

## **“The Fourth Wall”**

**By Leeny Del Seamonds**

Frequently, while teaching either a storytelling or acting class, I find myself comparing and contrasting the two art forms. I know that a **storyteller** can incorporate **acting** techniques into a particular story. And I know that an **actor** can incorporate **storytelling** techniques into a particular play or theatre piece. But the two art forms are not the same. For one thing: An actor, more often than not, performs the scenes of the play on stage behind the **“fourth wall.”** The **“fourth wall”** is a theatre term referring to the imaginary line, or wall, between the actors on the stage and the audience. The audience observes, or witnesses, the action of the play (the storyline) as it unfolds. It's as if the fourth wall of a set (i.e., the kitchen in **“Death of a Salesman,”** the living room in **“The Odd Couple,”** or the balcony and terrace in **“Romeo and Juliet”**) were cut open and removed, allowing the audience to watch what's going on in the play. The actors on stage speak to each other, and interact with each other, while the audience observes. The actors do not turn to the audience and personally draw them into the action of the play by making direct eye contact. That's not to say that actors don't feel the audience's presence and energy. Most actors certainly don't rely on the audience's laughter and applause to tell them whether or not they are doing a good job. They can usually “feel” whether the audience is with them or not, as if there was an energy field between them. There can be plenty of “give and take” between audience and actor, without the actor relying on looking into the eyes of the audience.

Once in a while, as in the play **“Our Town,”** and especially in musical theatre (i.e., **“Cabaret”**) and participatory theatre (i.e., **“Shear Madness”**), the actors speak (or sing) directly to the audience, including them first-hand in what's going on in the storyline and, sometimes, allowing the audience to aid in the outcome of the play. During these moments, the fourth wall is temporarily lifted; and the audience becomes an **intimate** part of the story.

**Intimacy.** That's a key part of storytelling. In storytelling, the teller looks into the eyes of the audience and **together** they tell the story. Without this intimacy, there would be no story. As the story unfolds, there is no fourth wall when the narrator looks at the audience to include them, letting them in on what's happening and sharing the excitement of the story. By seeing the audience before him, the storyteller can gauge how the story is presented. An audience's facial expressions and body language speak volumes to the storyteller, who may edit the story (or speed it up!), depending on the audience's reactions. Even if the storyteller acts out a dialogue between two or more story characters, those characters often include the audience by looking directly at them during some of the spoken dialogue. Of course, the narrator can break through such a “scene” in a story by looking at the audience to make a comment, observation, or facial expression before continuing with the narration of the story. There is no fourth wall here. Yes, there is “give and take” and great energy between teller and audience, as in theatre. But in storytelling, there is also intimacy. Teller and audience **share** the story, composing it together as it unfolds.

Every once in a while some actor friends ask, “When are you going back to theatre? Don't you miss the camaraderie with the other actors?” My response: “I never left theatre. It's very much a part of my stories, and I have camaraderie with the audience.” I prefer the intimacy of storytelling, breaking through the fourth wall and opening up my heart and mind to the audience. Together we live the story!

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