TOMÁŠ KAČER

New Messengers:

Short Narratives in Plays by Michael Frayn,
Tom Stoppard and August Wilson
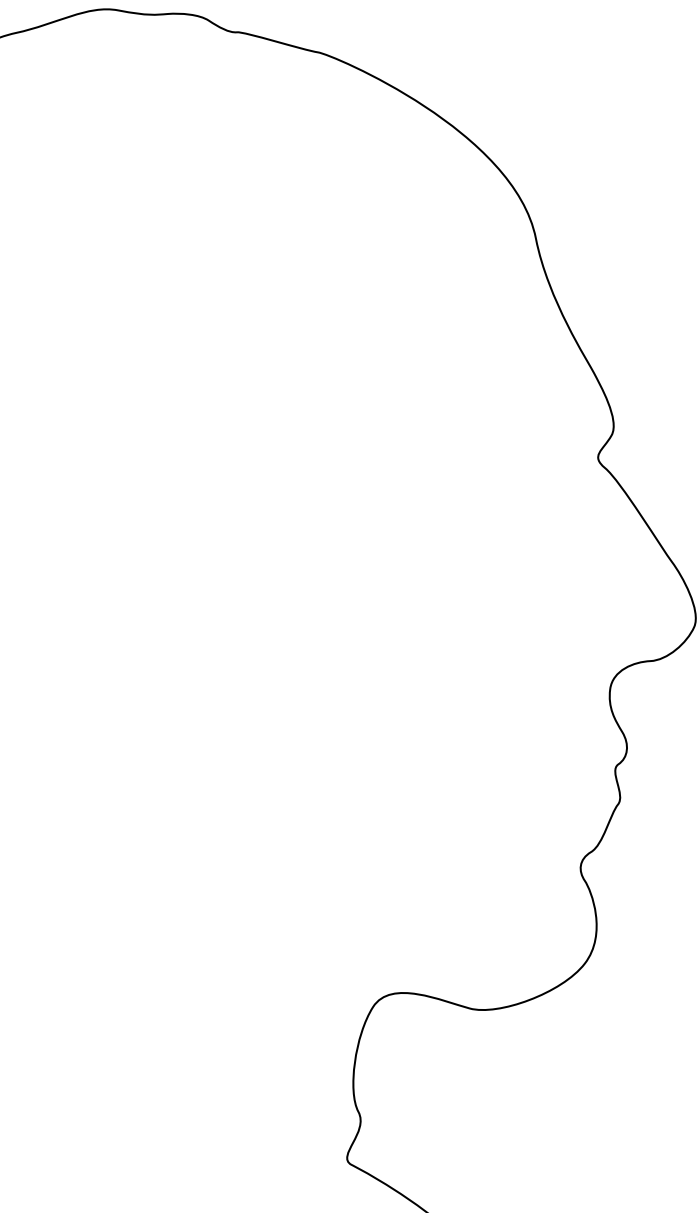
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Contents

'Tis done already, and the messenger gone.

(W. Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* III.3)

1 ▶ Introduction

This book began as a doctoral project at Masaryk University[1]. The final dissertation that concluded my study of the phenomenon of the messenger in drama, its conventional uses and final transformation into what I take the liberty to call "the new messenger", then has been reworked into this publication.

It presents the new messenger as a specific type of a character in the mainstream drama written in English of the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, it draws its examples for case studies from the works of three playwrights: the British Michael Frayn and Tom Stoppard, and the American August Wilson. Analyses of their plays made it possible for me to see the new type of a character in the first place and brought me to the inquiry of the nature of the function that it has in these texts. Further, it was necessary to find out where the character comes from, what the history of the development of its usage is, and what currents in the history of drama there are that enable its existence and fuel its function in the plays. The present book looks at the new messenger from several perspectives and each of them find their expression in one or several chapters and call for a different type of argument to be sound and persuasive. When taken into account all at once, they create a multi-layered picture of the new messenger as a new convention, a character-type, a specific dramatic function, and a vehicle of artistic communication.

Yet, the choice of authors and their works needs to be explained first. The choice has to do with the development of the topic of this book and the preceding dissertation project, which began as research in the field of implementing scientific issues into dramatic works. This is where the material for this topic included two English playwrights, Michael Frayn and Tom Stoppard. After looking into where their ability to explain science to theatre audience comes from, I realized that it is their journalist careers that made them skilful mediators of information. The focus shifted towards journalism and the stage, an issue which is thematically broader than "mere" science.

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1) Under the supervision of doc. Pavel Drábek, to whom I express my utmost gratitude for being my teacher and mentor. The thesis was defended at Masaryk University in September 2012.

After another extrapolation, I somehow identified the journalist as a special type of the messenger as it is known from the history of drama, that is to say a character whose purpose is to inform and bring news. This is where August Wilson came in, as he had long been my favoured American dramatist. I admired his *The Twentieth Century Cycle* as a fictional chronicle, a dramatic version of a series of reports about African-American inhabitants of Pittsburgh by the decades of the 20th century. The idea was to compare the journalistic approach to "actual" issues with "fictional" ones. The topic thus became even broader.

But then, as it happens, the more I tried to identify the messenger as a unifying factor, the more the messenger alluded me, until I found that in fact there are no messengers in the plays! Yet, this moment of void proved to be a starting point for a fresh start. The messenger was gone, but he or she still lingered in the plays, somehow. He or she did not disappear completely. He or she was transformed and found new ways of entering the stage. Then the idea of the new messenger appeared as of a component of the plays, which has kept some of the properties of the conventional messenger but holds a whole set of new ones. At this moment, the applicability of the concept of the new messenger began to press onto me and I tended to apply it on contemporary mainstream drama in general. But then I decided to remain with Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson as I believe, that it is for the best to show the reader the path I myself took. After all, these three dramatists were the three Fates present at the birth of the concept.

The decision to remain with the three dramatists is based on two premises. The first one is that it was the study of their works that lead to the notion of the new messenger in the first place, as I just sketched out. The second one is that they are mainstream authors and as such they work with dramatic tools and techniques which are functional, generally understandable, and acceptable by the audience. I believe that employing mainstream authors eventually shows that the idea of the new messenger is a viable and functional concept.

This book starts with a traditional type of character in the dramatic convention – the messenger. It then identifies various transformations and variations of this character in the history of drama and studies its more contemporary uses, while understanding the the messenger as a certain type of character bearing specific functions. It claims that the messenger as a character remained a crucial character type especially in the historical/political mainstream play but that it also underwent several radical transformations.

The book looks at the uses of the conventional messenger as well as its transformed appearances. It claims that in the recent decades and within the given context of the concerned dramatic works, the traditional messenger has been substituted with a follower, which I call the new messenger. These contemporary messenger-figures on the one hand carry out the basic function of the conventional messenger, which is to report about facts and events from outside the frame of the stage action, and as such they fulfil the original role of bringing new information to push the action forward. On the other hand, the new messengers have acquired several new roles, namely that of widening the

fictional world of the play when they feed the other characters and audience with supplementary information, which create the context but do not need to be directly connected with the development of the plot. This use of the new messenger is identified in connection with the concerned historical/political mainstream plays as assigning them the function of political agents. Furthermore, the new messenger also continues in the didactic tradition, when he presents information from scientific and other areas of contemporary knowledge, thus speaking directly about phenomena from the actual world occupied by the audience.

The book builds up its observations on a fusion of several theoretical traditions, when it focuses on the language and the modes of communication associated with the messenger (reportage), includes an approach capitalizing on the narrative grammar tradition (study of the structural role of the character as a type) and also attributes a great influence on the development of the messenger convention to Brecht's Epic Theatre (shift in the general understanding of how certain dramatic conventions work on the stage).

The book presents a definition of the new messenger as a possibility of a main character with a name to become the new messenger. To do so, such character must possess specific qualities that grant him exclusive and legitimate access to information outside the scope of the logic of the dramatic action while remaining a useful and widely used type of character. Focusing on the linguistic and narrative levels, the book gives a number of examples of characters that legitimately leave their roles for a short while to switch to the narrative mode in order to deliver a reportage from a sphere of their expertise, such as hands-on experiences from the past in the case of eye-witnesses, political and historical commentaries in the case of politicians and journalists, as well as lessons in various areas of science and history of the Western thought in the case of scientists and philosophers.

To show the conventional messenger and the variability of its traditional uses, *Oedipus the King*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *The Glass Menagerie* are analysed in a separate chapter. As far as the various types of the new messenger are concerned, this book focuses on the plays by Frayn, Stoppard and Wilson, capitalising on the success of their plays which signals an understandability of the application of a transformed type of conventional character, the new messenger. Case studies of, for example, Frayn's *Democracy*, Stoppard's *Arcadia*, Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* show how the new messenger retains the main function of the traditional messenger, which is to push the action forward. Analyses of, for example, Stoppard's *Night and Day* and *Rock'n'Roll*, Wilson's *Fences*, *Two Trains Running* and *Jitney* and Frayn's *Afterlife* identify a role of the new messenger which already separates it from its conventional older counterpart, when the new messenger interprets facts and events from the fictional (and sometimes actual, too) world to the others, thus becoming a political agent. Finally, case studies of, for example, Stoppard's *Hapgood* and *The Coast of Utopia* trilogy, as well as Frayn's *Copenhagen*, show the new messengers in these plays in the light of the didactic tradition of the stage when they operate as teaching agents.

Although the need for a messenger and its traditional function survives, the application has undergone a radical structural change which lead to the abandonment of the

conventional messenger and introduction of the more dynamic figure, the new messenger.

1.1 ▸ Structure of the Book

It is perhaps necessary to admit here, and thereby prepare the reader for it, that the argument of the present book does not unfold in a clear-cut, straightforward fashion. There are several types of argument structures employed. Chapter 3 "The Messenger as a Convention" is a historical overview; chapters 4 "The Poetic Tradition, 5 "The Prague School Theory of Theatre and Drama" and 6 "Morphology and the Theory of Actants" are theoretical; chapter 7 "Brecht's Heritage" studies the role that Brecht's Epic Theatre's radical transformations played in understanding the old dramatic and theatrical conventions from a historical perspective; chapters 8 "Reportage" and 9 "Introducing New Messengers" are deductive, building up on the principle of what the new messenger is; and finally, chapters 10 "New Messengers on the Stage", 11 "Pushing the Action Forward, 12 "Interpreting for others" and 13 "Informing (about) the Actual World" consist of case studies following the analytical, inductive tradition. The reason for this methodological eclecticism is that there are a number of ways that lead me to the subject matter, which is the character of the new messenger.

In greater detail, the chapters of the book are arranged in the following order. This "Introduction" is followed by chapter 2 "Why Mainstream". As I have already indicated, the whole idea of the new messenger is based on the study of the works by three mainstream authors. For this reason I find it important to explain what I mean by mainstream and why I consider it useful to study authors that belong there. The chapter thus deals with the relevance of dealing with mainstream for a theoretical study of drama. It also supports the claim that the new messenger has become a widely used dramatic convention.

Chapter 3 "The Old Messenger" introduces the classical convention used throughout the history of drama. It is a historical overview of what I consider the most influential uses of the messenger in the history of drama and as such it presents analyses of *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles, *Antony and Cleopatra* by William Shakespeare, and *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams. The chapter explains how the convention of the messenger works and shows its three various uses. It is in breaking away from the conventional usages of the messenger that the new messenger could begin to function as a new convention.

Chapters 4 to 6 could be included under a shared title, as they present the theoretical background of this whole book. They introduce theories that have shaped the theoretical understanding of the new messenger as it is handled here. Chapter 4 "The Poetic Tradition" capitalises on Aristotle as a part of the Western approach to the study of drama, which views a piece of art as structure that can then be analysed. This view contributed to a concern of the new messenger as a component of the dramatic structure with its specific place and purpose.

Chapter 5 "The Prague School Theory of Theatre and Drama" continues with selected issues from the works of the Prague School. It identifies the School as an important source for the semiotic approach to drama and theatre, which also shapes the understanding of how the element of the new messenger operates within a play when viewed as a system of signs. A greater attention is paid to the issue of the functions of language, mainly on the coexistence and interaction between the aesthetic function of language and the referential function of language. This approach of the Prague School makes a theoretical background to understanding how characters switch between various modes of delivery (from dialogue to narrative, for example), which this book identifies as one of the principles of the new messenger's materialization on the stage.

Chapter 6 "Morphology and the Theory of Actants" then deals with another theoretical concept, which also comes from the structural poetic tradition. This concept is narrative grammar, in particular as devised by Vladimir Propp and then applied to drama by A. J. Greimas. Both theoreticians came up with a system of character-functions, that is to say with an applicable set of roles within the development of a narrative in general. Particular characters are then only viewed as carriers of these functions. However abstract and limiting this approach may seem, it is convenient to view the new messenger from this perspective when its abstract and general qualities need to be deduced. So, these three perspectives form the main theoretical background of the concept of the new messenger, based on which the deductive argument is based.

Chapter 7 deals with Bertolt Brecht and it proved to be necessary to include it for two reasons. One, Brecht tends to come up when the issue of "political" drama arises, as is the case of the three authors in focus in the present book. More about that in the chapter itself. Two, the chapter claims that it was Brecht's influence that had a direct influence on the emergence of the new messenger. The reason to hold this stance is that Brecht's radical innovations redefined theatrical illusion and exposed some theatrical conventions. As a result, these conventions stopped fulfilling their role, that is to say that the audience not only see through them, they do not accept them. The convention of the messenger is among them, which has to do with Brecht's use of reportage. In this sense, drama needed to substitute for the messenger and Brecht stood at the emergence of the new messenger.

Chapter 8, "Reportage" capitalises on the theoretical chapter and identifies reportage as a narrative technique which is the main identifying element of the messenger as well as its new follower. It stands in contrast to Brecht's use of reportage and shows how it works when employed to inform about facts and/or events from outside the frame of the on-stage action, which is, in fact the main role of the (new) messenger. This chapter also theorizes the three case studies which make the introduction of the present work, thus creating ground for introducing the new messenger.

This happens in Chapter 9. This chapter is central to the present book, as it on the one hand follows from all the preceding chapters with their historical and theoretical perspectives, and on the other hand it can be viewed as a generalization based on the analyses performed in chapters 11 to 13. As such, the chapter presents to the reader the key elements of the issue of the new messenger when viewed as a character-type with

a specific role within the structure of the plot development, but it also introduces the mechanism that allow characters to step out of their roles and assume the role of the messenger for the given time. However, this chapter would seem unconvincing without the preceding theory and the claims it make call for studies of applications which are about to be presented in the following chapters.

Chapter 9 is an introduction to the analytical chapters 10 to 13 as it explains the structure of the analyses in general terms. It is therefore the analytical chapters that then form a substantial part of the book. They contains of a number of case studies of plays by Frayn, Stoppard, and Wilson. These case studies are performed from the perspective of identifying and explaining the role of the new messenger, focusing on those aspects of the plays that are relevant to the issue. Chapters 11 to 13 each focus on a different role that the new messenger has. First of them deals with the new messenger as an agent that pushes the action forward, which is a function that it shares with the traditional messenger. However, specific new applications are introduced in the two following chapters. Chapter 12 is a presentation of the new messenger as an interpreter of facts and events, which make the new messenger a political agent of the contemporary mainstream theatre. In this way, the new messenger is a propeller of social debate and communication, which follows from the tradition of drama and theatre in particular as the focus point of a public forum. Chapter 13 presents the teaching role of the new messenger when extrafictional information about the actual historical is explicated to the audience. Here, the new messenger follows in another tradition of drama, which is its educative role. A summary of the given case studies with general conclusions follows the case-studies chapters. "Epilogue" is a short farewell to the topic of the new messenger.

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)[2].

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"[3] 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[4]: "There is very little today that ventures beyond traditional theatrical parameters. [...] Broadway has maintained a markedly

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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)[5]. 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[6] by the 1950s, and although the post-war development of drama has been identified as a divorce from the well-made play plotting[7], 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

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5) It is worth noting that, self-ironically, *The Real Inspector Hound* meets the span criteria perfectly. Birdbood'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[8], 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).