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## Why mainstream

In: Kačer, Tomáš. *New messengers : short narratives in plays by Michael Frayn, Tom Stoppard and August Wilson*. Vyd. 1. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2013, pp. 15-18

ISBN 9788021063396

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/129055>

Access Date: 25. 02. 2024

Version: 20220831

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## 2 ▶ Why Mainstream

From a certain perspective, Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson may be considered mainstream authors. Although each of them has certain specifics, which distinguish them from the artistically dubious and theoretically/critically unrewarding commercial mainstream, their dramas meet the requirements and standards of both Broadway and the West End. This is connected with the fact that some, most, or all of their plays are eligible for commercial mainstream productions and as such, won recognition among both theatregoers and critics. This introductory chapter deals with the most typical feature of a “well written” commercial mainstream play, discusses its affiliation with Broadway and the West End, thus defining it, and explains that the selection of mainstream authors works as a good basis for a convincing argument that the new messenger as a character type has become a widely accepted, used, and understood convention.

In the English speaking world, there are two traditional centres of commercial mainstream theatre – Broadway in New York and the West End in London. For the purpose of this book, it is useless to describe details of both venues concerning numbers of theatres and their histories. I am using the terms “Broadway” and “West End” to identify the two areas in the American and English cities, respectively, as well as a metaphor for the commercial mainstream theatre in general, which is associated with them, as Broadway “has become synonymous with New York theatre in particular and American commercial theatre in general” (Chambers 112), and although there are also a few subsidized theatres in West End (such as the National Theatre) that stage quality non-profit productions, all in all the same holds for it in the English context.

It is also understood that Broadway and the West End are constantly changing, their role and position in the context of drama and theatre in the English language is shifting:

But historically, Broadway has been primarily a commercial enterprise, demonstrating for decades that the profit motive could support vibrant artistic expression. Broadway today, rather, must be examined in light of numerous artistic and economic currents that have changed greatly the way in which professional theatre in America is conceived, produced, marketed, and presented. (Adler ix)

The West End has also seen its ups and downs when it “comfortably accommodated occasional products of the rebels” (Chambers 830) as Dan Rebellato put it, only to be “surviving on a diet of musicals, *The Mousetrap* (since 1952), farces, and a stream of work from the publicly subsidized sector” (830) in the years of crisis (albeit an economic and/or social one, due to various developments resulting in an artistic crisis, too)<sup>2</sup>.

Still, it holds for a majority of their productions that they maintain the highest standard in the craft of theatre and musical shows, where the word “professional” is stressed in relation to all aspects of a stage production: Wilmeth and Bigsby praise Broadway for its “slick professionalism” (12) and stress that full-length works are “professionally produced” on Broadway (16). Similarly, Ibell in his *Theatreland* analyses the professionalism of the West End in great detail (see Ibell).

The influence of mainstream producers is also traceable in the content of the selected plays, in effect drawing a parallel between the situation in the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries and the “well made play”. This relates to mainstream theatre as well as to other genres in the contemporary mainstream artistic production, where the “commercial imperative” (Wilmeth and Bigsby 10) influences the producers’ choice of productions: “Broadcast television, films and mainstream theatre alike produce representations of human relations based on the assumptions that a few people hold about many. Thus the producers control the means of representation and the spectators consume the representations, internalising them via the dictates of false consciousness” (Prentki and Selman 157). Thus, when talking about the commercial mainstream, there are structural as well as content-related issues at play.

The environment, technological and training background enable productions of state-of-the-art performances. However, a few words need to be said about other important components of any performance. That is, its material and spectators. It is often lamented by theatre practitioners that Broadway and West End shows lack artistic innovation and experiment due to the spectatorship which attends the shows. The theatre business, often dominated by musical shows, is connected with consumerism and mainstream taste: “Theatreland”<sup>3</sup> still a distinct area which is dominated, in an un-showy way, not only by the theatres and opera houses that are its *raison d’être*, but also by the restaurants, bars and hotels that are testimony to the continuing commercial as well as cultural power that theatre produces in the early twenty-first century” (Ibell xiii). Taking into consideration “that more people attend live theatre every week than attend football matches” in England (150), mainstream taste among the audiences is only to be expected.

And commercial mainstream theatres adapt well<sup>4</sup>: “There is very little today that ventures beyond traditional theatrical parameters. [...] Broadway has maintained a markedly

2) See, for example, Dan Rebellato’s *1956 and All That*.

3) “Theatreland” is another name for the West End.

4) Let us leave aside the complicated issue of the relationship between a commercial project and its sales to audiences in the theatre business. Both Ibell and Adler quoted in this chapter give clear accounts of the process with all its components. Nevertheless, it is worth returning to Jan Mukařovský’s *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts* and note that from this perspective, the deviation from the norm is minimal in the commercial mainstream in order to meet the mainstream taste of the audience.

conservative tendency for many years. Some cultural pundits interpret this trend as the triumph of mainstream Americana in an elitist sector; others, as the “dumbing down of Broadway” (Adler 12). This reference to a certain “dumbing down” is a lament which may be understandable for a lover of artistic progress in search of new forms, stepping beyond boundaries, and breaking the norm, but on the other hand, mainstream theatre may be also considered a vast testing-ground. The mainstream practice is ordained by “a commercial imperative” (Wilmeth and Bigsby 10), which means that it is obliged to make the best of the norm or be conformist to accepted ways of writing drama and doing theatre.

This conformism of theatre production of the two biggest theatrical areas is depriving them of artistically innovative approaches. Centres of progressive Anglo-American theatre and drama are moving elsewhere both in the UK and the USA. Nevertheless, studying the mainstream helps to understand what the generally accepted and understood features of a play are at the present time. Typical features of a quality commercial mainstream production play that would meet the criteria of stageability in Broadway/the West End, from the perspective of offering it to the mainstream audiences expecting their positive reception, are the following: The plays are usually full-length. That is to say, they last between one and a half to two hours including an intermission, usually only one, halfway through the performance. Other lengths and structures are highly suspicious and considered experimental by the mainstream audience. In Stoppard’s *The Real Inspector Hound*, Birdboot makes fun of this convention in the opening speech of the play: “if it goes beyond half-past ten it’s self-indulgent” (10)<sup>5</sup>. This is related to the poetics of such a play. There are typically two acts designed to be staged before and after the intermission, with the standard development of building up and reducing suspense in almost Aristotelian fashion. The first act usually ends with a cliffhanger, or *climax*, if the Aristotelian term is to be used, while the second act progresses towards a resolution of the dramatic conflict, or a catastrophe.

There is a circular logic behind this: on the one hand, mainstream producers select plays that comply with this structure, but on the other hand, plays are being written in a manner which subscribes to this conventional structure, whose tradition goes back to the “well-made (problem) play” of the turn of the 20th century. Although well-made plays and dramatists became largely criticised both in the UK and the USA<sup>6</sup> by the 1950s, and although the post-war development of drama has been identified as a divorce from the well-made play plotting<sup>7</sup>, mainstream plays have preserved the two-act structure, while often rejecting the prescriptive plot development formulaic style. As a result, playwrights are forced to write in this “Anglo-American style” if they want to have their plays produced in the West End or Broadway. After all, Anglo-American theatre is often identified as the *author’s* theatre and the dramatic text has a specific importance for

5) It is worth noting that, self-ironically, *The Real Inspector Hound* meets the span criteria perfectly. Birdboot’s comment needs to be understood as based on the shared knowledge that the typical start of an evening production in the West End is 8 pm.

6) See, for example, Walter Kerr’s *How Not to Write a Play*.

7) See, for example, Dan Rebellato’s *1956 and All That*.

the performance; for example, it undergoes only a slight transformation when adopted for the stage, and plays for mainstream stages are written in this way. In critical terms, mainstream authors write for the mainstream stages, playing for mainstream audiences. In order to be successful, they use standardized structures, plot and character developments, dramatic dialogue and poetics in general. Looking at the plays written by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson, a vast majority belongs to this category.

So, how does a study of mainstream drama help to elucidate the conventional use of a technique such as the messenger and its transformation into the new messenger? The argument is that as the plays by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson belong to the highlights of the Broadway/West End commercial mainstream of drama and theatre in the English speaking world<sup>8</sup>, and the techniques of reportage and the character type of the new messenger are applied in the mainstream productions of their plays, then the new messenger is a viable, functional and generally understandable convention of contemporary drama and theatre.

In other words, the new messenger has become a generally accepted convention. While the use of reportage in Brecht's Epic Theatre, for example, had an experimental and innovative pitch, this attitude has been adopted by the mainstream:

In the 1960s the major influences were two-fold. Firstly were the Marxist theatrical analyses of Bertolt Brecht with the crucial perception that education and entertainment were not mutually exclusive in the theatre; indeed he was firmly of the opinion that theatre only educated when it entertained. The British mainstream theatre took up Brecht's influence as a matter of style and technique, instantly divorcing the form from the political imperatives which gave rise to it. (Prentki and Selman 63)

In other words, commercial mainstream has adopted the techniques which Brecht developed and which, thanks to his contributions to 20th century drama and theatre, have become generally accepted and understood as a standard part of theatrical practice. The use of reportage as a mode of delivery belongs here.

The (old) messenger, introduced with a flourish of trumpets off-stage and a standardized conventional character type of the classical drama (from Sophocles to Brecht), has been replaced by the new messenger – a reporter with privileged access to facts and events in the fictional world of the play outside the stage action logic and frame, as well as the actual world of the audience and its history and social political present.

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8) To illustrate the claim that their works represent quality amongst commercial mainstream production, see, for the West End, the Laurence Olivier Award (e.g. best new play for *Arcadia* in 1994, best comedy for *Noises Off* in 1982), and Critics' Circle Theatre Awards (e.g. *Arcadia* 1993, *Rock'n'Roll* 2006, *Copenhagen* 1998), and The Evening Standard Award (all available at the Albemarle of London website), and the Tony Awards, among others, for Broadway (see *Tony Awards* website).