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"Religion versus science ... makes for feisty drama."
—*The Village Voice*

Starry Messenger



Drama by
Ira Hauptman

"An endearingly earnest look at the stargazer's dilemma...
an amusing reminder that most scientific truths once
seemed incomprehensible."—*The Village Voice*

Starry Messenger

Drama. *By Ira Hauptman.* *Cast: 5m., 2w.* In *Starry Messenger* we witness the effects of Galileo's ordeals on his family and his family's role in his decision to renounce his discoveries. Cardinals Borgia and Zacchia of the Inquisition warn Galileo not to try to prove that the earth revolves around the sun. Galileo's illegitimate son, Vincenzo, presses him to obey the church so he can be legitimized. Galileo's brilliant daughter Virginia, a nun, also urges him to obey the church. Nonetheless, he is determined to publish his discoveries. His daughter Livia, also a nun, seems to be possessed by demons. She has a vision of the destructive forces that science will unleash in the future, including the atom bomb. But Galileo remains committed to scientific truth. The Inquisition condemns him but will spare him if he recants. His protégé, Castelli, is certain he never will and encourages his death as a martyr. Virginia, dying, pleads with him to give her life meaning by recanting and returning to the church. He makes his fateful decision, sacrificing his science for his daughter. Galileo publicly recants but cries out that the earth does move. *Area staging.* *Approximate running time: 90 minutes. Code: SP6.*

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Theater for the New City, New York City, production.
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STARRY MESSENGER

A Play by

IRA HAUPTMAN



Dramatic Publishing

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*“Developed by Magic Theatre/Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
Science & Technology Initiative.”*

*“First produced in New York City by Theater for the New City in 2011,
directed by Susan Einhorn.”*

Starry Messenger premiered on January 27, 2011, at Theater for the New City, Crystal Field, Executive Director, with the following cast:

CAST

Galileo Galilei	David Little
Virginia Galilei (Suor Maria Celeste)	Marnye Young
Livia Galilei (Suor Arcangela)	Elisa Matula
Vincenzo Galilei.....	Jorge Luna
Benedetto Castelli.....	Jeremy Rishe
Cardinal Laudivio Zacchia	Louis Vuolo
Cardinal Gaspare Borgia	Brian Gagné

PRODUCTION STAFF

Director.....	Susan Einhorn
Scenic and Costume Designer	Meghan E. Healey
Lighting Designer	Jeff Greenberg
Sound Designer	Nel Paese
Production Stage Manager	Anna Carhart
Production Manager	Ralph Carhart

STARRY MESSENGER

CHARACTERS

GALILEO GALILEI.....	Sixties
CARDINAL GASPARE BORGIA, Of the Inquisition.....	Fifties
CARDINAL LAUDIVIO ZACCHIA, Of the Inquisition.....	Sixties
VIRGINIA GALILEI (SUOR MARIA CELESTE), Galileo's Daughter, a Nun.....	Early Thirties
LIVIA GALILEI (SUOR ARCANGELA), Galileo's Daughter, a Nun.....	Early Thirties
VINCENZIO GALILEI, Galileo's Son.....	Late Twenties
BENEDETTO CASTELLI, Galileo's Scientific Disciple.....	Late Twenties

TIME AND PLACE

Around 1630. Various locations
in and around Florence.

The play can be performed
with or without an intermission.

**It's rumored that after Galileo recanted the theory
that the earth moves, he muttered,**

“But still it moves.”

The play is a blend of fact, fiction and rumor.

ACT ONE

(GALILEO's house. He is almost done setting up and adjusting a large telescope. He finishes and is about to look through it at the sky, then stops himself. BENEDETTO CASTELLI, a young scientist who assists and idolizes GALILEO, enters. CASTELLI approaches the telescope a little uncertainly.)

CASTELLI. Did you see...them again?

GALILEO. I saved you a fresh sky.

(CASTELLI looks through the telescope at the stars. After a while, GALILEO drums his fingers on a table.)

CASTELLI. I'm trying, Galileo... Yes! I see two.

GALILEO. Keep looking.

CASTELLI. Still two. That's amazing enough.

GALILEO. You haven't seen anything until you've seen the shy ones.

(Pause.)

CASTELLI. Still two. No! The other two swung out!

GALILEO. Four moons sailing around Jupiter. Shut your eye, Castelli. Look again.

CASTELLI. They're still there. Congratulations.

GALILEO. No, it's unfortunate.

CASTELLI *(leaving the telescope)*. Unfortunate?

GALILEO. Because of course we're wrong. They don't exist.

CASTELLI. Then what are we looking—

GALILEO. Who knows? We're cockeyed from too much squinting.

CASTELLI. Oh...

GALILEO. Either that...or Aristotle is wrong. Bodies besides the earth can have moons.

CASTELLI (*catching on*). Which is impossible to imagine.

GALILEO. And Ptolemy is wrong.

CASTELLI. And bodies aren't stuck to crystalline spheres.

GALILEO. Which is impossible to imagine.

CASTELLI. So we must be wrong.

GALILEO. Yes we're wrong.

CASTELLI. Very very very wrong.

GALILEO. Unless the great Aristotle is wrong.

CASTELLI. Which is impossible to—

GALILEO. Unthinkable to, blas...phemical to—

CASTELLI. Enough! You did it! You popped the wrinkled old balloon people mistook for the cosmos.

GALILEO. The telescope did it.

CASTELLI. A toy you taught to play with the stars.

(Pause.)

GALILEO. It is a frightening instrument.

CASTELLI. Have you named the moons?

GALILEO. I'm naming them all for the children of the Medici.

CASTELLI. That's a wise precaution.

GALILEO. Let's hope the English don't find some and name them for the wives of Henry VIII.

CASTELLI. Let's find them first.

GALILEO. After you.

CASTELLI. No, after you.

GALILEO. Your eyes are better.

CASTELLI. You can stay still longer.

GALILEO. I've been ordered to. When I hauled that cannonball and tennis ball to the top of that tower in Pisa—I wound up with a hernia.

CASTELLI. You should have saved the tennis ball for a second trip.

GALILEO. You're wasting the night, Castelli.

(CASTELLI looks through the telescope.)

CASTELLI. I don't believe it!

GALILEO. What?

CASTELLI. The surface of Jupiter is covered with a kind of dust. Don't you ever clean the lenses?

(A chamber with GALILEO and CARDINALS BORGIA and ZACCHIA of the Inquisition. BORGIA is even-tempered and relatively genial, ZACCHIA is stern. The contrast in their styles might be folksy vs. corporate, or phlegmatic vs. apoplectic.)

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. So the cosmos is a carnival show. Jupiter juggles four balls. I suppose Mercury eats fire, Mars swallows swords, and Venus is the bearded lady.

GALILEO. Cardinal Zacchia, Cardinal Borgia...please permit me to observe that Jupiter is no less perfect because it keeps company with lesser—

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Socrates corrupted Athens. He was put to death.

GALILEO. Your Eminence, I have no desire to emulate the career of a celebrated, yet pagan thinker who was shut off from spiritual—

CARDINAL BORGIA. Galileo, please consider this a friendly discussion.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Put to death. Just over Athens.

CARDINAL BORGIA. A friendly discussion. To reclaim a great man who wrote erroneously about Jupiter.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Your book *The Starry Messenger* gives new meaning to optical illusion.

CARDINAL BORGIA. Perhaps you and Castelli are playing some kind of game. And it's gone a little too far.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. But a game against whom?

GALILEO. The books Gutenberg printed after the Bible.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Aristotle? Ptolemy?

GALILEO. Anyone. We're overgrown puppies and we have a telescope.

CARDINAL BORGIA. Aristotle and Ptolemy support the Bible.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Why do you never play against Copernicus?

(Pause.)

GALILEO. He was not a dogmatist.

CARDINAL BORGIA. He was a heretic, Galileo. You must admit that.

GALILEO. He didn't claim the earth revolved around the sun. It was only a hypothesis.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. But he claimed that someday, someone would prove it true.

(Pause.)

CARDINAL BORGIA. There is a rumor that you have started a new book. Playing with this hypothesis.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. The rumor uses the phrase “proving it.”

GALILEO. The reason I was summoned here.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Jupiter is just the kindling for this fire.

GALILEO. Eminences, I will attempt to prove nothing. I will offer opposing views of the sun’s rotation. For intellectual sport.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Why?

GALILEO. People seem to like it.

CARDINAL BORGIA. Galileo, Scripture says that God fixed the earth so that it cannot be moved.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. And Scripture says that when Joshua needed more time to fight the Amorrites, God made the sun stand still in the sky.

GALILEO. My book does not disagree with either statement. It offers two different ways of understanding them. The church permits conjectures that retain their modesty.

(Pause.)

CARDINAL BORGIA. We hear you are occasionally intrigued by solid bodies immersed in water. That sounds interesting and healthy.

CARDINAL ZACCHIA. Learn to look down, not up. Or you will find yourself summoned again before this panel of the Inquisition.

(GALILEO’s house. He sits writing. His son VINCENZIO enters. VINCENZIO is pragmatic but a little goofy, with energetic gestures.)

VINCENZIO. Father. Forgive me for interrupting. It's all right, right?

GALILEO. Yes, Vincenzo.

VINCENZIO. Well, you know it's like a jungle in this city.

I mean, just surviving.

GALILEO. Yes.

(GALILEO gives him money.)

VINCENZIO. Thank you. It's like a series of roadway toll huts. Bam, bam, bam.

(GALILEO gives him more.)

VINCENZIO *(cont'd)*. Thank you. It's like a market in the last oasis before a vast desert.

GALILEO *(not giving him any more money)*. That's too bad.

VINCENZIO. All right. But what I need even more is, well, you know...

GALILEO. Yes.

VINCENZIO. To be legitimized. By the duke.

(GALILEO sighs.)

VINCENZIO *(cont'd)*. Then I can earn my own money.

GALILEO. What you're asking is very difficult.

VINCENZIO. Who wants to hire a lawyer born of fornication?

GALILEO. I could say many lawyers are bastards, but that would not help you.

VINCENZIO. My sisters are nuns. Their indecent origins don't matter. But I am in the world.

GALILEO. Your sisters know where you are. They live in poverty and sew your collars.

VINCENZIO. I have some that need bleaching.

GALILEO. I'm sure you remembered to bring them.

VINCENZIO (*giving GALILEO a sack*). Here. Tell them I'll visit when I have time.

GALILEO. I can't keep repeating that.

VINCENZIO. Tell them they don't have to pray for me. They can spend their time on whatever they want.

GALILEO. They're nuns, Vincenzo.

VINCENZIO. It must be nice to have steady employment.

GALILEO. Since you're begging for news about them, I'll tell you: Suor Maria Celeste is no longer running a fever after pulling two of her own molars. Suor Arcangela is still speaking only to herself, and the other nuns are frightened to be around her. She probably won't be bleaching your collars.

VINCENZIO. Is that supposed to tarnish my conscience?

GALILEO. No. You would only send it to them to be bleached.

VINCENZIO. What I am sending is a simple request, and it is to you. (*Pause.*) I hear you are going to tell the world it has wings. Please keep that news to yourself.

GALILEO. I will not claim that as fact.

VINCENZIO. But everyone will know you believe it. Your influence with the duke will fall below its present zero. And he will never declare me legitimate.

GALILEO. I petition the Medicis for you like clockwork. I stamp their children's names on the heavens. If the duke said the earth is flat, I would agree in private. What more can I do?

VINCENZIO. All I know is I don't want to remain a bastard because the sun moves.

GALILEO. The earth.

VINCENZIO. What's the difference?

GALILEO. I'm doing what I can.

VINCENZIO. Who would marry a son of yours? *(He exits.)*

(A room in a convent. GALILEO sits and waits. He has VINCENZIO's collars. SUOR MARIA CELESTE [VIRGINIA GALILEI] enters in nun's habit. For historical accuracy as well as striking stage effect, both she and SUOR ARCANGELA should be barefoot in the convent. SUOR MARIA CELESTE is very pious but has a keen, restless intellect.)

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Beloved lord father.

GALILEO. Suor Maria Celeste. *(He looks at her jaw.)* The swelling is down.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. God has seen fit to give me fragile teeth. Of all the trials that He can send to test us, that is surely reserved for the least worthy.

GALILEO. Really? It's toothaches that turn saints into screaming hyenas. *(Pause.)* Forgive me.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. You can make jokes in the convent.

GALILEO. I never know...

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. It's people without religion who are easily outraged.

GALILEO. And think it's the chief sign of piety.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Father, I have something to return to you.

GALILEO. You have nothing.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. It's too big to drag out here.

GALILEO. Ah. Your one possession.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Please do not consider me ungrateful. At night, when pain kept me up, I looked through it and saw Jupiter.

GALILEO. And its moons?

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. I could not be sure.

GALILEO. I see.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Jupiter up close is frightening enough.

GALILEO. Without adding a faint scent of heresy.

(Pause.)

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Did you bring me my brother's collars?

GALILEO. Yes. I'll take back the telescope.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Thank you. And please take back the books it made you write.

GALILEO. Those too?

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Father, I love the novelties you discover. But I am afraid to understand them. I am afraid I will agree with you.

GALILEO. My novelties will not corrupt your faith.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. I am your daughter. Your ideas affect me more deeply than they affect you.

GALILEO. Virginia—Suor Maria Celeste. Please understand that they are only speculations.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Don't insult my intelligence. I'm not a cardinal.

GALILEO. As you wish.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. You know that people assume your books are about something deeper than the sky.

GALILEO. People should start looking more and assuming less. *(Pause. Lightening the mood.)* I was at a state dinner last week. There was a swan sculpted out of ice. I said,

“Let’s put it in the pond and watch it float.” A duke said, “It will sink.” I said, “How do you know?” He said, “Aristotle says that ice is heavier than water.” I said, “Haven’t you seen ice float?” He said, “That’s when it’s flat and can’t divide the water.” I said, “Put the swan in the pond and see what happens.” Some of the guests said, “Why bother?” The others said, “Do it. It will show Galileo is wrong.” They all went down to the pond with the swan. I stayed behind and picked fried potatoes off their plates. They came back in a bad mood. “The ice was impure.” “It was filled with air bubbles.” “The water contracted because of the cold ice, forming an imperceptible carpet.” “The fact that we watched it changed the result.” That last one was interesting.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Of course the ice floated.

GALILEO. Ah.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. I’ve seen odd shapes of ice float many times.

GALILEO. You are the future of science.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. I hope not.

GALILEO. You are. You and those guests who said, “Let’s put the swan in the pond to show Galileo is wrong.” They wanted to do an experiment! They are the reason the Inquisition will not survive.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. Father, the church says nothing about ice swans. But it has unshakable convictions about a certain large watery ball.

GALILEO. Then I cannot shake them.

SUOR MARIA CELESTE. There are many with rough minds who do not need much excuse to forsake the church. I must beg you not to tempt them.

GALILEO. It’s not only my ideas that make them think. It’s my leash, held by that church.