THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN: WHO AND HOW BREAKS THE FOURTH WALL IN THEATRE

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Abstract

The convention of the fourth wall remains dominant in Western theatre. However, the boundary between actors and audience has become increasingly ambiguous. Although various methods are employed to break the imaginary fourth wall, a notable gap exists in research regarding their classification and the underlying purposes these methods serve. This article seeks to address three research questions: What is the fourth wall? What does it mean to break the fourth wall? And how are these methods used in theatre?

The first two sections of this article provide a historical overview of the concepts of "the fourth wall" and "breaking the fourth wall". The third section shifts focus to contemporary practices, with an emphasis on 21st-century Estonian theatre. Through the analysis of different examples, the study identifies and categorizes three primary approaches to breaking the fourth wall: instances where the performer directly breaks the wall, moments of alienation that disrupt the audience's immersion, and cases where the audience themselves breach the boundary. This classification offers a clearer understanding of how these methods function and their significance in reshaping the dynamics of modern theatrical experiences.

Keywords: *fourth wall, breaking the fourth wall, audience participation, Estonian theatre*

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1. The fourth wall rises

One cannot imagine theatre without the existence of an audience. However, there has always been an invisible boundary that separates performers from spectators and divides the theatrical illusion from the everyday reality. This is now widely known as "the fourth wall" – an imaginary wall that separates the audience from the performer, who acts as not being aware of the audience [Eesti Keele Instituut 2023].

Regarding the fact that the invisible barrier separates actors from audiences, it is important to distinguish the two layers of the fourth wall. First, there is an invisible, but perceptible boundary that exists in the **theatre space** and is affected by the architectural and scenographical conditions of the venue. For example, one could easily draw a dividing line in a proscenium arch theatre, as the proscenium arch itself is usually visually distinguishable, creating an illusion of a frame on the wall. However, the boundary is not so specifically defined or perceived in site-specific or promenade theatre where the stage area is not always discerned from the hall, and actors could, for example, move between audience members, blurring the line even more.

So, the arrangement of the theatre stage and auditorium plays an essential part in distinguishing performers from audience members and can act like a precondition to the second layer that exists in the **fictional space** which is perceived by both performers and spectators. Depending on the concept of the theatrical production, the separating line can be strictly in place, meaning that the audience members should stay behind the fourth wall and act according to the convention, or blurry, breaking the fourth wall down by turning to the audience. Regarding this, the fourth wall works as a silent agreement between the actors and audience members. When the fourth wall is broken, the conventional role of the audience is also being challenged.

The goal to establish an invisible wall between the actors and the audience was first articulated by the French philosopher, art critic, and theorist **Denis Diderot**, who wrote in 1758: "don't think about the spectator anymore, act as if he doesn't even exist. Imagine there is a big wall at the edge of the stage separating you from the parterre. Act as if the curtain was never raised." [Diderot 1970: 453] So, the imaginary wall is invisible to the audience, but the performers should act like the wall is opaque as they do not see the spectators.

This new convention required a completely new approach from the actors and writers. For example, Diderot started to write dialogues in prose to emphasize the naturalness of the text being presented from the stage. [Benedetti 2007: 39–40; Holland, Patterson 1997: 272–273]. **André Antoine**, the founder of Théâtre Libre, is considered one of the first pioneers, whose interest in new realistic and naturalistic authors (such as Émile Zola, Henrik Ibsen, and August Strindberg) and

the revolutionary ideas arising from the plays he read paved the way for the illusion that the audience was really in the hall behind an invisible wall [Esslin 1997: 343]. The invisible wall was named as the fourth wall, as Antoine's co-star French critic and playwright **Jean Jullien** wrote: "(...) the fourth wall is transparent to the audience, opaque to the actor." [Schumacher 1996: 78] Regarding this, it was Jullien who was the first to treat the invisible border between the actors and the audience as a fourth (not an invisible) wall. The reason lies in the changing theatrical space: as the significant developments in the architecture of European theatre buildings shifted the performer and the audience further apart, the proscenium arch acquired a new separating function, moving the stage into a box with three physical walls [Baugh 2013: 11–15]. Consequently, the invisible wall was conceptualized as the fourth wall.

In the late 19th century, European theatres also began adopting electric lighting, marking a significant shift in theatrical practice. Previously, audience members often directed their attention not only to the stage but also to others in the auditorium. However, the darkening of the auditorium refocused the audience's gaze exclusively on what was happening on the stage. This change, coupled with advancements in theatre architecture, scenography, and lighting technology [Camp 2022: 184], transformed the audience's role from vocal critics to more passive, anonymous observers [Heim 2006: 65–66]. The audience now engaged with the stage events as if peering through a secret keyhole, fostering the conditions for a greater imaginary distance between performers and spectators.

The principles of a realistic style of acting were further developed by the Russian actor, director, and acting teacher **Konstantin Stanislavski**, who paid more focused attention to the training of actors and laid the foundations for a revolution in the art of acting and directing in Russia, the influence of which extended beyond the borders of Europe [Esslin 1997: 352–353]. Stanislavski's training is based on the principle of ignoring the audience and what is happening in the auditorium – thus, Stanislavski is credited with creating the concept of the fourth wall. By establishing the fourth wall, the audience should forget that they are watching a finely honed work of art. For example, following Stanislavski's teachings, actors began to perform on stage both in profile and with their backs to the viewer, in contrast to the previous style of acting, where the text was predominantly delivered from the front, facing the audience [Benedetti 2007: 109–110].

To establish the fourth wall, Stanislavski developed various exercises to achieve full stage presence and attention. One such concept is "public solitude", according to which an actor must behave on stage as if he were completely alone in the room, but at the same time be aware of the public nature of his actions. "You are in public because we are all here. It is solitude because you are divided from us by a small circle of attention" [Stanislavski 1989: 90]. According to Stanislavski's description, circles

of attention are used to concentrate and control attention, where the actor's focus moves from one level of communication to another, becoming narrower or wider according to the situation or exercise. This allows the actor to divide attention into smaller parts and apply it accordingly.

Although the fourth wall was established with realistic and naturalistic theatre, it can also be used in other dramatic styles. According to actor and director Lee Strasberg's notes about the Group Theatre, "the audience can forget where they are and be transported to the imaginary place of the play, a place that doesn't have to be purely realistic" [Cohen 2010: 7]. Thus, it is possible to create the imaginary fourth wall in circumstances that do not necessarily try to represent life or realistic places. Regarding this, the fourth wall is more about activating the performers' and audience's imagination to transform the circumstances given by the theatre venue or space.

2. The need to break the fourth wall

While Konstantin Stanislavski emphasized the importance of the fourth wall in acting, the German director, dramatist, and writer **Bertolt Brecht** criticized both the aesthetics of illusion and truthfulness as well as the dominant dramatic style in the theatre, calling for the demolition of the fourth wall. Brecht argued that the theatre spectator sitting at the imaginary keyhole is as real as the fact that the same spectators are sitting in the theatre. Therefore, the spectator's presence cannot be forgotten, and there is no need for a "secret agreement" between the performer and the spectator. With this appeal, Brecht did not seek to put the audience in an uncomfortable situation but rather to activate their thinking, especially their sense of criticism [Brecht 1972: 84–85]. According to Brecht, to break the imaginary fourth wall, the alienation effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) or V-effect should be used, "a technique of taking the human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural" [Willett 1964: 125]. To Brecht, it is through alienation that an effect is achieved that ignores the creation of the illusion or breaks it, preventing the viewer from settling into the reality of the performance.

The boundaries were also discussed by several other thinkers, including **Antonin Artaud**, in whose approach the direct connection between the viewer and the actor should be restored. To do this, the viewer should be placed at the centre of the performance, in other words: ignore the fourth wall and abandon the conventions of traditional theatre. "We abolish the stage and the auditorium and replace them by a single site, without partition or barrier of any kind, which will become the theater of the action." [Artaud 1958: 96]

In turn, the ideas of Brecht and Artaud inspired other prominent theatre theorists and practitioners of the 20th century, who began to rethink the relationship between performer and spectator. For example, Polish director, theatre theoretician, and innovator **Jerzy Grotowski** shifted the boundaries between performer and spectator, arguing that to overcome the separation of stage and auditorium, the actor's play must incorporate the spectator into the action, resulting in a secular ritual in which actor and spectator participate together [Grotowski 2002: 74–78]. The English director **Peter Brook**, in *The Empty Space*, discusses Bertolt Brecht's ideas, including enchantment and illusion, and, like Brecht, stresses that the breaking of the fourth wall is not intended to make the audience uncomfortable or to bully them, but to activate them. However, Brook does not agree that the opposite of the illusion created by the fourth wall is reality, since illusions exist everywhere, in the theatre as well as in real life [Brook 1972: 64–70].

The idea of breaking the fourth wall also inspired the Brazilian theatre theorist and practitioner **Augusto Boal**, who compared Brecht's alienation effect with the chorus from the ancient Greek theatre, and noted that the boundary line separating the spectator from the performer, which Brecht wanted to break with enchantment, nevertheless remains. The reason, according to Boal, lies in the power relationship between the performer and the spectator, in which the performer is the dominant party even when the fourth wall is seemingly broken down, which in turn oppresses the spectator. Even if the performer would like to enter into dialogue with the spectator, he or she is hampered by the limits of one's role and the boundaries of the stage [Boal 2008: 19–21].

There are also opinions among theorists and practitioners, according to which the breaking of the fourth wall is seen as a technique already used before the establishment of the convention of the fourth wall. Although addressing the audience and using metatheatrical elements date back to the earliest forms of theatre, it can be problematic to consider these examples as attempts to break the fourth wall. While the chorus in Greek theatre would "often stand up for their particular role; promote their playwright and indulge in literary polemic; attack current political targets; advise, and sometimes abuse, the audience" [Taplin 1995: 36], it is important to stress that using these methods was a conventional practice of Greek theatre. Consequently, whereas one can find similarities between the Greek chorus and Brecht's alienation effect, it is also crucial to acknowledge the norms within the social and historical contexts. While Brecht wanted to break the established norms, the chorus in Greek theatre followed them.

Playwright and theatre director Dario Fo also claimed: "The intention of doing away with the idea of the fourth wall was already an obsession with the Commedia players." [Fo 1991: 73] He stated that breaking the fourth wall was a central intention

by Italian actors, which Molière gained in Commedia circles. Renewing the French theatre, Molière "grasped the importance of the involvement, including the physical involvement, of the spectators" [Fo 1991: 73]. However, Oliver Double challenges Fo's assumption that the origins of the fourth wall go that deep into history, suggesting that this error might have come from a quote mistakenly attributed to Molière. According to Double, it is actually Molière, the character, in Jean Cocteau's play called *L'Impromptu du Palais-Royal,* who is wondering "whether this invisible fourth wall does not conceal a crowd observing us" [Double 2017: 9]. Although Molière, the playwright, would have wished to challenge the prevailing norms in French theatre, the convention of the fourth wall was not one of them.

Likewise, the elements from William Shakespeare's plays are sometimes considered as an attempt to break the fourth wall. Jordan Schroeder gives an example from Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where Puck turns to the audience and informs that if the audience was offended by the play they saw, they could imagine that they were only dreaming. Although Schroeder suggests that Shakespeare "dabbled in breaking the fourth wall as well" [Schroeder 2016: 12], breaking the non-existent fourth wall was not the author's intention. Since the audience's presence was acknowledged throughout the theatrical performance during the Shakespearean era, the concept of the fourth wall did not exist – neither in the theatre nor within the fictional space. Therefore, the act or attempt of breaking the fourth wall can only be identified within the context where the convention of the fourth wall has been established.

3. Classification

With the growing use of diverse strategies in dramatic productions, including the reinterpretation of classic works, the landscape of contemporary theatre has become more multifaceted than ever. Estonian contemporary theatre, among others, continues to explore the boundary between performer and spectator, actively seeking to redefine their roles. Building on the literary conclusions drawn, this study aims to propose a potential classification of various methods of breaking the fourth wall, illustrated through examples from contemporary Estonian theatre.

3.1. The performer/character breaks the fourth wall

The performer/character is aware of the audience's presence and addresses the audience with a **gaze**, **verbally**, **physically**, and/or **entering the audience space**.

The power of breaking the fourth wall can often lie in the **gaze** of the performer/actor, without always being accompanied by a verbal turn. The eye contact achieved between the performer and the spectator combines and tests the boundaries of the fictional and the real world. The gaze often makes the viewer question whether

it is the performer or a character who is looking, which is why the gaze often causes the spectator to feel awkward or confused. In a social situation, the gaze can convey necessary information, such as the intention to make contact with the interlocutor [Bishop, Cancino-Chacón, Goebl 2019: 73]. Thus, this conclusion is also relevant in the theatrical situation, where the performer glances towards the spectator.

However, not every gaze towards the audience is automatically a fourth wall break. An example from film studies is relevant here, as characters often look directly into the camera. While the fourth wall can be seen as a camera or screen that separates two realities, Tom Brown describes the breaking of the fourth wall as a situation in which a character becomes aware of the viewer's presence. It is important to emphasize that breaking the fourth wall is not considered to be the use of a point-of-view shot if the purpose of the shot is to show what is happening, for example, from the point of view of another character [Brown 2012: 10–11]. Just as a glance into the camera does not always mean breaking the fourth wall, neither does every gaze into the auditorium serve such a function, as the character might look into the audience and, for example, describe a certain landscape he/she sees.

Thus, breaking the fourth wall is often understood as addressing and/or **verbally** speaking to the audience, where the addressor can be both a character and a performer who has stopped impersonating the character. Depending on the context of the production, the spectator's role can also vary. There is also a difference in whether the performer turns to the audience as if they were given a role that is included in the play, so the spectators are placed into the fictional reality, or being addressed as the audience of the show and not part of the fictional reality. Often, the addressee is supposed to speak or act a certain way by answering a question. At the beginning of *Terror* [Vanemuine 2021], the audience is assigned the role of a jury in a fictional courtroom and instructed to attentively follow the evidence, as they will ultimately determine the verdict at the end of each performance. Since it is relatively rare for audiences to be assigned a decision-making role, this approach enhances their sense of responsibility and attentiveness.

Crossing the **physical boundary** between the stage area and the auditorium is becoming more common in contemporary theatre – for example, it is not uncommon for the performer to use the same doors and aisles as the audience to enter the hall. In most cases, this breaking of the fourth wall is characteristic of so-called traditional theatre halls, where the stage and audience space are distinguishable from each other. However, in modern theatre, even more different ways to enter the audience space and cross the invisible border are found. In Tiit Ojasoo's production *Brother Antigone, Mother Oedipus* (Estonian Drama Theatre, 2022), the imaginary dividing line between the stage and the hall is broken throughout the performance, when the performers climb over the seats on the ground floor of the auditorium. By crossing

the physical boundary, climbing over the seat rows and breaking the fourth wall, the characters of *Brother Antigone, Mother Oedipus* automatically become outcasts of the society or face death and are no longer seen by the audience. As the performers reach out their hands to leave the space through the back door, the audience members who help the character to finish her/his mission automatically become accomplices in the expulsion or the character's suicide.

There are other examples: in Antti Mikkola's modern adaptation of *Macbeth* (Tallinn City Theatre, 2017), the performers delicately entered the Hell Stage auditorium before the performance began and initially impersonated ordinary spectators. To engage in an ongoing meeting on stage, the performers suddenly rose from their seats and stepped onto the stage to join the others. This approach suggests that the audience, too, becomes immersed in the illusion, participating in the meeting and assuming the role of other union members. As in both examples, an imaginary boundary between the stage and the hall can be drawn, crossing the imaginary line had the effect of breaking the fourth wall and abandoning the conventional boundaries.

Physically entering the audience space can also mean physically influencing the viewer in another way, as a result of which the viewer has to perform a task given by the performer – for example, go on stage or hold a prop handed to her/him by the actor. In *Ejection or the Chronicle of an Apple* (Estonian Drama Theatre, 2016), the main character makes eye contact with an audience member sitting in the first row and then throws him/her the apple. Although the character has already broken the fourth wall with a gaze, this act comes as a surprise for the viewers and crosses another level of the conventional boundary. The act of throwing the apple serves as a signal to the audience, emphasizing that they are not merely an anonymous crowd but active participants who should remain attentive throughout the performance.

3.2. Alienation

The alienation's idea is to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play through jolting reminders of the artificiality of the theatrical performance [The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica 2019]. This might usually happen in two ways: when the actors are changing their acting strategies and distancing themselves from the character (1), or by using theatrical tools to break the theatrical illusion (2).

According to Luule Epner, the strategies of acting in contemporary theatre could be divided into three groups: *being someone else*, *being oneself*, and *performing actions* [Epner 2014: 20]. When the strategy of acting changes, it could also lead to breaking the fourth wall. In *I Don't Believe* [Von Krahl 2024], the actors were already on the stage when spectators entered the room. While having a spontaneous conversation with the audience attendants, and watching spectators while they were searching for

their seats, the illusion of fictional reality was difficult to form. However, during the performance, the actors switched from impersonating a fictional character to being themselves and then back to being someone else multiple times, like they were changing from Stanislavski's large circle of attention into a smaller one. While some of the actors were being someone else, others were performing several actions on stage, such as changing the set or moving the buffoonery. By breaking the conventional performing methods, for example, using several acting techniques during the same performance, the fourth wall convention could be broken.

However, it is not always the actor who breaks the fourth wall. The illusion of a fictional reality and/or the embodiment of a character created in the stage space can also be disrupted by theatrical tools of the production. As the purpose of alienation is often to distract the audience from absorbing the theatrical illusion, raising the stage axes, lighting up a darkened auditorium, or refraining from hiding what is happening on stage during a scene change can break the fourth wall in theatre. Bertolt Brecht's "alienation effect" represented a similar aim. In *Business as Usual* (Estonian Drama Theatre, 2024), the actors on stage are constantly being followed by two cameramen. While moving around actors, a live video recording is shown on the big screen on top of the stage. So, the audience could see two types of performances at once: first, what is happening on the big screen, and second, on the stage. Although the actors do not change their acting styles, seeing the video production staff moving around the stage while filming every scene creates an alienating effect.

3.3. The audience breaks the wall

Thinking about the diminishing effect of the shock effect of the fourth wall breaking down over time, one could also think of a situation in contemporary theatre where the conventional boundary between performer and spectator is broken down before the illusion of a fourth wall is even established. According to theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann, in postdramatic theatre, the focus is redirected towards the spectator, who also perceives himself as having a different role to play in the theatre. With this fundamental change, theatre becomes a social situation, no longer an object of spectatorship [Lehmann 2006: 106–107]. So, as the fourth wall is a mutual agreement between performers and their audience, there might not always be a mutual understanding of how the wall should be "held up" during the performance.

In the context of breaking the fourth wall, less attention has been paid to the fact that tacitly agreed-upon rules, including the invisible wall, can be intentionally or unintentionally broken by the audience. This prevents performers from establishing or maintaining the established fourth wall. Today, the audience has been used to playing the conventional role of a consumer which usually means sitting anonymously

and quietly in the dark and not commenting on what is happening on stage [Heim 2016: 132]. However, one can easily point out several situations where the audience member intentionally or unintentionally breaks the fourth wall, whether by the light or sound coming from smartphones, comments about what is happening on stage, or leaving the auditorium during the show. As the convention of the fourth wall is still dominating, theatre etiquette is being less and less dictated from the stage. As Caroline Heim describes, the collective presence of the audience holds significant power, often prompting the fourth wall to be broken from the other side of the imaginary boundary [Heim 2016: 114]. By distracting the performance, the audience abandons the conventional rules and theatre etiquette.

However, the audience can also break the fourth wall by having the role of a participant. In Eduard Tee's production *Their Son* (Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre, 2024), when buying a ticket to the performance, the audience had to make a choice: while "the observer ticket" allowed the spectator to sit behind the fourth wall, the buyers of "the participant ticket" sat on the stage behind the table with the actors and were well-aware of the fact that they are participating in the performance. So, the participatory element or "role" did not come as an unpleasant surprise, allowing the stage reality and the fictional world to blend and softly break the fourth wall. As the breaking of the fourth wall has its psychological challenges and possible risks, making the audience aware of their participatory role reduced the stress and fear of participation among the audience members who had decided to stay in an observatory role.

The audience members who had bought the participant ticket were more willing to engage in spontaneous conversations with the actors. As the Estonian theatre audience tends to follow the conventional rules and often doesn't want to participate, it often leads to ignoring the actor who is speaking or trying to make eye contact. Being previously informed about the participatory element worked as a risk-reducing factor for all of the members, including actors who rely on the participant members of the audience. By changing the role of the audience, theatre can break the invisible barriers between the actors and spectators.

Conclusions

Contemporary theatre encompasses a wide range of styles and forms, making it difficult to imagine a spectator who has never encountered some form of fourth wall breaking. While there are many ways to challenge the traditional norms in theatre, breaking the fourth wall does not serve as shocking effect in the 21st century as it did before. In fact, one could argue that, despite the enduring strength of the convention, the unbreakable fourth wall has become increasingly rare.

This research proposed a possible classification of breaking the fourth wall in theatre. First, two layers of the fourth wall are being distinguished: an invisible boundary that exists in the theatre space and a second layer that exists in the fictional space. This is followed by a historical overview of the establishment of the fourth wall and the breaking of the fourth wall. By giving different examples from Estonian contemporary theatre, three methods of breaking the fourth wall are introduced: the performer breaks the wall, the alienation, and the audience breaks the wall.

Although there are many ways to break or test fictional or physical boundaries in theatre, the complex power dynamics between performers and spectators shapes the majority of theatrical performances. Performers typically hold power over the audience and dictate the events, leaving the question of whether it is truly possible to dismantle all the perceptible boundaries within a theatrical context unanswered. This issue is not merely about communication and the roles conventionally assigned to performers and spectators, but also the social and historical norms, and the willingness to break out of them to experience or learn something new. While theatre often provides a safe space to question societal norms, audiences may resist breaking established boundaries or abandoning their conventional roles. Therefore, it is important to understand the possible purpose and impact of breaking the fourth wall in theatre.

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