esslin’s view just on the basis of the radio version: “Obviously he isn’t a fantasy because Edward and Flora both see him and speak to him and Flora feels him.” (1970, 28) Especially after the play’s performance at the Arts Theatre in January 1961, and the widespread publication of the theatrical text, others retroactively found in them proof that the matchseller was real.⁶ Because “the Matchseller is undeniably, physically *there* in any stage production”, Simon Trussler insists, “his solidity, if not his reality, must necessarily be accepted” (1973, 59). So, too, Steven H. Gale concludes: “Questioning his existence is unjustified for two reasons: first, the matchseller is included as a character in the stage directions of the stage version, so he exists by definition; second, and more important, the other two act as though he exists.” (1977, 80) Although it is contentious to corroborate the matchseller’s reality on radio through the theatrical version, McWhinnie, who also directed the play for the stage, certainly tried to render *A Slight Ache* in such a way that it replicated, as best as possible, the radio medium’s trademark penchant for ambivalence. According to H. A. L. Craig, writing in *The New Statesman*, the stage production made all the actors, so not just the one playing Barnabas, do something that “comes unnaturally” to them, namely “effacing themselves”:

They are sound waves made man. Emlyn Williams speaks his opening lines with a newspaper up in front of his face and that obduction set the pace for the most standstill performing we have seen outside the Palace Guards. Except for a brief flurry of sexual body blows – Queensberry Rules – his wife (Alison Leggatt) is equally still; while the

third of this rigid trio, a match-seller (Richard Briers), neither speaks, nor twists, nor lights a match, nor shows his face, nor offers a single projection for the length of the play. I sat a few yards from these actors for an hour, yet I would not have recognised one of them in the street ten minutes later. Mr. McWhinnie almost rubbed them out. (1961)⁷

This “effacing” effect of the matchseller was further achieved by “an actor who stood with his back to the audience during the performance” (Wertheim 1986, 65) and had his “face almost totally obscured by a woollen balaclava helmet”, so that he was “portrayed quite calculatedly as an indefinite presence” (Peacock 1997, 45). His entrance onto the stage is also delayed, as Jacob Stulberg notes (2015, 516), because the garden gate “*cannot be seen by the audience*” (Pinter 1991, 153). Nevertheless, in spite of McWhinnie’s ingenious efforts, for those critics who held *A Slight Ache* to be essentially radiophonic, the “presence of an old man in a shaggy coat completely destroyed that ambiguity. There was no doubt any longer that the matchseller existed.” (Esslin 1980, 180)⁸

Such negative assessments were even more prevalent for the play’s television debut, broadcast by BBC Two as part of their “Theatre 625 series” on 6 February 1967, directed by Christopher Morahan, produced by Michael Bakewell and designed by Barry Newberry. As opposed to the theatrical version, which delays his entrance, it zooms in on the matchseller as soon as Edward spots him standing outside his garden gate, a few minutes into the production. As Morahan explained to Michael Billington, “we wondered about not having him there in our production [...]. But having decided to include him, I had to select very carefully the first moment we were to see his face. If one brought him in too early then some of the surprise would have gone out of the later part of the play.” (qtd. in Smart and Wrigley 2022, 119)⁹ At first, we only glimpse him obliquely, from the side and the back or on the edges of the frame, so that just his hands and the tray are visible in the shot, occasionally also his feet, which has a disembodied effect. As on the stage, a few moments attempt to visually recreate instances of radiophonicity, for example when Edward orders the matchseller to “Get into the shade of the corner” and stand “in shadow” (Pinter 1991, 170). Similarly, Flora asks him in the study: “Wouldn’t you rather sit in the shade?” (174), adding with mischievous delight: “Isn’t it dark Barnabas?” (176) These scenes are oddly out of place on radio, which lacks visuals and thus prompts us to imagine Edward and Flora not seeing the matchseller. On television, however, their potential is fully realized. The lighting diminishes towards the end, obscuring the actors’ faces, and when Edward re-enters the study, the darkness becomes even more pervasive, as he

pulls down blinds and closes the curtains. In a scene restricted to this version alone, he even strikes a match and gropes his way to the desk lamp, switching it on and turning around to see if the source of his anguish is still there, with a look befitting a classic horror film. While he likes to keep the matchseller in the dark, he prefers to remain in light himself. Flora is clearly more at ease with joining the old man. When she walks off into the gloom with him, she has clearly embraced the darkness, whereas Edward succumbs to it.

For the majority of critics, including Hayman, “the best moments in the match-seller’s scenes were when he was out of camera and the second-best were when he had his back to the camera” (1968, 76). However, such judgments perceive the production through the restrictive framework of radio and underline what is lost, disregarding its own visual terms and what is gained. “Thoughtful camerawork” indeed “underscores the power shift in in the traditional roles of husband and wife in the unfolding drama”, as Billy Smart and Amanda Wrigley note (2022, 120).¹⁰ For example, just before we cut away to the scullery, the camera zooms in one last time, from inside the house, on the figure of the matchseller outside, so that he comes to stand in between Flora and Edward. The zoom out transitions into the scullery, where Edward spies on the old man through the window panes, at a safe remove from behind the glass, while remaining unseen himself. It is a scene that resonates with his later question: “Do forgive me peering, but is that a glass eye you’re wearing?” (Pinter 1991, 169) At this point, the camera swings around to give us a first glance at the matchseller’s face, a short but extreme close-up of his nose and eyes, revealing that the left one is indeed artificial. This moment has about it a playful sense of self-reflexivity, as we find ourselves staring with Edward at the matchseller’s reflective glass eye on a screen, thus highlighting the mediatedness of this moment. It is also a turning point that assumes symbolic significance on television. Edward now has to face up to the truth that he will never be able to crack the enigma of the matchseller, not even in face-to-face confrontation, so eventually he loses face to this anonymous stranger. From the secretive voyeurism in the scullery, the play has come full circle, Edward being constantly subjected to the matchseller’s unperturbed gaze. As close-ups increase, they enhance the general sense of confinement, which television is well equipped to convey, more so than the wide-open stage.

Of course, an obvious difference with the theatrical version is that the character’s face could, for the first time, be seen directly at various points in the play. When Oliver Marlow Wilkinson was asked to advise on a possible production by the BBC in 1959, he felt that the “close-up of television” would give the play “another dimension”, making it “more revolting than macabre”, regretting that “one couldn’t distort or slurr the edges of events as one can, by implication, in sound”. Even though it was “tempting to think that this effective sketch could

translate into television”, he rejected the idea because “- - even if a brilliant adaptation were made, - - ‘A Slight Ache’ would still remain obscure for many viewers”.¹¹ A few years later, when it was realized, for Esslin this had turned the matchseller into “an idiot, or a deaf-mute”, making the experience of seeing him on screen “somewhat embarrassing” (1980, 180). Yet it was not merely a matter of propriety. The old man’s visual manifestation also had an “awkward effect” in the sense that it highlighted the “incompatibility of his concreteness with his symbolic quality” (Esslin 1970, 90). So, too, for Hayman, “the close-ups of the one-eyed actor’s face all jarred”: “All this works far better if the uncertainty is Edward’s. If we see the man’s face, it is ours too.” (1975: 28–9) Yet is that not entirely the point? As a consequence, “the continued unchanging presence of the balaclava-helmeted old tramp renders that shift of Flora’s image of him much harder to accept” (Esslin 1986, 50), making him “uncomfortably symbolic, within the otherwise realistic context of the play” (Peacock 1997, 167). In each of these cases, however, the noted discrepancy is taken to be a sure sign of visual media falling short of radio’s suggestiveness, but that need not be the case. Rather, it shows that Pinter was tugging at the limits of theatre and television, doing something with them that spectators were not yet accustomed to or prepared for.

Instead of a weakness or a “disadvantage”, the matchseller became a “tremendously powerful” image in McWhinnie’s opinion (qtd. in Wertheim 1986, 66). In the aforementioned Wildman interview from 1961, Pinter welcomes the sense of unease that seeing the character evokes: “we know that he is an old tramp, you know, and that closes the door somewhat – on the other hand, it doesn’t, I think, ultimately because the audience unhappily still go through great tearings of their souls wondering who he is.” (66) This remark is telling, for it reveals that Pinter did not necessarily share the critics’ detrimental opinions about visual renditions of the matchseller. Instead, what fascinated him more was transferring some of that radiophonic uncertainty onto the theatre space and, by extension, the screen. This sheds a different light on one of his other statements made a year later, in 1962, at the National Student Drama Festival in Bristol, during a speech entitled “Writing for the Theatre”:

I suggest there can be no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true or false. [...] We will all interpret a common experience quite differently, though we prefer to subscribe to the view that there’s a shared common ground, a known ground. I think there’s a shared common ground all right, but that it’s more like quicksand. Because “reality” is quite a strong firm word we tend to think, or

to hope, that the state to which it refers is equally firm, settled and unequivocal. It doesn't seem to be, and in my opinion, it's no worse or better for that. (1991, ix-x)

Pinter's comment proposes that the innovative nature of the play does not so much reside in the protean presence of the matchseller on air and the question whether he exists or not, but in his defiant appearance on the stage or the screen, prompting audiences to question what they think they see objectively, as it clashes with Edward and Flora's highly subjective and volatile perceptions of the old man. Judging from reviews, spectators struggled with this experience, usually attaching a negative value judgment to the "vague sense of menace, a vague sense of unease" that they felt.¹²

Albert Wertheim is one of the rare earlier critics to venture that "the possibility of the Matchseller's being entirely an imaginative figure" in visual media is "not impossible", be it still "less potent" (1986, 65). Volker Strunk is decidedly more vociferous in dismissing such residual hesitation as "the kind of reductive Platonism that has behexed much thinking about radio" and promotes "the rash assignment of a hierarchy of values when dealing with different media" (1989, 120). Instead, he advocates the more productive view that "Pinter has availed himself of certain freedoms which one might call radiophonic in a technical sense but which are really freedoms of the non-naturalistic stage" (122), and radio nevertheless helped foster. This alternative perspective makes it possible to consider the stage and screen versions of *A Slight Ache* not as adaptations, with all the normative value judgments such a term usually implies (see Hutcheon 2013; Sanders 2016), but as theatre and television plays in their own right, engaging with the specific characteristics of each medium while also being informed and shaped by others.

It doesn't matter: the later radio recordings

The third and final strand in the critical response to the matchseller takes up a more nuanced, middle-ground position. For James R. Hollis: "Whether or not the matchseller exists seems immaterial. [...] It is vacancy that the play explores and the matchseller only serves as an objective correlative for the emotions of Edward and Flora." (1971, 58) Similarly, Steven H. Gale states: "Whether he is real or not is not as important as the fact that they use him as a focal point in their struggle for affection." (1977, 80) Even Esslin confesses: "Whether the Matchseller actually exists in the flesh or not becomes correspondingly less important. [...] For the Matchseller is precisely that element of undefined dread waiting outside the enclosed, seemingly safe space of the characters' private world, which at that moment may intrude into

their lives.” (1986, 49–50) As these critics seem to agree, more significant than the question whether the old man is actually there or not is his effect on the relationship of the couple, as well as the shift in power from Edward to the matchseller and Flora’s switching sides.

His stage and screen appearances must have made it difficult, perhaps even untenable, to pretend the character is not there in the radio versions that were recorded later. The first of these was directed by Guy Vaesen and broadcast on 20 May 1970 by Radio 4, as part of the Wednesday Afternoon Theatre slot dedicated to a Harold Pinter Festival. No less than four repeats followed, making it the most frequently aired production of *A Slight Ache*.¹³ Eileen White’s memo to Jack Beale at the BBC’s Copyright Department of 10 April 1970 reveals it had to be redone because “[t]he quality of recording of the original production was considered not up to standard”.¹⁴ Michael Hordern plays Edward, with Vivien Merchant returning to the role of Flora, but no actor is listed for the part of Barnabas. The *Radio Times* announcement does mention “a match-seller at the garden gate”, and it even features a little drawing of the breakfast table scene with a dark figure standing under a tree outside (“Afternoon Theatre” 1970, 43), but audiences were possibly familiar enough with this character by now so as not to be misled anymore. There is no indication that Pinter had a hand in the production, which merely sought to improve the audibility of the 1959 recording, following it closely on almost every front, as if it were an act of conservation. However, it does have a couple of noteworthy deviations. There are more sound effects, yet still subdued, and the sense of space is generally enhanced. Most strikingly, the scene where Edward counts out the matchseller’s steps on the stairs is cut and so is the shaking of his tray when Flora hands it to her husband. This is odd, because the footsteps and the tray were clearly audible before. If Vaesen was out to confuse the listener through such random acts of omission, he certainly succeeded, but in doing so he violated the indications in Pinter’s script. Some of Barnabas’s movements are now easier to hear, but he is not governed by the same rigorous attention to detail or acoustic rationale that characterizes the most recent production from 2000.¹⁵

This second re-recording comes bursting with sound right out of the gate. While Flora and Edward are sitting at the breakfast table, we hear the birds chirping outside, the pages of the newspaper rustling and the teapot or the hot water jug being passed around. The wasp is clearly audible, too, with the jar of marmalade clanging as Edward traps the nuisance inside, muting the buzzing. In the garden scene, we hear the by now familiar sounds, but faint traffic makes up the background. As observed before, most of these sounds are not explicitly called for in the radio script, but rather implied through the characters’ lines or actions. The sound design is realistic, not at all artificial as if the play unfolds in a vacuum or a studio. We get a

fuller sense of space, as the characters' footsteps and voices come to us from different angles. Even the matchseller serves as our point of audition for both Flora and Edward, their voices drawing closer as they walk up the steps and into the study towards him, anchoring the old man in radiophonic space. Unlike the previous radio productions, but similar to the stage and screen versions, an actor is used to embody the character, with whom Edward and Flora are clearly interacting. But, as Hauthal (2021, 58) notes in the only academic discussion of this broadcast, the joke is still on us. In the *Radio Times* his name appears as "Albert Stokes", the protagonist of *A Night Out*. Pushing his late twenties in 1960, he would have been around the right age for the part, but clearly this is meant as a playful nod to David Baron. While thus not demystifying the matchseller completely, Pinter restored to him some of the agency he lacked in McWhinnie's original production for radio, realizing it more fully in acoustic terms with a systematic progression, along the lines of its theatre and, especially, television productions.

Instead of an anticlimax, there is a gradual buildup in the sound the matchseller makes. At first, when Flora lets him into the garden, we hear some vague movement, but since there are two characters in this scene, the source remains unclear. Next, when Flora offers to take his tray before he walks up the stairs, there is faint fidgeting as the old man refuses to let go. Whenever he is asked a question, the dead silences are replaced with "sounds of footsteps and of rustling clothes", but again "listeners cannot be sure whether these sounds are made by the silent matchseller or by the character of Edward, moving through the room" (Hauthal 2021, 58). Similarly, when Flora wipes Barnabas's brow, there is audible contact, and when she offers to look under his jersey, there is more shifting. The matchseller also distinctly flops down on the couch. But, most importantly, when he later gets up to walk about the room, pull up the blinds and open the curtains, not only are these actions louder and more distinct than in 1959, his pace is also confident, even menacing, not at all undecided as when clambering up the stairs before. His sonic evolution runs opposite to that of Edward, particularly in Pinter's marvelous voice acting, which ranges from abrasive, self-assured and controlled to hesitant, faltering and eventually broken up, ending with panting and heavy breathing. As he fades out of the soundscape, the matchseller gradually fades in over the course of the production, finally supplanting Edward acoustically as the old man leaves with Flora in this closing scene. Again deviating from the original broadcast, but also from the start of this new recording, he exits to the sound of his own footsteps, thus counterpointing the silence with which he entered.

This switch of roles and power is reinforced, in addition to the expected sound of the tray being handed to him, with Edward's dropping to the floor, a noise that is absent from the original recording and not called for in the radio script, but central on the stage and the screen.

Here, as Wertheim points out, “physical gestures” and “body language must go a long way in shaping the texture and tone” of the action (1986, 68), especially in the study scenes. Flora is more composed and comfortable with being close to Barnabas, kneeling down by his side and making physical contact. Her husband never remains in one place for long, trying to keep his distance. As Elin Diamond analyzes the scene: “Obsessed with positioning the Matchseller, Edward abandons his position of authority behind the desk. Curiosity compels him toward the old man, and, stooping over to retrieve his matches, Edward assumes a subservient position, prefiguring his final humiliation.” (1985, 36) His fall is to be regarded in a “symbolic light”, suggests David T. Thompson, Edward’s “loss of upright posture” making the matchseller “the dominant one when he gets up from his seat” (1985, 108). Before Barnabas walks out with Flora, he steps over Edward, who is lying on the floor next to the discarded tray of boxes. In Billington’s critical assessment, who refreshingly does not idolize the radio version, “[w]hen the play was later televised and staged – highly effectively – it became a more obvious study of territorial takeover and psychological displacement” (2007, 96–7). By finding an acoustic equivalent for this visual role reversal, so too did the 2000 re-recording, the sound of Edward falling to the ground cross-medially assimilating the theatrical and televisual versions into the aural texture of the new radio production.

When Pinter was asked which version he preferred, again during the aforementioned interview with McWhinnie by Wildman in 1961, before the play had appeared on television, he refused to choose a side: “I don’t know which one can regard as more successful showing him. (*Laughter*) I still can’t make up my mind, quite, you know, which is the better.” (qtd. in Wertheim 1986, 67) It is unclear whether he had made up his mind some forty years later, but it would be all too easy, and also misleading, to conclude that the 2000 recording of *A Slight Ache*, due to the author’s personal involvement, is what he always intended the play to sound like on radio and should therefore be regarded as the definitive version. Surely, he may have sought to remedy some shortcomings in his script or in the original recording, but we should be mindful not to confuse the later Pinter with the early one. However, certain is that, as with many of his other plays, “its production history offers further evidence of Pinter’s developing understanding of sound and its implications for his drama” (Hall 2020, 575).

As much as the 2000 production reflects back on its history across multiple media, *A Slight Ache* had already been looking ahead to its possible transmedial future from the outset. There is one key passage that remained unaltered in every version of the play. When Edward re-enters his study after Flora’s chat with the matchseller, he notices the character’s changed appearance and starts musing at length on the relativity of perspective:

Seeing you stand, at the back gate, such close proximity, was not at all the same thing. [...] You looked quite different without a head – I mean without a hat – I mean without a headcovering, of any kind. In fact every time I have seen you you have looked quite different to the time before. [*Pause.*] Even now you look different. Very different. [*Pause.*] Admitted that sometimes I viewed you through dark glasses, yes, and sometimes through light glasses, and on other occasions bare eyed [...]. Not that I had any difficulty in seeing you, no, no, it was not so much my sight, my sight is excellent [...] no, it was not so much any deficiency in my sight as the airs between me and my object [...]. (Pinter 1991, 181–2)

Edward's comment on the shifting "airs between me and my object" could be interpreted as a prefiguration of the various media in which *A Slight Ache* would be realised over the years. If the "dark glasses" point at radio, typically associated with blindness or sightlessness, and the "light glasses" stand for television, visualizing the actors from different angles, sometimes in close-up, while at the same time distancing us from them by means of a screen, then "bare eyed" invokes the theatre, where we perceive the stage directly, in the same physical space and without apparent mediation, be it always from a fixed position – unless, of course, in the case of a multimedial production. Implied in this metaphorical reading is that every medium invites or even forces the audience to see the figure of the matchseller anew, in ways that are not necessarily better or worse but "different". Or, as Edward states when comparing him to "Fanny, the squire's daughter": "In appearance you differ but not in essence. There's the same . . . [*Pause.*] The same . . . [*Pause.*]" (1991,171) Although this "essence" is unarticulated, in every case – be it on radio, the stage or television – the couple use the matchseller as a blank canvas onto which they project their suppressed anxieties and unfulfilled desires. Barnabas always takes the place of Edward alongside Flora, a transfer of power that is either realised acoustically or visually, depending on the affordances of each medium.

Conclusion

Recalibrated from this perspective, *A Slight Ache* must be revalued not as a quintessentially radiophonic play, resting entirely on the (non-)existence of the matchseller, unsuccessfully adapted for the theatre and the screen, but as a transmedial phenomenon. Codified as such in each of its versions, through vestigial remnants, it is at the same time self-conscious of each medium, or "metamedial" as Lucy Jeffery aptly terms it (2020, 522), while it intermedially

points to others and thereby “works against” itself, in Stulberg’s words (2015, 504). With its numerous invocations of sight and sound, *A Slight Ache* emerges as a synesthetic patchwork of theatre, radio and television, never seamlessly aligning with any of these media, some bits always sticking out, while being receptive to all of them, simultaneously. This last distinction is a crucial one to make, for in this sense *A Slight Ache* still markedly differs from plays that followed in the early 1960s, such as *The Caretaker*, *A Night Out* or *Night School*. As I have argued elsewhere (2021), contrary to works like *The Room*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* or *The Hothouse*, these were written in such a way as to make them easily adjustable to various media, with minor tweaks, often to different effects. Pinter no doubt learned from these formative experiences. Perhaps more so than any other play from this early period in his career, *A Slight Ache* is a transitional work rudimentary to Pinter’s evolving understanding of media. And, due to his prolonged revisitations of the play, it is also one that remained relevant to the later stages.

As Catriona Fallow has shown, even present-day, non-authorial revivals that engage with its transmedial history are instructive in this regard. One case in point is Jamie Lloyd’s 2019 staging for the “Pinter at the Pinter” season in London’s West End, which sets the scene in a radio studio and refrains from showing the matchseller. In Fallow’s view, this challenges “a reductive understanding of theatre as a visual medium, one that is incapable of sustaining the same degree of ambiguity or doubt as to a character’s presence” (2022, 198). Indeed, as Ann C. Hall does well to remind us: “Anyone who has read Pinter knows that just because a body is present on stage does not necessarily mean that they are literally there.” (2022, 582) This became most apparent during the late 1960s and early 1970s, with “memory plays” such as *Landscape*, *Silence*, *Night*, *Old Times* and *No Man’s Land*, which ushered in a new phase of Pinter’s dramatic trajectory. It is revealing that *Landscape*, as the first play in this series, was revived for a double bill with *A Slight Ache* at the Aldwych Theatre in 1973. From this it can be concluded that the matchseller, especially through his tramping onto the theatre stage and the television screen, helped to pave the way for Pinter’s continued media-bending and genre-redefining work.

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¹ Most recently in a special issue of the *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* on “Harold Pinter’s Transmedial Histories” (see Bignell and Davies 2020).

² BBC Audience Research report for *A Slight Ache* (R9/6/91). It is not suggested that any of the listeners questioned the Matchseller’s existence. Quite on the contrary, it was generally agreed that Maurice Denham and Vivien Merchant had “made the listener vividly aware of the match-seller’s presence” (2). In a more joking fashion, a “Clerk-Translator” was of the opinion that “David Baron (Barnabus) really beat them to a frazzle”, and a “Solicitor” even suggested: “Next time it is broadcast Edward and Flora should also be played by Mr. Baron” (2). Newspaper and magazine reviews largely followed suit, the *Times* critic, for example, stating that Denham and Merchant had managed to give the matchseller “an insistent and horrible reality” (Pinter scrapbooks, British Library, Add MS 88880/8/2).

³ Radio script preserved at the BBC Written Archives in Caversham, Reading. A recording of the original broadcast from 1959 is available at the British Library (T11062).

⁴ The recording of this interview has not survived and the BBC Written Archives no longer have the original transcript, but a copy can be found in the Harold Pinter papers of the Martin Esslin collection at Keble College, University of Oxford (AD 65/HP/2/1). I am grateful to Kate O’Brien, Giulia Baldorilli, Louise North and Peter Monteith for helping me locate it.

⁵ See Verhulst 2022, 110–12.

⁶ The radio version of *A Slight Ache* only appeared in the journal *Tomorrow* 4 (1960): 17–32, before the theatrical text was published by Methuen in *A Slight Ache and Other Plays* (1961), now used in Faber’s collected edition of Pinter’s plays (see Baker and Ross 2005, 18, 30–3).

⁷ This review, included in Pinter’s second scrapbook for the period ranging from April 1960 until October 1961 at the British Library (Add MS 88880/8/2), can also be accessed online at http://www.haroldpinter.org/plays/plays_slightache.shtml.

⁸ Interestingly, and contrary to what is generally believed, this was not the play’s theatrical premiere. It had been staged a first time, in the round, six months earlier (15 June 1960), by the Oxford University Poetry Society at the Clarendon Press Institute, a production which Pinter himself attended. The theatrical text not yet having been published, the radio script was clearly used as a basis for this performance, with an anonymous critic noting: “One could I think, however, quarrel with fair safety with John Spurling, who directed this production, for not allowing the match-seller to show some signs of life at the last and remove his balaclava, as the script clearly indicates, so that Edward could recognise in his now more youthful image the truth about himself.” (Pinter scrapbooks, British Library, Add MS 88880/8/2) This early production may have been seminal in shaping both Pinter and McWhinnie’s vision for their own version and the elements they altered for the stage, for example cutting the scene where the matchseller removes his balaclava.

This only happens on the radio where, tantalizingly, we cannot see his fully uncovered face, only imagine what it might look like.

⁹ Morahan's use of "we" suggests that Pinter was involved, which is also confirmed by the director's note to Gordon Richardson of 7 December 1996: "Harold and I were very pleased with the way 'A Slight Ache' went." (BBC WAC T5/1937: A Slight Ache) Even the character's off-screen appearance was carefully considered. When on 30 November 1966 Morahan returned captioned stills to Jacqui Stonebridge, he insisted to her: "I would very much appreciate it if photographs with Gordon Richardson, who plays the matchseller, in them were not used for pictorial publicity for this production. The play starts innocently, and showing pictures to the public of the matchseller would, I think, be doing the play a disservice." (BBC WAC, Television Registry Subject File Drama "A Slight Ache"). Indeed, the one that features in the *Radio Times* announcement only shows Edward and Flora talking. Unlike Maurice Denham and Hazel Hughes, Richardson goes unmentioned in the short blurb written by Bakewell, leaving audiences who were familiar with the play at least partially in suspense. It does say that "a stranger appears at the garden gate – an old match-seller" and the actor's name is also listed in the billing ("Theatre 625" 1967, 19).

¹⁰ As the highly technical "Camera Script" for *A Slight Ache* at the BBC Written Archives in Caversham, Reading, shows, no less than six cameras were used with detailed instructions for each in the various scenes, leading up to a total of 309 shots.

¹¹ Similarly, a handwritten note on Stonebridge's memo of 28 November 1966, informing Morahan that pictures of the production were to be sent that day, advised her to "avoid sending out the pix of the old man" as they were "likely to put people off" (BBC WAC, Harold Pinter TV Scriptwriter 1958 – 1990, T48/472).

¹² This comment is taken from T. C. Worsley's disapproving review of the stage version for *The Financial Times*, also included in Pinter's second scrapbook from April 1960 to October 1961 at the British Library (Add MS 88880/8/2).

¹³ A recording of this production is available at the British Library (T526). It was repeated on 24 November 1972, Radio 4 (Afternoon Theatre); 30 June 1979, Radio 4 (Saturday-Afternoon Theatre); 5 February 1980, Radio 3 (Play Festival); 14 April 1987, Radio 4 (Theatre of the Absurd).

¹⁴ (BBC WAC, Rcont 12 Scriptwriter Harold Pinter (David Baron) File III 1968-72).

¹⁵ This recording is available online: https://www.ubu.com/media/sound/pinter_harold/Pinter-Harold_A-Slight-Ache_2000.mp3.