



# The Fourth Wall And The Third Space

By John Stevenson

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**By: John Stevenson**

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*"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offense.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down. ... "*

*Mending Wall, Robert Frost*

*"In an age in which disbelief is profoundly prevalent, or if not disbelief, indifference to questions of belief, poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost. "*

*The Necessary Angel, Wallace Stevens*

During the 1960's, when I was a theatre student, some very interesting work was taking place in the area of experimental theatre. This was a time in which an aesthetic of revolutionary freedom was implicit in the efforts of artists in America and much of Europe and a time in which the idea of community began to be valued in new ways. It was also a time in which traditional boundaries between art forms began to be challenged. Poets and painters, for instance, ventured into creative processes which were more performance and "happening" than literature and painting. \*

Important developments in the theatre of this time included attempts to create settings in which the "stage" and "auditorium" merged and in which the viewer became a full participant in the theatrical event. In my view, these efforts failed to achieve their goal, while achieving some beautiful and occasionally moving theatre. Some of them consisted of mental constructions which simply defined life as theatre (or defined it as music in the case of John Cage) and thus denied any unique character or significance to theatre. More often they involved a kind of alteration of the boundary between performers and audience, either through experiments with the proscenium such as arena staging or through the creation of theatre "environments". Sometimes the approach featured an

aggressive penetration of the audience by the performers. All of these innovations added something valuable to the contemporary Western theatre experience but retained, nonetheless, the basic separation of the audience and the "creative people". In short, there was a lot of rotation during the 1960's but there was no revolution.

The urge to alter the separation and estrangement of performers and audience did not originate in the 1960's. It is part of a much larger picture, related to a larger sense of estrangement in areas beyond theatre. Purely in terms of the theatre and theatre history, it can be seen as a reaction to the limitations of theatrical realism. The experimentalism of

- *I was an art student myself, before changing to theatre. Once, in an advanced painting course, I was given full credit for staging, an event in which I tape recorded a figure drawing class, the conversations and incidental sounds, and then pulled the tape out of the recorder and fashioned it into a human figure. My instructor and classmates witnessed all and the project consisted as much of a process as a product.*

Western theatre in this century represents a departure and a response to a preceding style of realism, just as that realism was a response to the classicism which preceded it and reached its peak in the seventeenth century. But our experimental theatre has also been motivated, in part, by an urge to regain something which those of us who were born into this time and place sense we have lost. People have always experienced loss but this experience has somehow become more emblematic in our time. We encounter a sense of loss in many areas of our lives. When we express ourselves in a theatrical setting it tends to revolve around the question of estrangement and aesthetic distance. If much of our experimentalism addresses the loss of contact between audiences and performers, I believe that Playback Theatre offers one of the most effective solutions to this problem of estrangement.

When I tell people about Playback Theatre, people who have never seen it, I often explain that I've had a lot of experience as an actor but had completely lost interest in scripted theatre. In fact, I hadn't attended the theatre at all, as a performer or spectator, for many years before Playback renewed my interest in theatre and restored my faith in its power to enrich the experiences of performers and audiences. The difference between Playback and all other theatre that I'd seen or participated in can be illustrated by the fact that people generally come to other theatres, have their theatre experience and go away (sometimes after talking to the actors backstage). But after every Playback performance I've ever seen people have stayed and talked to each other. I start to explain Playback to people who have never seen it by asking them, "What do you think it would take to make that happen?"

For those who have experienced Playback, the obvious first answer is that Playback is fully collaborative, the audience is the source of the stories. The performers don't know what stories will be told and are intimately joined with the audience in the suspense of creation.

Certainly one of the things that brings people together in Playback is its special solution to the problem of the fourth wall. Instead of trying to tear it down or bend it into new shapes as so many other theaters have done, Playback deals with the space between the audience and performers by expanding upon it, paying attention to it and making it a third place, the place of transfer where someone comes forward from among the performers and meets with someone from the audience. In this "third space" they have a public creative dialogue suitable as the basis of theatre. The performance and audience spaces are not altered or turned inside out. Playback's solution to estrangement is, simply, to build a bridge.

I have said that some part of our experimentalism has been motivated by an emblematic sense of loss. To say precisely what it was we searched for in the theatre of the sixties is beyond my ability. No one was able to articulate this to everyone's satisfaction. But I did have an intense personal involvement in some of this work and can speak here for myself. Many people looked upon the problem of theatrical alienation as a primarily spiritual issue and what they sought was, in the end, ineffable. Some looked upon the issues as primarily social or political. There was, as I have mentioned, much interest in the idea of community, the small community of the theatre company and the larger communities to which it might relate.

It seems to me, now, that this sense of loss was, and is, about the acceleration of change in our lives. All changes, large or small, involve a measure of gain and loss. Losses have to be mourned and proper mourning is a process which consumes time and attention. But the pace of change in our century may have outstripped our ability to fully grieve changes. If a sense of loss is emblematic in our time, its significance may be an unprecedented backlog of little griefs. That's how I see it today. But in the sixties, when I was deeply involved in experimental theatre work, it looked more like this: There are billions of us. Soon there will be billions more. How can I believe that we are all needed, that there is any purpose whatsoever in all of us being here? The western theatre was born in a time and place where an urban center like Athens contained about as many people as now live in my home town, Ithaca, New York. Making a contribution to that kind of culture was a very different proposition from making a contribution in the space age. In terms of space age theatre, how can I repay an audience for its attention? How can I know who is out there in the dark and how can I reassure myself that they and I are necessary people?

### **The Fourth Wall and the Limits of Realism**

We are indebted to Denis Diderot (1713-1784) for the concept of the fourth wall. His critical writing about the theatre of eighteenth century France was important to the rise of realism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Diderot's time, Western theatre, at least the part of it that was "respectable," was divided between tragedy and comedy. There were rules and formulas for this "classical" theatre. Tragedy required lofty characters, taken entirely seriously. Few people could expect to see someone like themselves portrayed as the central figure of a tragedy. Comedy might focus on more common people, but it would not take them seriously. Comedy and tragedy were separate and mutually exclusive. There was nothing between them Diderot proposed various forms to fill the gap. He also advocated a more natural style of acting and a staging which promoted this comparatively natural style, proposed in fact that the audience be presented with the action of the play somewhat as real events would appear if observed through a transparent fourth wall of the room in which they are taking place.

With the advance of realism, the demarcation between the audience space and the stage gradually sharpened. In Diderot's time part of the audience sat or stood upon the stage. As the term is now used, the fourth wall corresponds in physical terms to the proscenium arch, and "traditional" Western theatre features a stage area clearly defined by drapery, lighting, sets, an orchestra pit. There are also strong customs which limit what is considered appropriate audience response. The progress of realism in staging has meant that the participation of audiences has been increasingly controlled and excluded in the service of an illusion of reality.

This movement toward realism in theatre has triumphed in the sense of having made it the norm that theatre is free to focus upon characters of any social standing and to use natural speech, action and setting as the usual mode rather than the exception.

In some ways, the concept of theatrical realism has had its ultimate fulfillment in the motion picture. This has done something for the theatre roughly analogous to what photography has done for painting. Visual artists are much less likely today to focus on the objective representation of objects because this, formerly an important function of painting, has been superseded by the photograph. When contemporary artists do concern themselves with the directly and intensely representational aspects of painting, their work often has a peculiar unreal quality, a kind of superfluous reality.

Before the invention of photography there was a movement in Western painting away from classicism and toward realism, relating, as in the theatre, to questions of subject matter and style of presentation. Classes of people previously more or less ignored in paintings, the same classes of people who brought about an age of revolutions, began to have the means of influencing culture. Their influence, which can be seen in the work of Courbet, Millet and Daumier, was just hitting its full stride at the moment photography arrived upon the scene. Realism as a style of painting was quickly overtaken by various experimental styles while the photograph brought us a stronger brand of realism, as exemplified in the work of Matthew Brady and others.

In the theatre we have the influence of film (and television) doing something like that. The realism of a film with regard to setting cannot be matched by a stage play. The same may be said of the acting. One needn't worry about projecting one's voice, for instance. The least little whisper and sigh can be recorded on film and reproduced in a manner which guarantees its audibility. Further, and more importantly, the insulation of the performance from the influential presence of an audience is nearly perfected in the film. Some will argue that the audience still influences what goes into films by going to

see them or by staying at home. Even if true, this is clearly a long way from audience participation.

People who seek out live theatre in our time are looking for things they can't get from film and television. In some form or other, I believe, they are looking to be part of the show, if only in the sense of dressing better than they do for the movies. Whatever today's theatre patron is seeking, it is less likely than it once was to be realism of setting, writing and acting. These are not the focus they once were on the stage. The reality of the here and now, however, the fact that a stage play happens once and never again in exactly the same way, the theatrical event, the happening, are still uniquely the property of theatre and have become a stronger focus for experimentation - as the paint itself, the canvas, the exhibition space and the act of painting have become more important focal points for painters.

The here and now event is the special province of improvisational theatre and, within the non-scripted theatre, there is nothing to surpass the Playback audience's experience of participation in this event. This participation represents new life for a theatre in which the advancement of realism, the illusion, has passed in favor of reality - the reality of a theatre in which there is an audience, a stage and a third space.

### **Characteristics of Playback's Third Space**

The unique third space of Playback Theatre consists of a combination of physical and psychological characteristics. The following is an effort to describe some of the more important of them.

***It is a physical place.*** While it is based upon the role of mediator which is common to many forms of non-scripted theatre, third space is more than this role. In a sense, Playback puts the act of mediation on its own stage. The third space is typically located between the audience and stage and to one side, triangulating the room. There are variations. The company of which I am a member, Pentimento Playback Theatre, uses the third space format in most performances but has made exceptions in workshops or when tellers are in wheel chairs. Playback is nothing if not flexible. In this discussion I am presuming a distinction between a Playback workshop and performance, with my focus on performance. (Also, I am not suggesting that there is no proper Playback which doesn't feature the third space, only that the third space is a special contribution of Playback to the question of "Wither the theatre?"~)

To see the significance of the physical reality of third space and its distinctness from the role of mediator, imagine the teller sitting in the audience while telling his story to a conductor on the stage or a conductor roaming the audience. Or imagine the teller at center stage with conductor and actors. There is an element of invasiveness, a disincentive to intimacy, in each of these scenarios which is resolved in the third space.

The physical reality of third space means that the experience of the audience and actors is altered physically. To illustrate this, consider the question of sight lines. In proscenium staging the focus of audience members is straight ahead, the playing of the actors is open to the fourth wall. It is rather as if the play were being poured into the audience. But in Playback the actors have to open their playing to both the audience and the teller. The people in the audience are able to see both the enactment and the teller's reactions to it and they must choose constantly where to direct their attention.

***The third space doesn't fully belong to anyone.*** It is the best possible setting for collaboration. The Playback custom of having the actors sit at the back of the stage between stories helps set this up. Between stories the audience sits in the auditorium, the actors on stage and then there are these two other chairs sitting side by side, and pointedly not quite in either place.

Creative collaboration is the very core of Playback events and its focal point is the third space, where the teller and conductor share a measure of power and risk. The conductor sits down in one of these chairs and invites someone from the audience to join her. This is a generous and courageous act. Playback's strength is that people will so often respond in kind to courage and generosity.

***The third space calls for new understandings.*** There is a potential for transformation of the familiar in it. A member of the audience (listeners) becomes a "teller". the actors sit still and silently listen. Telling stories is something we do every day but it feels different in the third space. The teller casts his story and shares the attention of audience and actors alike with the conductor. The conductor, in turn, has to manage a fluid synthesis of many roles; master of ceremonies, interviewer, shaman, drama director. These roles exist in other settings but their balance and coordination in the context of Playback is something which must be made up to some degree, on the spot and this process of clarification and readjustment is itself part of the content of Playback.

***The third space is an acknowledgement of the here and now.*** We talk about what we are going to see and afterward we talk about what we have seen. We don't



have to wait for tomorrow's papers for the reviews but openly recognize that the enactment could be different. We can change it if it is important to do so.

With a third space we have the option of commenting on what is happening during the performance from a position outside of the ritual stage. We might observe, for instance, that the stories have been somehow responding to each other, that certain themes have been emerging. In one way or another this promotes a sense that this Playback experience is the unique result of gathering this group of people, these specific tellers, actors, conductor and audience at this time and place.

*The third space survives the performance.* In traditional theatre the audience and stage spaces remain separate and, after the performance, people leave the building through the lobby or the stage door, as appropriate. After a Playback Performance it is more likely that the actors and audience will mingle and that the stage and audience spaces, physical and mental, will give way to an expanded version of the third space in which aspects of the stories just enacted are relived and some stories which didn't quite make it to the stage are told. We have had the roles of teller and conductor modeled for us and they seem to resonate more strongly as the roles of actor and audience fade.

#### **Fourth Space? Fifth Space?**

The theatre of realism required a separation of audience and stage which might be represented so:

Whatever diagram makes most sense as a representation of Playback, it is clear that the old tensions of demarcation between audience and "creative people" have been eased. There are new demarcations, however, and it is only natural that these new demarcations will foster their own tensions with time.

What are the implications of the line between the third space and the actors' space, the third space and audience? Is it a different relationship than exists between the opposite points of actors and audience, third space and music? As I have seen Playback performed, so far, these lines seem somewhat tentative. Audience members have to enter third space for Playback to happen. They are also invited to be actors on some occasions. The conductor is also free to exchange places with actors (Community Playback does this at times) and my company had the experience, earlier this Year, of an audience member coming forward and asking to conduct a story. Part of the content of

Playback "company life" is almost certain to revolve around decisions about who conducts.

These and many other questions arise when the fourth wall opens into a third space. As we work together this summer at Vassar I hope we will find opportunities to confront some of the creative challenges inherent in the opening of this third space.

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