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THE FOURTH WALL

I REMEMBER a dress rehearsal years ago, when I was a very young actress, during which the entire audience area strongly intruded on my faith and the sense of privacy of my stage room. While playing, I first pretended that no one was out there, and then that no one would ever be, and then that *nothing* was there. Every time I wanted to look up it became more impossible, until I began to hide physically and directed my physical life more and more to the back wall of the set. The director, sitting in the auditorium, stopped the rehearsal with the pronouncement, "Please keep your eyes trained to the balcony-rail level so I can see them." I obliged, played straight out front, and, of course, totally lost a sense of privacy and reality.

If we balk at dishing ourselves out to the audience and making our eyes available to each member of the audience, we ought to balk just as much at hiding. Of course, it is the director's responsibility to ensure that all pertinent action can communicate, and the focus of attention should always be allowed to be controlled by the director, but what can you do for yourself with that big, gaping hole out there which is

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supposed to be the fourth wall of your set? You can complete it in your imagination as a part of your room or landscape. I know that is easier said than done.

When the play dictates that the audience area must be used for a *primary* purpose it becomes relatively simple to make real. For example, in an outdoor scene, if you are asked to refer to a tree or hill or house or steeple or cloud placed imaginatively out front, and if you have particularized it and anchored it visually to an exit sign or door or a pillar it becomes easy to look at, talk about or point to.

Occasionally, an entire production is devised to break through the proscenium and to make use of the audience area in a primary way. In Elia Kazan's production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as the curtain rose, Maggie was standing facing the audience and arranging her hair in an imaginary mirror. This use of the fourth wall was established at once, and then carried out by the other actors with different objects and activities throughout the course of the play.

One of the first things you will discover about an imagined visual object is that you cannot suspend it in midair. Try to. Construct the windowframe visually a few feet away from you, turn your back to it, then face it and try to find it again. It will continually elude you, and your eyes may even cross in your attempt to bring it into focus spacelessly—somewhere. Whatever object you wish to see must be anchored to something which you can see is really there. To start with, you must know the object so well that you can close your eyes and *see* it. Don't try to reconstruct it at the moment of placing it in the auditorium.

Actors challenge me that they can't see anything out front on which to anchor something because it is too dark. Unless a brilliant spotlight is focused directly on you to blind you to the auditorium, this is untrue. We see the outlines of almost

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everything, from the people to balconies to aisles and exits to the loges at the side and the partitions at the back, etc., etc., while the stage lights are on and the house lights are off.

Actors also challenge me with distance, once they think they have learned to complete a fourth wall by extending the room or landscape into the auditorium, and have placed logical objects out there, and placed them in conjunction with what is really out there: how near or far the imagined objects are *supposed* to be, and how this conflicts with the *actual* distances in the auditorium.

I was ecstatic when I discovered that I could bring anything as near as I wanted or see it a mile away simply by shifting my body accurately. Try it. Look into a mirror to check your appearance when you are only one foot from it, and observe the adjustment of your body to this task. Then do the same thing after you have stepped back six feet. Now check yourself when you look into the mirror from the opposite side of the room. Finally, see if you can re-create all three adjustments by eliminating the mirror and substituting a simple door frame. You will be amazed that you not only believe you see yourself, but that you can bring the mirror close or place it far away without ever moving from the spot simply by finding the focus and re-creating the bodily adjustment to it.

Be sure to place your imaginary objects at the back or sides of the auditorium or in the aisles so that people, still or moving, won't disturb your belief.

You may already have applied this technique successfully to a particular play or production. If not, you will be able to conquer it in a matter of hours. However, if the entire production is *not* conceived to use the fourth wall for a *primary* purpose, beware of doing it all by yourself. If you are the only actor on stage openly relating to imagined clocks, mirrors, pictures, windows, you will seem most pecu-

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liar. The audience will probably look behind them to see what you are looking at.

And now we face the problem which most often presents itself—how to exploit fully the fourth wall in a *secondary* way, when we want visual attention to be free to go up and out even though primary inner attention remains connected with the objects on stage, when we don't want to *do* anything to the fourth wall, when we demand of it only that it *be* there for us. We don't want to be walled in or closed off, but liberated by it, free to open up physically without loss of privacy or involvement.

I always set up my *secondary* fourth wall exactly the way I would if I were to use it for a primary purpose. I finish the room, so to speak, by placing imaginary objects that are familiar to me, that have logic and are consistent to the place on that fourth wall of my other three walls, *except* that the objects are secondary in importance. I imaginatively place at least five or six objects across the back and sides of the auditorium, anchoring them to actual objects which exist there. What's in between them seems to take care of itself. My objects must be so particular that I can take them from my mind's eye and place them where I choose. (Don't try to turn an exit sign into a picture, but hang your picture on the exit sign!) I don't need to tell anyone what I'm using. My objects are only there for me, for my privacy, for my freedom from audience intrusion.

Each actor will build his own private fourth wall, since the objects will have no other consequence than on your ability to open up. *They are secondary to everything else on stage.* Distance or physical relationship to them is of no consequence, since you are making no demands on them. For example, while doing something on stage your eye may contact the curtains at the window on your fourth wall. If you

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should examine them to see if they're hanging straight or need to go to the cleaners, they immediately become primary and an inaccurate divergence from your main purpose on-stage. If, while talking or listening, your eye touches on a fourth-wall clock, it's fine, *but* if you contact the clock to see what time it is, the clock immediately becomes primary and defeats your purpose.

In order to experiment with this technique I would like you to take a telephone call as the basic premise of your two-minute exercise. Watch yourself for a few days every time you are at home at your phone to see where your outer, secondary focus goes while your inner attention seems to be given totally to the content of the phone call. When you have settled on the phone call you will use for the exercise, be certain it has all the aspects of the other exercises: time, place, circumstances, objects and objectives. Be sure that your position of standing or sitting at the telephone allows the visual attention to go up and out. (If you are lying on your back on a bed or a sofa, the visual attention normally goes to the ceiling. If you are slouched forward on a chair with your elbows on knees, it would probably go to the floor. If you are at your desk, you may have papers and pencils available, but if the nature of the phone call demands that you make notes or write down what is being said to you be careful that it doesn't take over and prevent your attention from wanting to go up and out.) Whether your circumstances place you already at the phone, or, in the course of them, you decide to make a call or you receive one is unimportant. Just make certain that you are telephoning for the balance of the exercise. You should not improvise the conversation when you present the work, or the fourth wall will not work for you at all. You don't have to write out the dialogue. If you know exactly to whom you are speaking, and what about, and what you want, if you know the content of what is being said to

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you (not the outer words), and if you rehearse it at least ten times, the words will take on their own inevitability.

After you become aware of the objects which your eyes most often land on while you are telephoning, start to determine how you can set up the same fourth wall in your studio or workshop. When you finally set up the exercise for presentation, take as much time to establish your fourth wall as you would to place your furniture and personal objects in the re-creation of your place. Don't dictate at what points you will look up to make use of the fourth wall. Let the attention go up when it wants to and to what it wants to. Above all, don't *check* if you really see the objects when you look up; that immediately means you are giving them primary importance. When the exercise is successful, the wall will simply *be there* for you in place of the audience. (If a director complains, and suddenly asks what you are looking at out front, you are undoubtedly using fourth-wall objects incorrectly, as primary objects rather than secondarily.)

You may repeat the exercise three or four times with variations of events and kinds of phone calls before it is totally successful. *When* it works, no one will have to tell you so, because you will feel as free as a bird, and relieved of the old agonizing burden of audience intrusion to the point where you will always want to build a fourth wall in every exercise, in every scene on which you work, and for every play in which you will ever appear!